Song Remains the Same

by River_Winters

Summary

For Alex Winchester, normal has never been in the equation. Mute since the nursery fire, she grew up on the road chasing ghosts with her brothers and father. When her voice is inexplicably restored and the angel Castiel appears claiming to be her guardian, both of their lives change forever in ways that Heaven and Earth never expected. Castiel/OFC - sisfic - S4-9.

Notes

Welcome and thanks for stopping by! My name is River. If you're like me you like to know what you're getting into (committing to, even) at the beginning of a fanfic (especially one that is two million words plus), so here we go with some info: Song Remains the Same begins right at the end of season three and stays fairly close to canon (at first) while including my AU addition of Alex Winchester—Dean and Sam's younger sister (Sam's twin) who has recently and inexplicably been cured from her lifelong condition of mutism.

Even though the story focuses on Alex as the protagonist and Castiel as the secondary protagonist, there is plenty of Sam/Dean/John stuff as well (in further chapters especially)
—I love Supernatural and all the characters and as such, this story is not 'just' a romance (but trust me, there's plenty of romance ahead!). I really enjoy the family drama/arc as well. The relationship between Cas and Alex is everything from painful to fluffy/sappy to angst-ridden to very dark at certain points of the story, and the Alex/brothers relationships are thoroughly explored as well. I don't like to skimp over important emotional content and I really like to explore the way emotions work in all kinds of relationships. The length of this story is definitely evidence of that. Speaking of which: this story may or may not have lethal amounts of feels (okay fine, it does have lethal amounts of feels). So strap in if you love angst and pain because it's about to get intense up in here. As this is an approximately 5,000 page, series-length fanfiction that spans a very long television show, you can expect many ups and downs for Calex and constant growth/development as they progress. You can also expect more and more AU storylines and material as the story gets to Season 7+. The ending is completely AU from the show.

If you dislike Mary Sues, you're in good company and won't find one here (though at first you may wonder, because there are a lot of unanswered questions about Alex but please rest assured... I reveal the answers gradually as I build the story and as more is explained about Alex's character, background, etc). She's what you'd expect out of a Winchester: tough as nails and a real fighter but with a million emotional issues under the surface and very real vulnerability hiding behind her jaded exterior.

I would say the story really gets off the ground and running around chapter four, takes off in ten, and gets insane around chapter twenty. A lot of new readers ask me when the romance begins. The slow build starts as soon as Cas and Alex meet a few chapters in. They're drawn together whether they like it or not. I do however take the time to build realistic emotional connection between them because I typically dislike when characters fall completely in love right off the bat (especially characters like Castiel, who is learning emotions and characters like Alex, who doesn't trust easily and has limited skills with interpersonal relationships).

Readers, I hope you enjoy the story that follows. Please read and feel free to review/PM/email me; I love hearing from you :-) This story has been an absolute labor of love to write and I've put my heart and soul into it. My thanks to the folks behind Supernatural for creating and producing such an amazing universe and story that has captured me so completely. SRS will always be a huge part of my life and so will SPN.

Now, go check out winchesteralex dot tumblr dot com and you can see pictures of Alex as I envision her (as played by actress Astrid Berges-Frisbey), manips, videos, questions & answers, Calex shipping mania, as well as other stuff from the fic. The tumblr blog does contain major spoilers for the story and the show though, so please be forewarned. Cheers & happy reading! #SPNSRS

A STATEMENT ABOUT TRIGGERS: This story is not lightweight. Read at your own risk. As a reminder, I do include trigger-warnings on a few chapters with especially sensitive content matter, but please know that this story is intended for adults and if you're sensitive about any of the above tags, please be careful!
Every story has a marked beginning. Mine begins thousands of years ago at the dawn of time itself. I was created, not born; put here to be a warrior and messenger of God. My task was to watch over God's children, to carry out the purposes of my father—a father I never knew but always believed in. I was obedient, I was faithful, I never questioned my role or my father. Not until them. A little broken family of three seemingly small and insignificant human beings: two brothers and their sister. This is where my story changes. For the better or worse, I'm not entirely sure. However, I suspect it's for the worse.

The Winchesters taught me about free will and choice, two things that were once foreign concepts to a being like me, an angel of the Lord. I was drawn to this idea of being free to make my own choices, of choosing my own fate—but now I realize freedom is a great and terrible burden. If I knew then what I know now, perhaps I would choose a different path. Perhaps I would take it all back. I don't know.

If you told me a few years ago that I would be in the dilemma I am in now, I doubt I would have believed you. At that time, I couldn't have fathomed that I would be capable of the things I so clearly feel today: remorse, agony, confusion, pain... love. It's difficult to reconcile who I was with who I've become. I'm not sure that I like who I am, honestly.

The centuries I lived through, the wars I saw waged, the rise and fall of kingdoms I've observed... none of it prepared me for being put into the body of a human man, for being thrust into the midst of emotions and feelings and the responsibility of being completely in charge of my own actions. Even after watching humans century after century, I had no idea how to be anything like one. Not at first.

I've tried to make the right choices. I've tried to protect these fleeting and fragile human beings who have become so important to me—especially her, always her—but perhaps I've failed. I think I have.

And of all the people I've failed... I've failed her the most.

- Four Years Ago -
Late April 2008
Just Outside of Erie, Pennsylvania

Alex slowly woke from another snatched few hours of sleep to the familiar growl of the Impala's engine. Van Halen was crackling on the radio. Groggily, not sure what time is was, she wondered why she'd let herself go to sleep at all—as usual, there had been the normal assortment of nightmares. Nothing about the sleep had been restful. She almost felt more tired now than she had before. Awkwardly crammed into the back seat with only her arm as a pillow, Alex stiffly sat up and grimaced as she tried to knead some soreness out of her stiff shoulder muscle. Ouch. Damnit. Between kicking ass, getting her ass kicked, sleeping on crappy motel mattresses or in the car, she couldn't remember ever not feeling sore. She gave up on the shoulder and instead squinted into the bright light streaming in through the car's windshield. The sun was low in the sky—sunrise?—and it shone directly into her heavy-lidded eyes. In the front seat with one hand on the wheel and dark
shades on, her oldest brother Dean acknowledged her with a slight turn of the head.

"Mornin', sunshine." His familiar gravelly voice bordered on either sarcastic or good humored... Alex couldn't tell. Plus she was too tired to give much a fuck, using her focus instead to try and force herself into consciousness—it wasn't easy, as her body and mind were both desperate for more rest.

Being exhausted all the time kind of came with the job title of hunter and she knew that... but she didn't have to like it, did she? Maybe someday she would sleep more than three or four hours at a time, but right now was clearly not that time. Alex glanced over at her just-slightly-older twin brother Sam, who was at the moment snoring softly, his giant head lolling onto his shoulder in the front seat—the dude could sleep through a hurricane. Lucky.

The car slowed and pulled over, rolling to a stop at a dingy gas station. Dean punched his sleeping brother in the shoulder, who was startled from his sleep and said something like "huh, wha!?" to Dean's clear amusement.

"Enough with the shut eye, Sammy. Rise and shine!" Dean got out of the car and began fueling it up, leaving his two sleepy siblings to themselves.

Sam turned around, his slightly confused I-just-woke-up expression mirroring how Alex was feeling at the moment. "Hey," he mumbled, and looked at her for only two more seconds before asking, "nightmares again?" Her eyes flicked up to him. He saw through her like that sometimes—maybe it was part of being twins. Maybe it was because he had nightmares, too.

She almost forgot to reply, because being able to speak was still relatively new. And then she realized she was expected to, and went with a very eloquent, "nah." Her voice sounded weird, and she cleared her throat loudly, coughing a little and feeling self conscious. Sam looked like he didn't believe her. And he was right. It was a lie. Nightmares were pretty normal for her. Alex again tried to bring her focus to the present moment, and away from the dreams of yellow eyes, crunching bones, a dark world where she was stuck in chains as horrible clawed hands dragged Dean away to his death... she shivered a little, suddenly wide awake and somber, once again remembering the reality they'd been running from for the past eleven months. The reality of Dean's quickly closing in death.

Sam was watching her still. "You okay?" He asked, his eyes that filled with studious concern. Obviously, her face was giving her away, and she was too tired to do much else except shrug and manage a soft, "no." She gritted her teeth, looked down, trying not to sound as freaked out as she was. "It's... Dean's time is almost up, Sam," she said, barely above a whisper. Alex looked at her older brother, desperate for an answer to the question that harrowed her night and day. Desperate for someone, anyone, to give her reassurance. "What are we gonna do?"

Sam went blank at her words, then his jaw tensed and he was quiet for a couple heavy beats. "We... we still have some time," he muttered, distracted and upset. He turned away. "I, uh, I need some coffee." And just like that, he exited the car, heading in his trademark long stride toward the convenience store. Alex stared after him silently, not sure if she should be pissed or sad or what. After all, what could Sam have said to make it better? No words could change what was coming. Maybe he was just as scared about losing their big brother as she was.

Ever since Dean had made the crossroads deal to bring Sam back from the dead, they had lived it up wild and free, Dean-style—basically doing whatever the hell Dean wanted in between jobs. There had been a lot of booze, women, and bad burger joints in between the hunts they found. But the Winchesters had never really talked about the approaching day that they all knew was coming:
the day Dean would have to make good on his soul deal. Dean refused to talk about finding a way out of it, said that if he so much as tried to get out of the deal, Sam would die again. However, Sam and Alex? They'd been trying to figure out a way. However all of their research and inquiries had come up luckless. Sam was beginning to avoid the subject matter completely when Alex brought it up... like he had given up or something; like he couldn't face the subject at all, needed to ignore it.

Dean had avoiding reality down to a science by now... he'd always been like that though. He'd never been able to tolerate sitting around, instead he preferred to always be moving forward. Moving and doing gave him something to focus on besides the crazy crap the three of them lived through and called their life. Right now was actually a good example of Dean's penchant for not wanting to give a single thought to his future—they were on the way to investigate a possible zombie outbreak. And Dean was literally days away from being brutally murdered by Hellhounds. To Alex, it was really beginning to feel too late, and whenever she actually thought about it, she was overwhelmed with the worst fear and panic she'd ever known. So she tried not to think about it. They always found a way out, right? So maybe this time would be the same. Maybe something would come to them in the eleventh hour.

She glanced out at Dean who was bobbing his head along to the music playing in the car as he gassed up the Impala. He was off in his own little world, and she wondered how he could be so relaxed and fine about everything. She wanted so bad to just go out there and shake him and demand for him to do something please! about what was about to happen. But if you tried to talk to Dean about what was coming in just a handful of days—you'd better prepare to be bitch slapped verbally.

Alex slid out of the backseat and headed into the store, needing the bathroom, needing to get out of the damn backseat for a few minutes. It was cold outside even though it was April. Her breath made little puffs of water vapor as it hit the air, her worn out combat boots crunched against frost on the cracked pavement. She wrapped her arms around herself, deep in thought. She wondered about how other families might deal with what hers was having to face. How did normal people handle knowing that they were losing someone? What did functioning families do when a loved one had a certain amount of time to live? But of course, the Winchester family was anything but functional. They barely held it together as it was.

The gas station restroom was a dank little tiled room with a cracked toilet and a foggy, water damaged mirror. Seeing herself in that mirror for what might have been the first time in days, Alex was taken aback. She looked so tired and harrowed, old... beaten down. Her hair was completely bedraggled and her tank top had some kind of stain on it near her hip—did that happen when they tortured that demon last night for information? Alex yanked a few fingers through her hair, trying to tame the long brown mess—it didn't really work and she gave up. She had thought of cutting it all off before, but had never gone through with it. She glanced at her face again in the mirror, wondering if the dark circles were temporary or permanent—had they always been that dark and pronounced? She couldn't remember.

Alex pulled her army-green jacket around her closer to cover the stain on her shirt then shoved her hands into the pockets as she exited the restroom. Outside, through the glass door of the gas station, she saw Dean and Sam leaning against the Impala. She felt a stab of pain, unintentionally letting herself fear for and be in the day when Dean was no longer there. He'd always been there, always. How the hell was she supposed to live without him? An agonized feeling in her chest and throat came at the thought and she shut it down, refusing to grieve yet. Dean was still here, and they had work to do. They could save him somehow, she knew it. They had to. She walked out of the gas station, stone-faced, trying to look like she was okay. Sam smiled one of his half-smiles at her and held up a cup of coffee in her direction. Alex accepted it when she reached them, cupped it in her hands for warmth, giving it a sniff through the little hole where you were supposed to sip.
Gas station coffee was always so hit or miss. This particular brew had the aroma of burnt rubber. She wrinkled her nose. She'd drink it anyway.

The Winchesters hit the road again, Dean doling out the plan for the day—get a motel room, suit up as feds. The brothers would go to the morgue to see what they could find out while Alex went to the hospital and interviewed the victim of the strange ‘kidney-napping’ as Dean put it.

"Make sure you remember to find the nurses or doctors who treated the guy and ask them all about what they saw, if there was anything weird or—" Dean was saying to Alex, but she cut in.

"Dean, I've watched you do it a million times... I know what to do." She gave him a pointed look and her oldest brother conceded, if a little reluctantly and with a little attitude.

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered gruffly. "I know it's been a few months, but I can't get used to it. The whole you-having-a-voice-thing."

Alex's eyes snapped up to the rearview mirror, where Dean was looking at her with watchful, narrowed eyes. Almost like he was suspicious. She looked away. "Me either," Alex murmured, her mind turning to the many questions she had about that. She could feel Dean still watching her in the rearview, but she avoided looking back at him. Dean and Sam shared a significant glance. Dean frowned and shook his head. Unsolved mystery number one: how Alex had suddenly and inexplicably gotten her voice back after being silent since she was six months old.

Dean remembered Alex had been a normal baby until that night—the twins' six month birthday. Up until then, she'd cried, babbled, and screamed like all babies did. But after the fire, after Mom died... nothing. It was like her vocal chords had just quit working. Doctors couldn't make sense of it and after a few years, the Winchester family had just accepted the fact that little Alex would never speak.

The silent one, volume zero, freak. At every new school, she would earn cruel nickname after cruel nickname. Her inability to speak or make any sort of sound made her a target for bullying and estrangement by her peers. Sam agonized over it, Dad had blamed himself and been closed off about finding solutions, and Alex cried silent tears when she thought no one was looking—or broke things in rage/started fights at school when her famous temper got to her. And Dean—well Dean had always taken it hard. Real hard.

As they currently sped toward their destination, Dean's mind wandered into an old memory. Sam and Alex must have been about twelve at the time. He remembered it like it had been just a few days ago...

_Dean came in alone into the motel room with canned chicken and some instant noodles—the fixings for what would be their dinner for the night. Dad was not there, as per usual. Sam was sitting on the bed with Alex, his arm around her, his face twisted in concern. Sniffing and breathing heavily, Alex was in tears._

"What happened?" Dean demanded, throwing down the groceries on the motel table and going over to where his siblings sat.

"Kids at school making fun of her again," Sam said angrily, clearly frustrated that his twin was hurting and he couldn't do anything.

_Dean sat on the bed on the other side of Alex and put an arm around her. "Hey, chin up kiddo. Don't listen to those losers. They're stupid assholes, right?"_
Alex bent and scrawled in her little worn out notebook—she took one with her everywhere and wrote in it countless times a day to communicate. None of them knew much sign language—just some basics thrown in with some they’d made up themselves. Dad hadn’t wanted Alex to learn it because he was going to ‘fix her’ soon, just you wait and see. Well, Dean was tired of waiting. And he knew Alex was too.

they said i’m weird & a freak

Dean felt a familiar righteous anger thump in his heart as he looked down at his kid sister. If he could get his hands on those freakin’ bullies... but he needed to focus on calming Alex down now. He squeezed her shoulder gently and spoke to her firmly. "Well, you're not a freak or weird. You're awesome, okay? You could kick any of their asses from here to Tuesday. Do any of those punks know how to gank a ghost? Or hunt a werewolf? Have any of them ever helped their dad research how to finish off a wraith? They're cushy little brats, why would you care what these idiots think anyway?"

Alex shrugged miserably, sniffing as another fat tear rolled down her cheek. She quickly wrote something else, then stood up and threw the book on the floor, making Dean have to retrieve it to see what she’s said. He picked it up, and was confronted with a very hard line of text to read.

i'll never have friends :’("

Dean tried to keep his voice upbeat, even though the frowny face with multiple tear drops just about did him in. "Sure you will, baby girl," he soothed. Dad used to call the twins baby girl and baby boy. He didn't anymore. "And no matter if you have friends or not, you'll always have me and Sam, okay?" Dean patted her roughly on the back. "It's gonna be okay." Dean gave his sister a light and playful punch in the shoulder, as he cracked a no-nonsense grin. "Now. You and Sammy need to help me make dinner. No being down in the dumps allowed."

Alex nodded halfheartedly, giving a very unenthusiastic 'okay' hand symbol.

How many times had they had that same exact conversation? Dean wearily thought of how many hard, lonely nights he had helped his brother and sister through. Alex’s muteness had caused her to become an outcast, and Sam was picked on too for varying reasons—often for being the brother of the mute girl. Neither of the twins had made many friends, actually. Alex and Sam had been joined at the hip, pretty much, until the high school years, which is when things had gotten a little less cozy in the family. Sam had tried harder to be quote unquote ‘normal’ and Alex hadn’t been into that at all (or capable, really). And then when Sam decided to go off to college... she’d taken that really hard and personal. Things had never been the same between any of them since. The whole college thing, in Dean's opinion, had royally screwed the Winchester family. He was still pissed about it, honestly.

He’d always felt very protective over both of his siblings, but especially over Alex because he saw her as being really vulnerable. Yeah, she was a good hunter and Dad had raised her just like him and Sam: to be capable and resourceful, strong and smart—but up until her unexplained, ‘miraculous’ healing a few months ago, Dean hadn't ever wanted to let her out of his sight. Too much risk out there. He feared she would end up trapped somewhere or hurt badly—unable to even make a sound or call for help. Dean had always held out hope they would find some voodoo, some spell, some something to get Alex her voice back. She'd always been so unhappy, so lonely, so off to herself, so undeserving of the crap fate had dealt her. Sometimes her frustration and anger came out, mostly in her teen years, in random and unexpected bursts of violence or acts of aggression. She'd broken stuff in motel rooms, gotten in fights at school, had meltdowns where she'd kick anything in sight—Dean had caught her spray painting school property before and stealing random
stuff from anywhere she felt like it. She didn't care too much about the 'regular' outside world, because they didn't care about her either.

Dean couldn't be too mad at her. He got it, he did. She felt weird and freakish and was mad at the world. But more than mad, she was alone and lonely. Even if she were in a room full of people, she was alone, off to herself, in the corner or sitting, watching, quiet whether she wanted to be or not. Dean had always felt responsible for trying to make her feel normal, at least a little bit. He wasn't sure it had ever worked though. Anyway, were any of the Winchester family normal? He really didn't think so.

Dean's mind again wandered into his memories, this time a more recent one...

*It was 2004 and Dean and Alex had just reunited with Sam a couple weeks ago after Dad went missing. The sibling dynamic was off, period, maybe because they'd been apart for years, maybe because Sam was mourning the death of Jessica, maybe because Alex was kind of withdrawn and weird with her twin suddenly back in the picture. Either way, Dean was a little extra pissy because nothing was going according to plan and because Dad was proving impossible to find.*

*They'd stopped in Lake Manitoc, Wisconsin, to investigate a series of suspicious drownings. The deaths had been ruled accidental, but Dean hadn't been so sure. They'd found the wife and son of one of the most recent drowning victims. This boy named Lucas had seen his dad drown—and the poor kid had been stuck out there, floating in the cold water all alone for hours—he hadn't spoken a word since. The second Dean had learned that this kid had gone mute after watching a parent die, he'd been deeply affected and empathetic. After all, that's pretty much exactly what had happened to his little sister.*

*At a local park, Dean had tracked down Lucas's mom for the second time to talk to her. He wanted to talk to Lucas some more, see what the kid had seen when his dad drowned. Morbid stuff, but someone had to do it. Lucas was off by himself at the park, so Dean and Alex had gone over to try and see if they could get him to talk. Sam hung back with the mom. Lucas was sitting alone, bent over a park bench coloring. "Follow my lead," Dean said, maybe a little unnecessarily to Alex, who gave him a part-amused, part-judging look that clearly said I always do, don't I? Yeah. She did.*

"*How's it going?*" Dean asked Lucas as they approached, then crouched down across from the kid. Alex knelt at the end of the bench, folded her arms over the wooden slats. The little boy didn't acknowledge either of them, just kept coloring. He had colored construction paper stacked next to him and some untouched plastic army men scattered across the bench, too. Dean and Alex exchanged a glance, Alex shrugged almost imperceptibly, and Dean picked up a toy soldier.

"*Oh, I used to love these things,*" Dean said conversationally, and swung the little plastic piece around making cheesy gun and explosion sounds. Alex shook her head, hid a smile. Lucas kept coloring, ignoring them, and Dean tried again. "*So crayons more your thing?*" Dean asked, watching Lucas carefully. "*That's cool. Chicks dig artists.*"

Alex had picked up the drawing on top of the little pile of drawings Lucas had next to himself. She looked at it thoughtfully—the drawing was of a big black swirl. Dean glanced between Alex and Lucas, struck by the fact that this kid Lucas reminded him painfully of his sister in a way that surprised him. Lucas had to be five or six, and Alex was twenty-two, but they had the exact same sad, alone, haunted eyes. They had the same lonely-in-a-world-full-of-people kind of slouch to their shoulders.

*Dean caught himself in his thoughts and refocused, soldiered on—this was no time to get all
jacked up on sad feelings. He flipped through Lucas's drawings. "Hey, these are pretty good," he said, looking at the one of a red bicycle. He got an idea, glanced at Lucas. "You mind if I sit and draw with you for awhile?"

No response from Lucas. "I'm not so bad myself," Dean commented, going ahead and picking up the stack of paper and a crayon, standing up. Alex had her hands together and under her chin and she watched silently, mostly observing Lucas, but looking at Dean from time to time. Dean glanced at her briefly as he sat down on the empty end of the bench, then addressed Lucas again.

"You know Lucas, I'm thinking you can hear me, you just don't want to talk. I don't know exactly what happened to your dad, but I know it was something real bad." He glanced at Lucas, who was still unresponsive. "I think I know how you feel. When I was your age, I... I saw something." He paused, stopped drawing for a second, grew deeply thoughtful and pensive, thinking of what he remembered about that fateful night: flashes of fire down the hallway, Dad shouting, the roar of the flames, baby Sam wailing, Alex wide eyed and screaming and silent. Dean had run outside, stared up at the window of the nursery from outside as he clutched the twins just barely—they had been so heavy in his arms. He hadn't understood what was happening, not at first. Their nursery window was lit up soft orange by the fire—how could Dean have guessed that Mom was burning alive just beyond those panes of glass?

Sobering a good deal, Dean took a deep breath, glanced at Alex, who was watching Lucas draw. Sometimes Dean wondered if she remembered anything. She'd just been a baby, after all.

"Anyway," Dean looked at Lucas, gathering himself and forcing his mind out of the dark places. "My little sister Alex here? She doesn't talk cuz of what happened. Just like you. She saw something so bad that it just... made her voice go poof, I guess." Alex's jaw had tightened a little at the subject matter, but she just stared down at the bench neutrally. However, Lucas did stop drawing a second and glanced Alex's way in half-curiosity before returning to his scribbles.

"Listen," Dean said to the kid. "We understand and we wanna help." He returned to drawing as he talked. "Maybe you don't think anyone will listen to you, or, or believe you. I want you to know that I will. You don't even have to say anything." Alex peeked up at Dean from under her lashes and he attempted to give her a little smile. He was good at these one-sided conversations after a lifetime with her. And she knew it, too.

"You could draw me a picture about what you saw that day, with your dad, on the lake," Dean suggested, refocusing on Lucas. When he got no response, he nodded. It had been worth a shot. "Okay, no problem. This is for you." Dean held out the stick-figure drawing he'd done. "This is my family." He pointed to each stick figure individually. "That's my dad. That's my mom. That's my geek brother—" he smirked, glanced Sam's way, "my kid sister—and that's me." A pause, and Lucas still said nothing, just colored his little rocket ship drawing, off in his own little world. Dean gave up, but kept his voice friendly and calm. "All right, so I'm a sucky artist." He stood, put the drawing down where he'd been sitting. "I'll see you around, Lucas."

Dean started to walk off but when Alex stayed put, and he stopped, looked at her, waited—but she shook her head slightly, motioned for him to go on and go. He hung back, but watched, curious. Lucas came out of his fog, picked up the drawing Dean had left, stared at it curiously, then looked at Alex and then back to the picture, then back at her again. He was scrutinizing her kind of suspiciously. She smiled just a little—she had a way of smiling really hesitantly, sort of grimacing, holding her mouth in a stiff line and testing the waters before really smiling for real—but today she smiled for real and right away at the little kid as she tapped the stick figure on the sheet that symbolized her. She then tapped herself on the chest, close to her shoulder. Lucas looked at her a long time, trying to decide something maybe. Alex took a piece of paper, a crayon, wrote something
down, held it out in front of herself for him to read. **I see you.**

Lucas tilted his head to the side just slightly, thoughtfully, then reached out and accepted it from her. Dean watched with increasing interest... usually Alex was a total disaster with kids—she just didn't know what to do with them and they didn't know what to do with her—kids liked loud people, entertaining people. Alex was easy to miss if you weren't looking for her. Maybe that's why Lucas seemed kind of fascinated by her, because he wasn't a typical kid. He had taken out his own blank piece of paper and was writing on it. Lucas handed it to her and Dean could just make out the words **I see you too.**

Alex read it, took it, raised her eyebrows and tilted her head, her eyes flickering over Lucas's face. She smiled a little then, and the kid's chin moved up, he looked at Alex thoroughly. Dean swore the two of them were having an entire conversation that only they could understand.

And then Lucas got out a new sheet of paper and began to draw a house—they didn't know it at the time, but that drawing would help them solve the case.

Dean remembered watching the two of them together, those silent kids with world-weary eyes and knowing there was hope for Lucas that he might speak again someday, but knowing deep down in his heart of hearts that Alex would remain silent forever. So imagine his surprise, shock, and disbelief when a few months ago, out of nowhere, Alex had stubbed her toe on something and yelped out loud in pain. All three of them had been totally shocked at the sound, the first sound out of her mouth since she'd been a baby. At first they had all been beside themselves with disbelief and overwhelming confused happiness—but then they had all stopped, suspicious, wondering how—why—and who? They still didn't know of these answers.

The first few days, Alex hadn't been able to speak too well, stuttering a lot and getting overwhelmed and frustrated with her newfound ability. But these days, you'd never know she'd ever been mute. She spoke easily, argued a lot, joked, laughed, snarked off as if she had always been able to—which was another mystery, something that bothered Dean deeply. She'd caught on fast. Too fast. It had to be supernatural, however she'd been fixed up and Dean knew that—but didn't have a clue how to find out who or what was responsible. He thought maybe, maybe Dad had done it somehow from beyond the grave, but he had no way of knowing that for sure. For a moment, Dean thought how much he would like—no, how much he needed—to stick around a few years more, if only to find out who had fixed her and why. But soon, the Hellhounds would come. Dean's expression darkened and he gripped the steering wheel tighter.

In the back seat and lost in her own thoughts, Alex was also thinking about her newfound voice as she absently bit at her nails. Being inexplicably healed of a life of silence, of the inability to make a single noise didn't sit well with her. The having a voice part was great, the not having a clue why was what ate away at her. In her experience, good things didn't just randomly happen to her. Ever. There was some catch to it... she just knew it.

For her entire life, Alex had lived in her own internal world, watching life happen and not feeling part of it in the way others were. She'd spent a lot of time imagining her responses to conversations she was never be a part of, giving grand monologues inside her head for hours at a time, wondering what would change if she could speak, respond, and participate like everyone else could.

If she tried to look at her muteness from a positive angle, all she could come up with was that she'd gotten really good at writing fast and clear since she usually used notepaper to communicate. Sometimes she'd used morse code, too, since Dad made them all learn the military-method of communication. She never learned sign language though... not much anyway. She knew a few basic signs and the alphabet but Dad had always insisted, sometimes really angrily, that she didn't
need to learn 'that crap' and how he was going to find a way to fix her. Well, he never had. Throughout the years, some kindhearted teachers had insisted on sign language classes for her a few times but Alex had never really put any effort into learning it. She'd known her brothers and especially her dad wouldn't have the time to learn it, and they were the only ones she really cared about communicating with. That and as soon as she'd be enrolled in the class, it'd be time to change schools again, anyway. They traveled—a lot—and school had been a big, stupid blur. She hadn't been like Sam, good grades and Mr. Honor Roll. She'd been the F student who never tried at all.

It had always seemed like a cruel joke, that a girl like Alex—in a family that lived to hunt down and killed the undead—would have an extra thing holding her back. She was already in the minority, being a girl, being the smallest, being the youngest. So being mute was the cherry on top of the crappy ice cream sundae. She had overcompensated, trying to prove to Dad and herself that she wasn't weaker and that she wasn't any less of a person. She'd obsessively worked on her marksmanship until she was the best shot of either of her brothers, she'd studied Latin on her own instead of doing homework, she'd taught herself to look at something for just a few seconds and remember details, she'd tried and tried and tried. But still, she'd felt overlooked by Dad. After awhile, she gave up on pleasing him.

But for years, she tried and failed, and sadness from the disappointment of Dad never being proud of her still remained. Her brothers were her saving grace in all those hard moments of sadness and being let down by Dad, but especially Dean. Dean who had always gone out of his way to look out for her, comfort her, stick up for her, protect her. Dean who had seen the ways she worked hard to please Dad and patted her on the shoulder, told her good job when Dad had said nothing. Dean who had stuck by her side, even when Sam left the family, even when Dad disappeared for weeks and months on end. Dean who had never let her down, not even once. Dean who couldn't die, who couldn't leave her here alone. He was her best friend.

Alex felt desperation bubbling up inside her, and helplessness at the same time. You couldn't just break a soul contract. No one ever had, not that they knew of. She looked out the window, tears pricking her eyes.

*Don't cry. Don't let them see you cry.*

She steeled herself, breathed in deep, cracked her knuckles one by one and forcibly made herself think about anything other than the soul deal, but not before reflecting miserably that maybe she was more like her brothers than she thought: avoiding the reality that was staring her down the barrel.
Canned baked beans. Again. Alex shoveled the globby lukewarm lumps into her mouth and chased
them with tap water, trying to get breakfast over as fast as possible. Meals around here tended to
come from a can, and that wasn't going to change anytime soon. Moreover, she didn't honestly
care. Food didn't really taste like anything to her anymore, she didn't want to eat it, no matter what
it was. But she made herself, because if she didn't, Bobby would. Across from the kitchen table
where she sat, Bobby Singer was in his study, poring over some books with his Jack Daniels close
by. It was nine in the morning. Alex eyed the whiskey bottle a little wistfully. Maybe later. She
started on her third cup of coffee instead. It seemed to have little to no effect in helping her feel
alert or stay awake, but she was hoping maybe this cup would help jump start her.

She was tired to her bones. It wasn't that she didn't have time to sleep. She just wasn't ever able to
sleep more than a few hours at a time. When she did manage to fall asleep after laying awake for
what felt like hours, she didn't stay asleep long. There were nightmares. There was never a feeling
of being calm due to the nonstop thoughts and losses racing around her head. There were tears that
never stopped coming. She felt dissatisfied with everything, constantly vigilant, and incapable of
relaxing.

Alex took a sip of the quite frankly terrible coffee and thought of how without Bobby's kindness,
she probably would have either gotten killed or killed herself by now. She wasn't sure if she could
go on living like this forever though. There was this huge void inside that ached day and night,
made her existence miserable. She didn't want to live like this. And she'd thought life was lonely
before Dean had died and Sam had left...

Sitting there at the familiar old kitchen table in the somewhat dilapidated house, Alex thought of
how this place held so many of her childhood memories. She remembered playing hide-and-seek
with Sam in the junkyard on their tenth birthday. She remembered one time the three of them had
read some of Bobby's top shelf, forbidden-for-kids books secretly in the dead of the night... and
then had scary dreams for the next week after that because of the freaky illustrations and stories
inside of that book. She remembered finding Dean with some 'borrowed' whiskey when he was
sixteen and him letting her try some too—she'd made the most sour pucker 'yuck' face in her life
when she'd tasted the dark liquid for the first time. The memory brought a soft smile and then the
familiar pain.

Alex got up, holding her coffee cup tightly, trying to not feel the loss, the gaping hole, the great
sadness. She drifted into the study, old hardwood floor creaking under her feet. "Anything?" she
asked Bobby, who glanced up at her from underneath his ball cap.

"Maybe," he replied, preoccupied, turning the page of his book. "Possible werewolf down in
Virginia."

Yes! Anything to get the fuck out of this house. "Let's do it."

He didn't seem to share her enthusiasm, flicked another page in his book. "Rufus's already down
that way, I'm gonna get him to handle it." He took a swig of his drink and grimaced as he set the bottle down on the table with a loud thud. "'Sides, we just got back from smokin' that nest of vamps—take a breather."

Alex's jaw tightened, she turned her mug of coffee in her hand, every muscle in her body tense. A breather was the last thing she wanted to take. Revenge was what she wanted. "Lilith is still out there."

Bobby looked at her fully this time, cautioningly, then deliberately sat back in his chair while holding her gaze. "Yeah. She is. But running ourselves ragged ain't gonna magically get us where we can kill her. These things take time—research—preparation. We need to know what we're up against." He softened a little. "I know it ain't easy waiting. But trust me. If it's the last thing we do, we'll get the bitch." He pushed the book back a little from himself, looking at her more closely. "You okay?"

She gave him a sullen look and shrugged. She didn't want to say 'yes' and be lying, and she didn't want to talk about her actual feelings either. He looked at her sadly, and she could tell that he knew she wasn't good at all. But he said nothing, thankfully.

Dean is dead.

No matter how hard she tried to forget it, push it aside, play it down... her big brother being gone forever was the cold reality. No amount of alcohol, hunting, reading, tv, coffee, daydreaming, wishing, whatever—could change that. She remembered his screams as he'd been ripped apart. She could still see that blank, lifeless stare in his eyes when it had all been over.

Alex felt tears coming on and quickly pressed her mouth into a flat line and managed a mumbled I'll be outside before she turned and hurried out into the salvage yard, allowing the tears to come as her knuckles turned white holding the forgotten coffee cup. Just when she thought she'd drained the last of her reserves, that she couldn't cry anymore—it would happen again, wracking her body with such intense grief that she felt like she would die. The loss, the desperation, the anger and bitterness crashed over her once again like the stormy ocean tide. She felt physically ill, mentally incapable, totally wrecked. She'd never known so much sorrow in her entire life. And that was saying something.

Why didn't you save him? Why didn't you think of something?

In a sudden burst of rage, Alex hurled the half-full mug of coffee blindly with an oddly choked scream. It crashed and shattered against an old, rusted Chevy—and Alex put her hands against her mouth to try and get herself to stop crying and breathe more normally, sinking down to her heels because standing was too much. She was suddenly remembering the time Dean flew off the handle about Dad dying, the time he'd trashed the Impala.

It was a memory that was still fresh, especially since it had been in this same exact salvage yard... Alex had been sitting there beside one of the other junkers.

Her red, watery eyes drifted over to the exact spot as she remembered. It had been really bright that day and she'd been sitting on the ground in the shade of a messed up semi truck. She'd been staring unseeingly at the laces of her faded Converse shoes, listening to Dean and Sam argue. Sam had wanted to know why Dean wasn't grieving Dad's death—Dean had given his brother some douchey, heartless response, Sam had gotten pissed and walked off. Alex remembered looking up at her oldest brother, who hadn't even remembered she was there. His shoulders had been tense, his breathing weird. He stared at his car a long moment, completely still, the crowbar he was holding hanging there limply at his side. And then in a fit of absolute helpless rage, he had reeled back and
then smashed one of the windows in. That hadn't been enough for him—it seemed to set him off in fact—he'd started beating the trunk of the car, tearing apart what he'd rebuilt—and Alex, who had jumped up when he smashed the window, grabbed his shoulder, startling him—he'd looked absolutely wrecked with grief. She'd shaken her head 'no,' wishing so badly she could talk out loud, tell him it was going to be okay, that he shouldn't blame himself, that she couldn't let him do this…but all she could do back then was look at him in concern, try to reach out and pull him in for a hug—but he'd tried to push her away. She'd refused to be pushed, shaken her head 'no' again, sterner this time, daring her brother to keep up the stupid charade—she yanked the crowbar away from him angrily and threw it aside—and then his front had dissolved, he'd broken down and hugged her tightly, pressed his face into the top of her shoulder. He'd shaken with sobs, clung to her hard. "It's my fault," he had choked out over and over again. "It's my fault."

And it hadn't been, but that was Dean. He blamed himself for everything, always.

Alex looked over to her left—the exact spot in the salvage yard where all that had happened, and her grief was renewed a hundred times over. For her entire life, Dean was the one thing that had never changed. Sam had been come and go, hit or miss. Dad had been mostly absent and distant even when he was there, more of a drill sergeant than a father... he'd said he was proud of her like once her whole life. Once. Her life had been a shaky off-the-rails roller coaster. Nothing had ever been permanent, nothing had ever been constant or unchanging. Nothing except her oldest brother, who had been her absolute hero, her best friend.

She sniffed, wiped her cheeks off, growing stony and numb, feeling so hollow. As if she was cold, her arms circled around herself. For the past four and a half months she had been drowning in her grief alone. It was hard to face the facts, but her family was pretty much gone completely—only she and Sam had survived, and, hell, at the rate they were going, the two of them would probably be dead soon too. Sam might be dead already, she didn't know—they hadn't spoken in four months. Her stomach turned bitterly, guiltily. She stood slowly, zombie-like, then looked across the junk yard blankly, arms hanging at her sides. She should call him. She had this thought every single day, and every day she almost did—then stopped herself. She already knew how it would go. Badly. And her pride was at stake, too. She didn't want to cave.

Their fight had happened three days after Dean's funeral. It had cut her deep and it still hurt bad. She was still too angry to want to even see his face, and still too ashamed of some of the things she'd said to attempt to make any kind of peace. Things had been rocky in their brother-sister relationship, well, for a long time now, but especially since Sam had left for college when they had been eighteen. And after burying Dean, things went from bad to absolute worst...

Late into the night and the two surviving Winchesters were awake, sharing another bottle of whiskey in Bobby's study. A couple other discarded, emptied bottles laid nearby. The twins had been at it for several hours, drinking up to Dean's memory and getting more than a little wasted in the process. Alex had the bottle and was staring at it miserably. "I still think we need to go back, Sam. We should salt and burn his bones just to be safe. It's what Dean would want."

Sam ran a hand through his shaggy hair tiredly. "We've been over this—we need his body for when I bring him back. Gimme that."

Alex glared a warning at him, held the whiskey bottle to herself. "If you say that one more time..."

Sam looked at her with one of more stubborn, exasperated expressions. "He's our big brother, Alex. I'm finding a way." His tone was deadly serious and even acidic, and Alex scooted toward him from where she sat on the couch. He was eyeing the bottle in her hand, a growing ugly expression on his face.
"You're being stupid," she accused. "I want him back too, but there's literally not a way that won't fuck more shit up." Alex looked at him long and hard, he avoided her gaze, stayed silent, and Alex scowled drunkenly. She sounded incredibly bitter and horrible, even to herself.

Sam stood up, clearly agitated, throwing his arms wide dramatically. "Do you hear yourself?" The accusation in his voice, unspoken, was clear enough to Alex: she didn't care about their brother. Sam doubled down. "We can bring him back, I know it. There has to be a way."

Alex stood up at that point, set the whiskey bottle down. Even though she was five foot eight inches, he still towered over her. "Yeah, there're ways to bring people back—dark magic, sell your soul, demon deals..." Alex gave a disgusted snort. The alcohol was making it hard to think, and easy to make mistakes.

Sam was getting angry. "He's in hell, Alex. We can't leave him in there."

"Well what the hell can we actually do, Sam?!" Alex burst out, all of her frustrations and anger and grief making her feel powerless. "NOTHING!" That word felt final. Fatal. True. Of course she didn't want to leave Dean there, but she knew there was no way to bring her brother back that wasn't laced with dark, demonic consequences that would leave them all worse off. It was an impossible, heartbreaking situation. She wished in that moment that she knew nothing about the supernatural and paranormal. Maybe then she wouldn't be forever after tormented with thoughts of somehow saving her brother. If she weren't a hunter who had seen so many people come back from death, maybe she could just accept the fact that her brother was dead and move on.

A muscle jerked in Sam's cheek as he fixed her with narrowed eyes that seemed to suddenly despise her. "You really don't give two craps about him, do you? After all he did for you."

Her eyebrows shot up high as deeply offended feelings jolted her insides. "Excuse me?"

Sam gave a short, humorless laugh. "All I'm saying is if he could see you now, how you don't even want to try to bring him back or even try to—" Sam said. "When we both know he would do anything for either of us!"

"Oh you're one to talk about loyalty," Alex snapped. "You know what, fuck off. I never friggin' abandoned my family like you did! So don't lecture me when all you ever did for him or me was walk out!"

Her words were slurring worse and worse and her inhibitions didn't seem to exist anymore.

He seemed to think that was funny, pausing and scoffing, then laughing a short, biting laugh. "Are you really that jealous of me having a normal life?"

Exasperated and disgusted, Alex threw her hands in the air, like she couldn't believe he went there. "That's not what this is about!"

Sam's mouth was in a thin line, he was unconvinced. "Yeah, like hell it isn't. I know you're pissed at me for, I dunno, going off to college, living my own life, leaving you with Dean and Dad." His face twisted in an ugly expression. "You know what, just because you were disabled didn't mean I was obligated to waste the rest of my goddamn life babysitting you!"

Alex's face fell in wounded shock, and Sam immediately seemed to regret his choice of words, fumbling. "I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

Crushed, Alex felt her eyes stinging with tears. She was angry. Hurt. And suddenly so enraged she couldn't see straight. She jumped across the space between them, grabbed him by the front of his
shirt, and punched him for all she was worth in the face. It still sent them both falling over and crashing into furniture, where she socked him a few more times with angry shrieks as he flailed and put hands in front of his face. They both scrambled back up once he shoved her off, Sam holding his face where she’d hit him. Alex shook her head, breathing hard from emotions and adrenaline, not sure if she recognized the guy standing in front of her. She had half a mind to keep hitting him, but she decided words would hurt more. "You don't even deserve what Dean did, you fucking jerk," she spat scornfully, hiding her tears and hitting Sam where it hurt, both with words and a hard shove to his chest. "He should never have made that crossroads deal for you!" And then five words that came out of nowhere, screamed at the top of her lungs: "I wish YOU were dead!"

The words hit the air and there was suddenly dead, hurt silence. Alex immediately realized she had gone too far, but didn't know how to undo it. Sam's face went cold and dark, and he stared at her wordlessly for several seconds. Then he made a disgusted face, shook his head, over it. "You know what? I don't need this crap from you," he said bitterly, and without another word, he turned and stalked toward the door. For the briefest of seconds, she knew she needed to apologize, beg him to forgive her outburst—but pride wouldn't let her. She dug even deeper in out of anger, grief, and the clouded way her alcohol-addled brain was operating.

"Yeah, leave like you always do, fucking coward!" Alex screamed even as Sam slammed the door out hard enough to break something and send several items knocking to the ground. She almost went after him, suddenly panicking, taking two steps after him—and then she stopped. She was either too proud to follow and say she was sorry, or too afraid that he wouldn't care and leave anyway—and she just stood there, stupid and useless, not able to stand up completely steadily thanks to the booze. A couple seconds later, she could hear the Impala as it started up and tore out of the driveway.

She heard soft footsteps behind her. "Jesus, you two were about to bring the whole house down," Bobby commented uncomfortably.

Alex swallowed, pretended to be fine, even though she was mortified with herself and feeling sick inside. "He'll come back," she said tersely, then brushed past Bobby, refusing to speak any more that night.

But he didn't come back. He didn't call. Nothing. She had stewed for a week, waiting to hear from him, waiting for him to crawl back. And... nothing. But why would he after what she said?

Before she knew it, the week turned into two weeks. Then three. Now, almost four months later, she was at the point where she felt there was no returning—that it was too late to try and make amends. And honestly, maybe she didn't want to. She wasn't sure she could forgive him for what he'd said—and she sure as hell didn't want him to be in her life if he saw her as only a babysitting job. And what about what she had said to him? That had been even worse maybe, even more unforgivable than what he'd said to her. Dean would have been pissed as hell to see them not speaking. What a mess. What a horrible, stupid mess. It was fitting though, because that's what her life was, after all. A wreck. Sam's absence was just further confirmation that he didn't want to be part of the family and never had at all. He'd walked out, just like before when he turned eighteen. Sure, Dean had dragged him back into the life a few years ago and Sam had stuck around, hunted with them again, acted like he belonged in the life. But she should have known that it was just a matter of time before he left again. Apparently Dean had been the only thing keeping the family together. Apparently she wasn't someone worth sticking around for.

Alex realized how self-centered her thoughts were and got mad at herself all over again. She kicked a discarded beer can aimlessly, not even sure why she was bothering with life anymore. It
felt pointless. Totally pointless. Empty. She had no one but Bobby, and he was great, really. But not the same as who she’d lost. Absently, she listened to the sound of Bobby's phone ringing inside the house for the second or third time and hoped it was another hunter with a job for them. She wanted to be hunting something. Anything. Killing something, slashing something, beating someone's face in. And more than that, she wanted to be hunting down Lilith. Maybe after a couple more months of getting her head right and hunting alongside Bobby, she'd go find Sam, try to apologize or something and they could work together on taking down that evil bitch together. It would be the least they could do in memory of their brother. Either way, Alex didn't want to lose the only living relative she had left. But maybe you already have, said a quiet, dark voice inside.

The sound of Bobby's heavy footsteps sounded behind and then beside her. "Hey, you all right?" he asked. He had his arms folded and he was looking at her sort of dubiously. She glanced at him sidelong, cursory and cautious. Bobby was about her height and built stockily. He was always wearing the same outfit: a flannel shirt with a puffy vest, a ballcap, and a disgruntled expression. He was bearded and to look at him without knowing him, you might judge him as being crotchety and country as hell. And he was both those things. But he was also cunning, intellectually brilliant, and a real softie deep down. Like right now, coming out here to ask if she was all right. But the narrowed-eye stare he was giving her was weird.

"Yeah, fine, why?" She asked.

He looked at her with a deepening frown. "You've been standin' out here for almost an hour."

Alex blinked in surprise. An hour? "I... I guess I lost track of time." She'd done that a lot lately. Attempting to look less unsettled than she was, Alex cleared her throat. "Who uh, who called?"

"Some jackass," Bobby said, seeming a little distracted. "It wasn't anything."

"Some jackass," Bobby said, seeming a little distracted. "It wasn't anything."

Alex looked at him carefully now. Something seemed off about him, catching her attention and suspicion. "You sure?"

His grizzled face gave nothing away except the fact that she better quit asking. "Yeah, I'm sure," he answered firmly. "Look, those salt rounds aren't gonna pack themselves," he said, jerking his thumb in the direction of the house.

"Oh, crap, yeah. Forgot. I'll go start."

Bobby gave her a crooked little smile and patted her a little awkwardly on the shoulder. 'I'm makin' more coffee. Lemme know when those rounds are packed." He turned to go inside and Alex made to follow, but a flash of light in her peripheral vision caused her to stop, turn, and squint —she could have sworn, for a millisecond, that someone had been standing there. But there was nothing there. She frowned at herself, retreating into the house with a few backward glances. She sometimes saw those flashes of light at the corners of her vision, but when she looked fully, there would be nothing there—she probably needed to go see an eye doctor or something. She saw these flashes more and more, especially since Dean died.

Alex followed Bobby into his house—it was a cluttered place that was tidy in an untidy way, if that made sense. The same stuff had been here since Alex could remember—same faded tartan couch, same rickety kitchen table, same solid oak study desk. She went downstairs into the ramshackle basement and began loading up salt rounds, packing shotgun shells full of rock salt. There was a therapeutic quality to doing this. Maybe because this was a task she had been assigned to since she could remember. Even though she was the baby of the family and the instant minority since she was the smallest and a girl, Dad had always taught her everything her brothers had learned about hunting and killing the undead. And this had always been her job, the thing she took
care of for the family. Dad hadn't willingly taken her on many hunts, but he'd let her do this.

Methodically she filled shell after shell. The salty smell would stay on her fingers and on her skin for awhile. It was a familiar, comforting scent and took her away from her deeper, more painful thoughts. After awhile, she heard the shuffling of feet on the floor over her head—two pairs of feet. She hadn't known Bobby was expecting company. She kept on with the shells. She had probably filled a hundred now and her neck was tired, her fingers cramping. Just a few more and... up above her, she heard sounds like something had been knocked over, and then the sound of shouting and a chair scraping across the floor. Recognizing the sounds of a scuffle she reacted on instinct as her heart rate suddenly leapt into high gear. She bolted up the stairs without a second thought, a shotgun in hand. She shoved a spare round into it as she went, not sure what she was going to find.

Rounding the corner at the top of the steps, she froze at the sight before her with the shotgun pulled tight into her shoulder.

Bobby stood and stared as Dean, silver knife in hand stood stock still, blood dripping from his forearm. The two men looked from each other to her. When Dean saw her, an indescribable expression—something like disbelief and joy—passed over his features, and the knife lowered, he made to move toward her, but she was taking a step back, aiming the shotgun directly at his center and cocking it loudly. He froze. Completely shocked, she felt like she could puke or collapse.

"What is this Bobby? Who is that?!!" Alex demanded, almost shouting or crying, she wasn't sure which. She was shaking all over, wondering what kind of sick joke this was.

"Al, it's me," Dean implored. At the sound of the familiar gravelly voice, Alex froze too, confused and horrified and shocked. She realized she was breathing hard, her heart was hammering a million miles an hour. She looked at Bobby questioningly, who was reaching for her weapon.

"Gimme the gun, kiddo. I... I think it really is him," Bobby said, sounding a little dazed.

Alex jerked away from Bobby, refusing to give up her weapon, backing up even more. She held it with doubled aggression, staring at the guy who looked like her oldest brother. "No," she said through gritted teeth. "Not possible."

Dean was slowly laying his knife down, and then keeping his hands out, as if to show that he meant no harm. "It's really me, Al. You gotta believe me." He looked pleading and worried.

"No..." Alex shook her head, feeling sick with hope, but refusing to believe it. She fixed him with a hard expression, but felt her eyes filling with tears. "I watched you die. I saw you buried." She began to despair. "How could you be—" she paused, aghast, "here again?!"

Dean looked about as sure as she was. "I dunno how, but I'm here. And I'm me."

Alex's breathing was labored as she looked at the anxious face of her older brother. Every detail was the same as she remembered, and if this were a shifter or something... it was a damn good imitation. Whoever it was in front of her looked exactly like Dean Winchester: he was tall and broad-shouldered, built solidly, not overly muscular, just strong and brawny. His eyes were startlingly green and looking at her with a wounded and hopeful expression. He had the lightest smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose and the planes of his cheeks. He looked like Dean, he sounded like Dean. He even stood like Dean. His legs were slightly bowed too, just like the real Dean, and Alex's heart twisted in her chest. It really did look like him. And she wanted it to be, oh god she wanted it to be but how was this possible?

She looked at him carefully, still holding the shotgun level at his chest as she struggled. Her,
pointing the weapon at him seemed to be inspiring a great sadness in his eyes—like he was hoping to be recognized right off the bat. *Is that really him?* She looked down over him completely, looking for proof that it was him or wasn't him. Then she noticed how he nervously clenched and unclenched his fists at his sides. A subtle little motion, barely perceptible. Her grip on her weapon softened and her mouth opened slightly in surprise. She stared—he had always done that when he was uncomfortable or nervous. Clenched, unclenched, clenched, unclenched—driven her freaking nuts with that damn habit over the years. And *that*—the little nervous tic she had seen a thousand times during their shared lifetime—that was something a demon or shapeshifter would never be able to duplicate to perfection or think to implement. She looked him in the eye, her heart completely flooded with a surge of amazed, overjoyed disbelief. But she wanted to make extra sure.

"When's my birthday?" she asked in a whisper. A low ball, easy one.

"May second," came the immediate answer. Then added on after a one-second beat: "Nineteen eighty-three."

Her heart was picking up pace and the shotgun was lowering slowly. "What's my favorite cartoon?"

Dean's face softened with the beginnings of a smile. "Wile E. Coyote, duh."

Alex's eyes were brimming with tears, and she was beginning to smile too. "Pizza topping."

"Plain cheese, you freak." A constant accusation he always gave her throughout the years. At this point, he was smiling big, but through tears of his own too. "I could name your favorites all day, Al, but can I get a hug first? Just got back from being dead and shit."

"Y-you're really you," she said in a stunned daze, feeling herself moving forward toward him.

He nodded, smiling tightly as his eyes shone with tears and his features wavered. "Yeah kiddo."

A happy sob sounded as Alex crashed into her big brother, arms around his neck, shotgun still in her hand. She began to cry out of happiness. "Oh my god, oh my god," was all she could manage. Alex shook from sobs, and Dean buried his face in her shoulder, relieved, breaking down too, embracing her so tightly in his strong arms that she could barely breathe. For a moment they just gripped each other like that, then Alex pulled back to look at him again, just in time to see water splash across his face.

Deadpan, he blinked and spit, made a face. "Not a demon either, Bobby." The Winchesters looked in unison in Bobby, who shrugged sheepishly.

"Sorry. Can't be too careful."

Floating, in a gaze, Alex got a towel out of one of the kitchen drawers and laid down the shotgun as Bobby and Dean hugged tightly. Dean took the towel with a "thanks," and Alex stared, unable to believe this, still afraid to. This was surreal, and that was putting it lightly. "H-how the hell are you back, Dean?" she asked as they followed Bobby into the study. She couldn't stop looking at him—he being alive was too good to be true. *Am I dreaming?*

"Your guess is as good as mine," Dean replied. He sounded almost as dazed as she was.

Bobby crossed his arms and fixed Dean with a serious gaze. "Dean. Your chest was ribbons, your insides were slop. And you've been buried for *four months*. Even if you could slip out of hell and back into your meat suit—"
"I know, I should look like a Thriller video reject." The humorous comment fell flat. They all knew something was very off about this entire situation. Alex hovered close to her brother, kind of afraid, however illogically, that if she walked away, he'd disappear.

"What do you remember about what happened?" Bobby asked.

Dean shook his head. "Not much. I remember I was a Hellhound's chew toy, and then... lights out. Then I come to six feet under, that was it." He switched subjects. "Sam's number's not working."

He looked at Alex, suddenly seeming to have a horrible thought occur to him. "He's... he's not...?"

She looked away from Dean, ashamed and nervously, absentmindedly rubbing the back of her neck.

"Oh, he's alive," Bobby assured. "As far as we know."

"Good... wait, what do you mean, as far as you know?"

Bobby glanced at Alex uncomfortably and she took the cue to explain. "We, uh, haven't heard from Sam since a few days after you died."

In disbelief, Dean looked from Bobby to Alex. "You're kidding. You two just let him go off by himself?"

"He left, didn't really ask for permission," Alex said, her tone a little shorter than she had intended.

Dean was now frowning, his trademark big-brother lecture face and tone coming out. "You should've been looking after him."

"Yeah, maybe," she admitted, feeling bitter about the way things were with Sam but questioning herself about her decisions as usual. Her eyes scanned the floor in front of her, seeing the fight she'd had with her twin all over again. "Things fell apart pretty fast after you died."

Bobby was now sitting at his desk, drumming the surface thoughtfully with his fingers. "These last months haven't been exactly easy, y'know. For any of us. We had to bury you. Your brother and sister, they just couldn't hold it together. We all took it pretty hard."

Dean seemed moderately chastened, and let it go. "Why'd you bury me, anyway?"

Alex sat down in one of the chairs across from Bobby's desk and Dean followed suit.

"Alex and I wanted you salted and burned. Usual drill. But... Sam wouldn't have it."

"Well, I'm glad he won that one," Dean said wryly. Another attempt at a joke that got nothing but grim looks from Bobby and Alex.

Bobby shrugged ruefully. "He said you'd need a body when he got you back home somehow."

Dean grew suspicious. "He said that?" He looked at his sister, frowning deeply.

And then, there was a sinking feeling. Had Sam done this somehow? Alex tried to explain it as best she could briefly, even as new worries grew. "He told me a bunch of times he'd find a way to bring you back. I tried to talk some sense into him, Dean—but he wouldn't listen. Turned into a huge fight. And then... he left." She drew a heavy breath, feeling guilty. "I, uh, I didn't try to follow or find him. And I still haven't."

Dean's expression was strange—disillusioned, hurt. Disappointed. And that was incredibly hard to look at for Alex, so she looked away.
Bobby let out a heavy breath through his nostrils. "Well, I tried to find him, even though your sister wouldn't hear of helping me. Sam wouldn't return my calls, lost me pretty fast when I tried to track him down. He didn't want to be found."

"Dammit, Sammy." Dean shook his head and rubbed his face in his hands. "Whatever he did, it's some kind of bad mojo."

"Whaddayou mean?" Bobby asked.

"You shoulda seen the grave site," Dean said, sounding deeply apprehensive. "It was like a nuke went off. And then there was this... this force, this presence, I dunno, but it, it blew past me at a fill-up joint. And then this."

He stood up and yanked his jacket off, pulled up the sleeve of his shirt. There on his shoulder, in red scar tissue, a chillingly clear hand print. Bobby and Alex jumped to their feet in unison, staring at it in shock and mild fear. "It was like a demon just yanked me out," Dean said, then paused darkly. "Or rode me out."

Alex reached out and gingerly tested her fingertips across the raised scar tissue, then met Dean's gaze, deeply troubled. "To hold up their end of the bargain," she surmised.

"Looks that way," Dean replied grimly, and pulled the sleeve of his shirt down again.

"Krishna and Zeus," Bobby breathed. "There's no telling what we're up against here."

Dean was putting his jacket back on, his expression dark. "I'll tell you one thing. We need to find Sam, and quick."
Finding Sam was easy enough thanks to modern technology and Dean's quick detective work. Within an hour of Dean's arrival at Bobby's, the three hunters were already headed back Pontiac, Illinois—suspiciously enough, the place where Sam was staying was close to where Dean had been buried. It looked like Sam had succeeded in getting Dean back, but the question was, how? And why was he still acting like he didn't want to be found?

A couple hours into the drive, they pulled over at a gas station. Bobby was outside his Chevelle fueling up as Dean was digging into a fast food burger in the front seat.

"Oh my god," Dean was saying through a mouth full of grease, cheese, and meat. "This is amazing." He made a very appreciative mmm sound and grinned back at Alex, which was kind of disgusting with all the burger and mayonnaise in his teeth.

"You're gross," she said, the would-be-insult touched with a certain note of affection. He raised the burger her way in salute, chewing loudly. Alex grinned, feeling it in her soul itself. In this moment, it was like Dean had never left at all. She momentarily forgot the months of pain and confusion and wandering; the overwhelming loneliness and grief. She was in a car watching her dumb brother pigging out on junk food... and it was the best thing in the world. Well, almost. The only thing missing was Sam. Alex's smile faded as she thought about her other brother. She felt so many things toward him—anger, remorse, guilt, disappointment, heartbreak. She thought about the 'babysitting' comment and wondered for the millionth time if that's all she had ever been to Sam—a responsibility he hadn't wanted, a hindrance on his freedom. And maybe Sam wasn't the only one who thought that.

She glanced at her oldest brother, faltering before she went through with it. "Dean, can I ask you something?"

"Duh," Dean replied as he took another huge bite of his sandwich.

She fidgeted a little, suddenly interested in her bitten-short fingernails and not sure how to put her question into words, second guessing herself. She was about to sound so stupid... but if she didn't ask, she wouldn't know, and she had to know. Still, this was going to suck to come right out and ask. It was embarrassing, but she knew Dean would let her know the facts. She pushed forward even though she felt a little physically sick with nervousness. She tried to sound nonchalant. "I, uh, I was just wondering... and just tell me the truth, okay?" She went quiet, hesitated. "How bad of a downer was I on, you know, the family, while we were growing up?"

Attention piqued, the hamburger was temporarily forgotten and Dean looked at her intently, frowning. "The hell you talking about?" His eyes were narrowing.

Alex got more uncomfortable. She didn't want to explain it. She struggled a little on how to word it. "I mean, it was hard on Dad to have these three kids tagging along after him all that time, and then one of them was you know—special needs." She said 'special needs' with a certain type of disdain that her brother clearly didn't like.
Dean's face was hard and almost a little angry. "Hey. I told you a million times—you've never been
disabled, okay? Nothing about being mute made you any less of a person. You were never any
kind of burden on us." Alex met his eyes hesitantly, feeling younger and smaller than she was. She
didn't believe him for a second.

"Then why'd Sam leave us when he was eighteen? And why'd he leave again?"

Dean looked confused and hurt at the same time. "You think that was your fault?"

Alex looked down at her hands angrily. "I know it was." Sam had always felt 'stuck' with her in
high school years, she knew he had. Leaving the family meant being free of having to look after
her and put up with her.

Dean seemed to soften, his eyes saddening. "Al... no." He sighed, a weary sound. "Dammit, you
really are too much like me." He sounded guilty, but quickly covered it up with a try at
reassurance. "Listen, I'm sure it's not as bad as you think. Sam's just being a jackass. Wouldn't be
the first time."

Alex shook her head slowly. He didn't hear the fight they had. He didn't know how much they had
hurt each other.

Across the parking lot, Bobby was coming out of the convenience store now and heading back
toward the car. Dean saw that even though Alex was silent... well, that was what Dean was used to,
actually. He could read his sister easily, he had years of experience figuring out her mood and
thought process from a glance alone, and he saw right now how doubtful she was about a
reconciliation. "Listen, whatever happened between you two... we'll stow it," he said. "We'll find
Sam and put this damn family back together if it kills us." He paused, and then added as an
afterthought, "Like it or not."

Alex said nothing. That sounded terrible, honestly. If Sam didn't want to be in this, why force it?

"Okay?" Dean prompted, a little forcefully.

Alex nodded automatically and gave him a "yeah," even though she wasn't sure how committed, if
at all, she was to doing what Dean had planned. She felt queasy thinking of seeing Sam again,
which was sad. She had idolized Sam and depended on him during her childhood. They had drifted
apart as teens, broken apart completely when he went to Stanford... gotten close again a couple
years ago. But she just really didn't know if it could be repaired again after that last fight. She'd
said something unforgivable. Something she wouldn't blame Sam for hating her forever about.

"Hey, sleepyhead," Alex heard, and felt herself being shaken. "Wake up." She started awake, and
found herself staring at Dean through bleary eyes.

"Where are we?" she asked, looking around groggily and sitting up from where she'd been slumped
into the car door. When did I fall asleep?

"Some motel," Dean said, and that's when Alex saw a familiar, dark car parked a few rows over.
The Impala. Her stomach jumped. She was no longer sleepy at all. Sam was here. "Bobby went in
to find out what room Sam's holed up in," Dean said, and got out of the car. Alex scrambled out
after him, grabbing her jacket and yanking it on, suddenly filled with trepidation at the thought of
seeing her twin again. Would he be happy to see them? Would he be happy to see her? What if he
welcomed Dean back and told Alex to screw off? That last scenario seemed most likely to her.

The night air was chilly, and the motel sign flickered a couple times. Dean was off in brooding
thoughts of his own, his expression tense—a muscle jerked in his cheek and his brow darkened as his eyes slid over his car.

Just then, Bobby appeared out of the check-in office and quickly made his way over to the Winchesters. "Wedge Antilles is in room two-oh-seven," he reported.

A smile fleetingly passed over Dean's face at the Star Wars reference. Dean chuckled softly. "That's my boy," he said. "Let's go."

And with that the three of them set off to finding the room, but not before Dean walked by the Impala. "Baby," Dean murmured affectionately, running a hand across the hood of his car. The inside of the motel was dim and run down—much like almost every other place they had ever stayed, Alex thought. At the end of the hall, Room 207 was marked by a cheesy red heart plaque.

"Here goes nothin'," Dean muttered, and knocked on the door.

A couple seconds passed then the door swung open, and the three of them couldn't hide their surprise—instead of Sam, a pretty, dark-haired young woman stood there, dressed in only underwear and a tank top. She looked at them expectantly. "So where is it?" she asked impatiently.

"Where's... what?" Dean asked, confused.

The girl copped an attitude. "The pizza... that takes three people to deliver?"

"Uh, I think we got the wrong room," Dean said.

And then, a tall, hulkingly familiar figure stepped into their line of sight from somewhere back in the room. "Hey is—" Sam stopped dead when he saw Dean, swallowing, his face the picture of shock. His eyes flickered between Dean and Alex, and he seemed completely caught off guard—almost panicked.

"Heya, Sammy," Dean said, and Alex could hear all of the deep, unspoken emotions in Dean's quiet greeting. He stepped into the room, moving toward Sam. Sam's eyes went cold, his body tensed, and Alex saw the violence flare in his eyes before Dean did.

"Wait, Dean!" Alex warned, moving forward and trying to stop her brother from going any closer, but it was too late. Sam whipped out a knife and with a roar, lunged at Dean. Dean blocked the knife slash just barely, even as Alex tackled Sam the only way she knew how, using her entire weight to slam her shoulder into his side, effectively knocking Sam to the side by a foot or two. The knife clattered to the floor even as the girl who had answered the door shrieked and jumped back. Bobby was just behind Alex and grabbed Sam, who was recovering from his sister's attack.

Alex stumbled back, a little jarred from the impact. Bobby was barely managing to hang on to Sam, who struggled violently, shouting at Dean, "Who are you?!"

Dean was flabbergasted. "Like you didn't do this?!"

"Do what?!" Sam roared, struggling against Bobby's grip.

"It's him, Sam! It's him! I've been through this already, it's really him!" Bobby managed through gritted teeth, fighting to hold Sam back.

Dean stared at Sam in floored disbelief at his crazy reaction. Sam was ceasing to fight as he stared at his older brother more closely. "What..." he stuttered, as the struggle left his body completely. He looked at Alex, searching for confirmation—and Alex was mystified at his behavior. Hadn't he
brought Dean back? Why was he acting so shocked? Sam was now looking at Dean in complete disbelief.

"I know." Dean smiled a little, chancing humor. "I look fantastic, huh?"

Bobby cautiously let go of Sam, who was now on the verge of tears. He had eyes only for Dean, and pulled his brother into a crushing hug that Dean returned. The two of them gripped each other tightly for a long moment with teary eyes, then pulled back to look at each other.

"So are you two two like... together?" asked the girl, who everyone had forgotten was there until then. She was standing there watching the scene with a strange expression.

"What?" Sam seemed to have forgotten about her. "No. No," Sam almost chuckled. "He's my brother."

"Uh... got it. I... I guess. Look, I should probably go," she said, already turning to pick up a shirt off the floor.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's probably a good idea," Sam said, distracted and a little awkward. "Sorry."

She grabbed her jeans too and shimmied into them right there in front of them all. Alex saw Bobby, ever the gentleman, looking down and tugging the brim of his cap lower, clearly a little embarrassed. Dean however, watched openly, looking mildly approving. The girl grabbed her bag, and Sam walked her to the door. "So, call me," she said, looking up at Sam hopefully.

"Yeah, sure thing, Kathy."

She paused, disappointed. "Kristy."

"Uh, right," Sam said, and shut the door behind the girl. He came back into the room slowly, glancing around at everyone with a hooded expression.

Alex looked at Dean sidelong, questioning and dubious. He shrugged. He also seemed to have noticed how un-Sam-like that entire scene was. Alex stayed her distance, leaning up against the wall and crossing her arms as Sam sat on the bed, grabbing a button up shirt and shrugging it over his t-shirt. Sam hadn't really acknowledged her and now he was just ignoring everyone—seemed like guilty behavior to her. Dean was leaned against the wall across from Sam, his arms folded.

"So, what'd it cost?"

Sam had a little dark smile on his face as he buttoned the shirt. "The girl? I don't pay, Dean."

Dean was intense and serious. "That's not funny, Sam." He paused, hardened his voice. "To bring me back. What'd it cost? Was it just your soul, or was it something worse?"

Sam paused, looking at Dean with uncertainty. "You think I made a deal?" He asked. He sounded offended.

"We know you made a deal," Alex said coldly.

Her first words to Sam, who looked at Alex with an unpleasant expression. "I didn't." His words were sharp.

"Don't lie to us," Dean said, his tone darkening.

"I'm not lying," Sam insisted as slow anger built in his voice and face.
Dean only got angrier. "So what now, I'm off the hook and you're on, is that it?" He asked, standing and approaching Sam coolly. "You're some demon's bitch-boy? I didn't want to be saved like this!"

Sam seemed to reach the end of his patience and stood up in anger. "Look, Dean, I wish I had done it, all right?!

Dean escalated the situation, grabbing Sam hard by the front of his shirt. "There's no other way that this coulda gone down," he growled, then shouted: "Tell the truth!"

Sam broke his brother's grip wrathfully, his voice raising to a shout, too. "I am telling the truth, Dean! It wasn't me, dammit!"

Responding to the rising tensions, Alex had shot forward from where she'd lurked off to the side and she was throwing an angry hand out to her side. "Well who the hell else would it have been, Sam?!

"I don't know!" Sam insisted, appearing to feel attacked and outnumbered, glancing from Dean to Alex to Bobby cagily as his face reddened. "You!" he accused, getting a very interesting expression from his sister. "O-or Bobby!" He was agitated and animated with balefulness. "Listen, yes, I tried everything, that's the truth. I tried opening the Devil's Gate, hell, I tried to bargain, Dean, but no demon would deal, all right? You were rotting in Hell for months. For months, and I couldn't stop it. So I'm sorry it wasn't me, all right? Now would you all get off my back?"

The room went quiet as Bobby, Dean, and Alex processed what Sam had just told them. So he hadn't brought Dean back. Who... or what... had? Alex shook her head in faint horror at her brother's actions, realizing how close Sam had gone to the edge and thinking about how much he had risked. He could have gotten himself in serious trouble or even killed. Even though that should have made her soften towards him, she only felt more angry at him for his reckless stupidity and for the way he chose to leave her out of it completely. Dean however seemed to relent, patting Sam on the shoulder. "It's okay, Sammy. You don't have to apologize, I believe you." He chuckled dryly. "After all, you did try to kill me when you first saw me. Probably wouldn't have done that if you were expecting to see me."

Sam looked embarrassed. "Sorry about that," he said lamely. And the room fell into a brief silence. Next to each other, Sam and Dean's differences were startling to Alex in that moment. Sam was something like six-and-a-half feet tall and he towered over everyone in the room, including Dean. Her twin was built lean and muscular, he had a massive upper body and broad, tank-like shoulders. He made Dean look almost stocky in comparison. Sam had more narrow, sharp features than Dean did—piercing eyes, a sculpted jawline, high cheekbones, a straight, aquiline nose. His hair was longer than it had been last Alex had seen him—it touched the collar of his shirt in the back. He glanced at Alex with an unreadable and gruff expression and she set her jaw like stone, looked away from him.

"Well kids," Bobby said, "I'm happy as apple pie to witness this reunion, but this all raises a pretty sticky question." He looked at Dean meaningfully. "If Sam didn't pull you out... and if Alex and I didn't either..."

Dean nodded tensely and finished Bobby's thought for him. "Who—or what—did?" He let out an annoyed huff of breath, clearly fed up with the entire exchange. "I need a friggin' beer," he muttered.

"There's some in the fridge," Sam said offhandedly, distracted by other things.

Bobby muttered "thank God," and went to get some as Alex retreated back to skulking beside the
"So what were you doing around here if you weren't digging me out of my grave?" Dean asked Sam, sitting down across from Sam on the other twin bed.

Bobby handed out beers to the boys and offered one in Alex's direction, but she shook her head no, intently listening to Sam, who held his beer without opening it. "Well, once I figured out I couldn't save you, I, uh, started hunting down Lilith, trying to get some payback." His eyes flickered over to Alex. She felt another stab of disappointment and anger at his confession—his actions were another clear and silent statement about how helpful he must believe her to be. He looked away.

"All by yourself!?" Bobby exclaimed, unhappy. "Who do you think you are, your old man?"

Dean got up, seeming to notice something on the floor a few feet away from him. "Uh, yeah, I'm sorry, Bobby. I should have called," Sam said. He glanced again at Alex, who was stone-faced. "I was pretty messed up."

Dean gave a short, humorless laugh as he bent and picked up a discarded pink, flowered bra from the floor. "Oh yeah. I really feel your pain."

Alex looked at Sam hard, trying to figure out what was going on with him. Something felt wrong, but she wasn't sure what. He began telling them details about how he'd been hunting demons in the area and then she sort of spaced out, the voices of Dean, Bobby and Sam becoming like distant hazy sounds as she got lost in her grim thoughts—just a few hours ago she had thought Dean was dead. Just a few hours ago she thought maybe she never would see Sam again. Seeing him again, hearing that he had been hunting Lilith on his own—she felt wounded, deeply. Confused. And guilty as fuck. Did he really despise her that much to go on hunting without her? This was her fault. She shouldn't have just let Sam go. She should have manned up and tried to be the bigger person, forgive and forget, and apologized for the shit she said to him. Oh well. Too late now.

His decision to hunt Lilith without her seemed to confirm that nagging suspicion that Sam viewed her as a burden and a responsibility rather than an equal. That stung bad. But worse than that, she realized she truly didn't trust him anymore, not after this—plus, being here with him in the same room, she could sense that he was holding something back. It was in the veiled glances and guilty way his shoulders slumped. But she thought it was just him not wanting her there. Funny thing was, she had been holding onto hope that maybe they would find Sam and things would be okay somehow. Hunky dory, even. You're so fucking stupid, Alex. What did she think would happen? They would both just see each other again and magically forget the separation and fight they'd had? Alex should have known better than to allow herself to even toy with the idea of a happy ending, because up to now life had just been one damn heartbreak after another. Alex glanced over at her twin, who was looking at her out of the corner of his eye, his expression unreadable. His eyes quickly darted away from hers.

"I know a psychic," Bobby was saying. "Few hours from here. Something this big, maybe she's heard the other side talking. Maybe we find out whodunit."

"Hell yeah, it's worth a shot," Dean said.

Bobby took his phone out of his pocket and headed toward the door. "I'll be right back."

Dean stood up as if to leave, and Sam followed suit. "Hey, wait Dean. What was it like?" There was a moment in which all three of the Winchesters were silent, but especially Alex, who hadn't gathered the courage to ask Dean that question yet.
"What, Hell?" Dean paused, his expression grew thoughtful, then he shrugged and became apathetic. "I dunno, I, I must have blacked it out. I don't remember a damn thing."

"Well, thank God for that," Sam said, giving Dean a smile tinged with sadness.

"Yeah. Uh, bathroom." And with that, Dean left the room. Sam shoved his hands into his pockets and finally looked at Alex, who still slouched with crossed arms at the window, wordlessly saying she wasn't happy about anything. Total silence spanned the space between the twins for several seconds, and Alex said nothing, just looked at Sam, who had his mouth drawn into a thin line.

"Hi Alex," he said finally, the words a little abrupt and cynical sounding, accompanied by a wan smile—but it looked more like a grimace.

"Sam," she said flatly, not bothering to hide her bad attitude.

He crossed his arms, came toward her a little, his eyebrows knitting together. "It's been four months. Don't you have anything else to say to me?" That was rich—he needed to have things to say to her first. She shrugged, staring at him in silent defiance then pointedly looking away. "Wow. Missed you too, sis," he said in words laced with sarcasm.

Alex let out a disgusted breath and uncrossed her arms, stepped to him, ready to kick Sam's ass verbally so that she didn't cry instead. "You know what..." she began, but then thought better of it and clamped her mouth shut, turning to walk past him. "I'll be outside with Bobby."

She let her shoulder knock into his arm as she brushed past and she thought she heard him mutter something like, "real fucking mature."

About an Hour Later

Alex was slouching in the front seat of Bobby's Chevelle as the car raced across the miles toward a physic who could hopefully show them who or what had taken Dean out of hell. Alex hadn't wanted to ride with her brothers. She needed some space away from Sam to calm down or she might say something she regretted. Bobby had said next to nothing to her for the drive, not until that moment.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. "So listen, I know it ain't none of my business—"

"So then don't go there," Alex said a little rudely, which she regretted immediately—geez Alex, what's your problem?

Bobby was not deterred, he just matched her sass with some of his own. "Well, I'm goin' there anyway, princess. You and Sam need to work out this little family drama hour if we're gonna have any luck taking down whatever baddie brought Dean back." He glanced at her sidelong. "Avoiding Sam's only gonna work for so long."

Alex chewed the inside of her mouth, a bad habit she had picked up in childhood. She knew Bobby was right. "Yeah, I know..." she muttered, reliving her resentments in her head. She just couldn't stand him right now. She was so angry at him for always abandoning ship. She stewed unhappily, sullen and staring out the window. "It's all kinds of screwed up."

"You ain't kiddin'," he agreed. "But it can be fixed. You know that. You two've fought before."

She looked at the dashboard with a tense face. "Not like this." Her jaw clenched as she faintly shook her head. "Don't get me wrong. He's my brother." She breathed hard out of her nose, a sound
that seemed reluctant. "I love him or whatever but I also can't stand him." Bobby chuckled softly at her statement and Alex wished she could see some humor in the situation, too. To her, it was all misery. She stared unseeing in front of herself and said it so softly: "It was so much easier when I couldn't talk."

Bobby glanced at her in surprise. He took a couple beats before asking, "How d'ya mean?"

Alex took a long moment to try and think the right words to say. "Just... I don't have a filter anymore. I keep fucking stuff up. I get so pissed and now I can just say shit so much faster than before. The wrong stuff. It's weird. And hard." She heard herself screaming she wished Sam were dead in her mind, feeling more and more regretful every time she went through that terrible moment.

Bobby looked empathetic. "I'm know it's tough, sweetheart," he said, "but for what it's worth, you're doin' just fine. I'm proud of you." Words that were like water in the desert to her heart in that moment. They glanced at each other briefly and he gave her a kind, encouraging smile that was hard not to ruefully return. He patted her knee twice, a gesture that was affectionate and fatherly. Bobby refocused on the road. "Now why don't you try and get some shut-eye? You look tired."

Another little defeated smile. "I'm always tired," Alex leaned up against the cold glass of the window. A moment of silence passed. "Bobby?"

"Yeah?"

She hesitated. "Do you think I should have tried to get Dean back? Was it wrong to not even try?"

Bobby's answer was immediate. "We did the right thing. He was gone, and there was no wholesome way to bring him back. You know that."

She did know that. But it also worried her, because in the back of her mind, she now believed that whatever had pulled Dean out of hell might have sinister plans for him—and Alex refused to lose him again.

Cruising down the road to the familiar hum of the Impala engines with classic rock on the radio, Dean Winchester was glad to be alive, momentarily free from his normal barrage of troubled thoughts. Out of habit, he glanced into the rearview, where he could usually see half of Alex's face where she sat in the back seat. He was reminded that she wasn't there, and he glanced at Sam, who was silent and pensive. On the radio, Highway to Hell began playing. A little disconcerted, Dean switched the radio off. He didn't want to think about Hell right now. Unlike the lie he had told to Sam in the motel, he did remember it. All of it. Forcibly, he pushed all of that out of his mind.

He cleared his throat and glanced over at Sam, who hadn't said much for the whole drive. "So there's still one thing that's bothering me."

Sam acknowledged him with a flicking glance. "Yeah?"

"The night that I bit it. Or... got bit." Dean chuckled at his own joke, but Sam just gave him a shut up look, clearly not amused. Dean composed himself. "Uh, sorry. How'd you make it out? I thought Lilith was going to kill you and Al."

Sam shook his head. He seemed distracted. "Well, she tried. She couldn't."

"What do you mean, she couldn't?"
Sam paused. "She fired this, like, burning light at me, and... didn't leave a scratch. Like I was immune or something."

"Immune," Dean repeated as if he hadn't heard right.

Sam shrugged, frowning slightly. "Yeah. I don't know who was more surprised, her or me. She left pretty fast after that. Seemed kinda spooked. Didn't even try to burn Alex. Just disappeared."

Dean's jaw was working oddly as he thought through the entire situation—his baby brother and sister left alone and undefended in this crappy, crazy world—but if that weren't bad enough, they hadn't even stuck together. He glanced at Sam irritably. "You know, I wanna know what the hell were you thinking leaving Alex alone for all that time, Sammy. You were supposed to protect her."

Sam glanced over at Dean, looking like he'd been caught. "I didn't leave her alone—she was with Bobby." Sam sounded kind of quieter than he had before. Like he didn't believe his own words. "She was fine."

"You didn't know that for a fact," Dean retorted. "You promised me that you would take care of her when I was gone," he said, reminding his brother of a conversation they'd had privately a few weeks before Dean's death day. Sam said nothing, but his silence was distinctly guilty. "So I die and the family falls apart?" Dean asked a little gruffly.

"I guess," Sam said apathetically, refusing to look Dean's way.

"Well what the hell happened to make you break that promise to me, man?" Dean demanded.

Sam looked disturbed. "Does it really matter, Dean?" He shrugged, uncomfortable. "We... we fought and I—I just needed to leave, okay?" Dean looked at Sam oddly, who was staring unseeingly into the windshield. "And besides, it was pretty clear to me that she didn't want me around anymore."

"Come on, Sam. She just lost her oldest brother, don't you think she might say some crap she didn't mean?" Sam said nothing, just looked really unhappy. Dean shook his head, completely disappointed. "Come on, Sammy. I thought you two were closer than all this. I mean, you've fought before and didn't end up hating each other's guts then, right?"

"I mean, yeah, I guess," Sam muttered, reluctant. "You're right. We used to be close. But ever since I started hunting again after college, things've been different. And then with her whole voice thing..." he trailed off. "I dunno. I thought I knew her, but ever since she could talk again, it's like... she's not who I thought."

"Yeah, or maybe you liked her better when she couldn't call you on your crap or argue back," Dean accused. That comment seemed to trigger something in Sam, who exploded.

"Dean, the hell are you defending her?! Why am I getting all this crap from you? She's a grown woman for crying out loud and didn't need me chaperoning her when you were gone. I told you, she didn't want me there, okay? I don't appreciate you making this whole thing about me and my problems!"

"I'm not, I'm just saying—"

"Yes, you are." Sam insisted vehemently. "You're taking her side without even hearing about what went down!" Sam ran a hand through his shaggy hair, glaring at nothing in particular. "And you know what, when are we gonna talk about how weird it is that she got her voice back to begin with?" Sam was now talking with his hands, riled up. "And not just her voice Dean, but the ability..."
to speak. I mean do you know how how... not normal that is? Doesn't it freak you out?"

Dean glanced at Sam sidelong. Yeah, it did, but he wasn't about to admit to it. So he shrugged neutrally. "Guess after the life we've lived, I'll take whatever good I can get." Exasperated, Sam looked away. A few moments of silence passed and Dean attempted a new conversation. "So you've been using your, uh, freaky ESP stuff?"

He got a barely-suppressed dirty look from Sam. "No."

"You sure about that? Well, I mean, now that you've got... immunity, whatever the hell that is... just wondering what other kind of weirdo crap you've got going on."

Sam gave Dean a fully aggravated look, losing patience. "Nothing, Dean. Look, you didn't want me to go down that road, so I didn't go down that road."

"Well thanks for honoring that promise at least," Dean said sarcastically, and reached for the radio to turn the music back on.

Sam hunkered down in the seat silently, brooding.

They reached the psychic's home early the next morning. It was a normal looking house with potted flowers on the front porch. Dean and Sam got out of the Impala and approached the Chevelle where Alex stood and watching them. Bobby had intuitively walked ahead of them and was waiting at the foot of the porch, leaving the Winchesters to themselves for a minute.

Dean approached his sister with a reluctant Sam in tow. Alex waited silently, her arms crossed in a way that made her look very unapproachable. Dean was always struck by how for twins, the two of them looked pretty much nothing alike, at least not at first glance, and especially when it came to their builds. Sam towered over his younger twin. He had about eight inches of height on her at his height of six-foot-four, and he probably weighed about a hundred pounds more than she did—he was all muscle and brawn and was, in a word, huge. Alex was tall, too, probably five-foot-eight or so, but next to her giganic, freakishly tall twin, she looked short and small. She was built completely different than he was, too—she had one of those willowy figures that was boyish, straight, petite. She reminded Dean of a beanpole or a fencepost, and he'd teased her as such in the past. But she wasn't a waif. A lot of people glanced at her and didn't notice how strong she was, how she was basically all lean muscle from years of running, fighting, and training.

The twins had similar brown hair—Sam's shaggy and floppy, Alex's a little darker and wavy, messy, long—their eyes were the same hazel color and they both had ridiculous, sharp cheekbones. They made a lot of the same faces and expressions, but their faces weren't strikingly similar, especially considering that they were twins. Dean had decided awhile ago that Sam took more after their mom, and Alex took more after their dad. Sam had one of those faces that chicks dug—dimples, strong clefted chin, expressive, piercing eyes. Alex had a more youthful face than Sam—big doe eyes, square jaw, dark eyebrows. But, even if the twins weren't too similar physically, they were similar in personality.Stubborn, hard-nosed, headstrong, emotional. So that's why having to referee this fight they were having was a pain in Dean's ass.

He cleared his throat and looked between the twins, fixing them with his best I'm-upset-with-you glare. In moments like these, he felt more like their dad than their brother. "Okay, listen. You two are gonna stow your crap," he said with little fanfare, pointing at them in turn sternly. "Say you're sorry and agree to at least be civil to each other." Sam and Alex looked at each other grudgingly and Dean waited unhappily. "Today, guys!"
Alex gave in first. "Sorry, Sam." She clearly didn't really mean it.

"Yeah. Me too," Sam said, sounding as genuine as Alex did.

Dean was less than impressed. "Geez, making me weep here," he said sarcastically. They looked at him almost in unison, with identical, annoyed 'are you happy now?' bitchy expressions on their faces. Dean rolled his eyes at their refusal to really apologize. "How old are you guys, like five?!" He demanded, and with an exasperated huff he gave up and headed toward where Bobby was waiting near the house.
"Down in the atmosphere, garbage and city lights. You've gone to save your tired soul; you've gone to save their lives."
- Our Lady Peace

They were welcomed inside the house by Pamela—a strong looking woman with a ready smile. She had tanned skin and dark hair and a low rasping voice. Her little house was decorated with a few pagan artifacts and mystical imagery here and there, but otherwise looked like a normal home. She wasted no time flirting with Dean and Sam both—usually Alex wouldn't have cared, but Pamela was a little over the top in her no-nonsense style—her eyes ate the brothers alive shamelessly and Alex quickly began to feel a little uncomfortable at the innuendos.

Pamela set up a seance in between flirting and then called them all to a small table where six lit candles waited. She had darkened the room and even though it was just a dinky old kitchen, the room felt eerie to Alex because of what they were about to do.

"Right. Take each other's hands," Pamela instructed. Alex looked to her left where Sam sat. He held out his hand to her, a grudging peace offering. She took it reluctantly. Sitting across from them, Dean saw and smiled sort of smugly at the twins, who, not even meaning to, made the same exact face at their oldest brother—a half-eye rolling scoff.

"All right," Pamela purred. "I need to touch something our mystery monster touched." Her eyes darted to Dean coyly. He was sitting right beside her.

"Whoa. Well, he didn't touch me there," Dean said, jumping a little.

Pamela half-feigned ignorance with a chuckle. "My mistake."

Alex, Sam, and Bobby exchanged confused looks—had she just reach under the table and touched him...? She probably had. Sam made a face and Alex raised an eyebrow at Dean who was a little flustered. He cleared his throat and pulled up his sleeve, revealing the angry red hand print branded onto his shoulder. The humor of the moment was forgotten as Sam stared in shock and looked from Alex to Bobby who were somber again, remembering the reason why they had come to this psychic.

Pamela laid her hand on the scar. "Okay." She closed her eyes and everyone else followed suit. "I invoke, conjure, and command you, appear unto me before this circle," she said, then repeated it three more times. Her television flicked on, the sound of static filled the room. "I invoke, conjure, and command... Castiel? No. Sorry, Castiel, I don't scare easy."

"'Castiel'?" Dean asked.

Alex peeked up, a strange curiosity tugging at her, a feeling of déjà vu washing over her. What the hell is a Castiel?

"Its name," the psychic explained. "It's whispering to me, warning me to turn back," she said, then returned to chanting. "I conjure and command you, show me your face." She repeated this over and over, louder each time. The room began to shake and the static on the television grew louder.

Alex gripped Sam's hand tighter, opening her eyes just barely to watch as the table began to vibrate. A sense of dread was coming over her. This felt like it was gonna end badly. Bobby was
also opening his eyes. "Maybe we should stop," he said loudly, raising his voice over the din.

"I almost got it," Pamela said, not about to back down. She was in the zone, eyes squeezed shut, expression fierce and intense. "I command you, show me your face!" She was shouting at that point. "Show me your face NOW!" At that moment the candles flared up into flames several feet high—Pamela screamed as her eyes flew open, filled with horrifying white-hot flame. Before any of them could even react, the flames went out and she collapsed, moaning in pain. The house became silent—the rattling, white noise, and flames stopping. "My eyes... my eyes!" Pamela was sobbing. Alex could see between her fingers that clutched at her face that they were burned out completely and deep reverent fear set in, even as somewhere nearby she heard, "Call 911! Call 911!"

A Few Hours Later

Bobby watched as Alex spoke to the on-call doctor inside Pamela's room. That was something to be proud of, wasn't it—in the past few months he had affectionately started calling Alex his 'little protegée' and had really seen the kid grow a lot in confidence and ability. Not only as a hunter but as a person. His eyes went to Pamela and the good feelings evaporated to be quickly replaced by guilt and regret. The psychic was resting in a hospital bed, her eyes covered with a sleeping mask. Bobby felt another overwhelming surge of guilt—he really should have insisted she stop when things got shaky.

After a few moments Alex nodded her thanks to the doctor and both she and the MD came out of the room. Alex was looking at Bobby in a way he didn't like—all sad and sensitive, like she was feeling sorry for him or trying to think of a way to make him feel better. It reminded him of Sam, actually.

"So, what's the scoop, Grasshopper?" Bobby asked her as the doctor retreated down the hallway and out of earshot.

"Well, the doctor says they're gonna keep her overnight for observation. Pamela's daughter is on the way."

"She be all right?" Bobby asked, looking into the room and feeling entirely powerless.

"Uh... she's blind, obviously—no eyeballs left—but other than that." Alex said then seemed to realize she'd put it kind of bluntly—made a mildly chagrined face like she wished she had thought it over better. "I guess."

"This is my fault," Bobby muttered, hating himself.

Alex shook her head, frowning to herself. "You're not the one who burned her eyes out, Bobby. It was that..." she tried to remember, "Castle creature."

"I shouldn't have gotten her involved in this mess to begin with," Bobby said, more to himself than anyone else.

Alex didn't disagree. "Well, she's alive though, right? That's something." Alive, but forever changed in such a negative way. She grabbed Bobby's shoulder briefly in an attempt to comfort him. "Couldn't have known what was gonna happen."

"Yeah, I guess," Bobby muttered.

Alex relented—she knew when to leave Bobby alone and now was one of those times. Just then
her phone rang in her pocket and she pulled it out, squinting at the screen. She was pretty sure it was one of Sam's old numbers. "Hello?"

"It's me," Dean's voice said. "So some demons just tried to jump me and Sammy over here at this local mom 'n pop diner—"

Alarm shot through her veins. "What? You guys okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," he said, sounding more businesslike than anything else. "Come back to the motel pronto, okay? There's probably more demons in town and I don't want you on your own."

Psh. "That's sweet, Dean," she said sarcastically, but it's not with a bad attitude. "I'm fine. Besides, I'm with Bobby."

Dean gave an aggravated, impatient huff. "Come on, just get back to the motel, shortstop. It'll be dark soon and I don't want you out there at night. Oh, and bring pie."

"Fine, fine. On my way." And she hung up, snapping her phone closed. Always with the pie. Her heart clenched and she suddenly had so many feelings. She had missed him so much.

"What's up?" Bobby asked, forehead wrinkled in concern.

"No clue," she answered honestly. Dean would fill her in later on the details. "Something demonic, as usual. I'm heading back—you coming?"

"Think I'll stay with Pam a little longer. Just call if ya need me."

"Copy," Alex said, already heading for the door.

"And Alex—" She paused. Bobby looked at her meaningfully. "You be careful."

She made an overly innocent face. "Always am."

He gave her a look—they both knew that was total bullshit. Alex gave him a crooked grin, raised her eyebrows, and left.

Late That Night

The TV was still on and Alex was half-asleep on the couch, the remote still in her hand as Spongebob Squarepants played. A stupid show she always got a kick out of. Dean had been reading all evening and she had been flipping through the channels while Sam had remained in the background, doing something on his laptop for awhile until he announced he was going to bed. Alex was in that place of half-awake and half-asleep where she wanted to get up and turn the light and TV off, but she was also convinced she would tune both out in a second and fall asleep.

A soft and sudden click startled her into full wakefulness and her head shot up, she quickly glanced around to assess the room. Dean was half sitting on his bed with a huge book open in his lap as he slept soundly, head lolling on his shoulder. Sam's bed was empty and she didn't see him anywhere else. Alex got up, creeping toward the door and peeking out just in time to see Sam's unmistakable silhouette turn the corner down the hall. What the hell? Alex was struck with a million sudden suspicions and a general bad feeling. She glanced back at Dean, who was sleeping peacefully—his face completely relaxed for once. She decided not to wake him up. Sam might just be going to get something from the car, after all. She chided herself for assuming the worst about her twin. Maybe she should cut him a break. Still, she was going to follow and see what he was doing... just to be
safe. She darted out of the room, following quickly and quietly down the hotel hallway. She peered
around the corner Sam had just rounded. She could see out into the parking lot through the glass
door. Sam was getting into the Impala, casting glances around—the picture of guilt. Not good. The
car started and pulled out of the parking lot, leaving Alex with a sinking feeling. Nope. Something
was just not right. She didn't like this. She turned around and promptly gasped—Bobby was
standing right behind her.

"Shit, Bobby!" She swore, holding a hand over her heart.

"Sorry kiddo. Didn't mean to startle you. Was in my room and heard a noise. Was that Sam?"

"Yeah. H-he snuck out and—wait, what's that?" They both turned at the sound of shattering glass
and then took off at a run down the hall toward where they could now hear Dean screaming, and
then a high-pitched shrieking sound that was so intense their vision began to waver. Oh god. Alex
was swept away in alarm at the sound of her brother in pain, maybe hurt or dying—Bobby broke
down the door just barely as Alex stumbled behind, her hands over ears as her panicked heart
lodged itself in her throat. Dean was on the floor in a pile of broken glass, his hands over his ears as
he screamed against the deafening noise. It was the most intense sound that Alex had ever heard, it
reverberated through her entire body, made it hard to see—almost made her feel like she could
explode apart if the intensity increased at all. But she stumbled over to Dean with Bobby and they
hauled him up and fled out of the room, down the hall, and out of the motel completely.

Bobby coaxed more speed out of the car as they sped down the road, not really heading anywhere,
just driving fast. He glanced back a lot, looking to see if they'd been followed. Alex rubbed her ears
with her palms. They still rang from that incredibly intense noise.

"Yeah, okay, catch you later," Dean said, snapping his cellphone closed and pocketing it, twisting
around to look at Alex who was in the back seat. "Sam says he went to get a burger."

"Yeah, a burger," Alex muttered doubtfully. The way he had quietly snuck out—the way he'd been
looking around like he was afraid he was being followed—she smelled a lie. But, they would have
to figure that out later. "Why'd you lie to him about what we're doing?" she asked, because Dean
hadn't told Sam about what they were about to do—he'd said they were just going to go to a
different motel.

"Because he'd just try to stop us," Dean replied tersely.

"From what? What're we doing?" Bobby asked, glancing at them both in confusion as he drove.

Alex knew Dean well enough to already have guessed what her brother had in mind—it's what she
wanted to do, anyway—and she replied before Dean had a chance. "We're going to summon
Casteel and kill it."

"You two want to go after Castle after what he did to Pamela?!" Bobby exclaimed in disbelief.

"Castiel," Dean corrected passively.

Alex gave him a drab look. "Whatever his name is, he's dead."

"Yup," Dean confirmed. "We're gonna face this asshole head-on, Bobby."

There was a shocked pause. "You two can't be serious!" Bobby was dismayed.

"As a heart-attack," Dean confirmed.
"Bobby, think about it," Alex said, leaning forward in her seat. "This Castiel thing is hunting Dean. We take the offensive, we get out ahead."

"We've got the big-time magic knife, you've got an arsenal in the trunk..." Dean trailed off suggestively.

Bobby was shaking his head in extreme hesitation. "Now look, you two are assuming it's some kinda demon, but what if it's something else? We might be signing our own death certificates here. This is a bad idea."

"Bobby, whatever this is, whatever it wants, it's after me," Dean reasoned intently. "That much we know, right? I've got no place to hide. I can either get caught with my pants down again or we can make our stand."

More silence. "Doing it with or without you, Bobby," Alex said.

"You damn idjits," Bobby sighed heavily. "Well, don't you think we should at least tell Sam in case, you know, we don't come back?"

Dean was quiet for a minute. "No. We'll be back."

Bobby didn't look so sure.

Several hours later, Alex got up from where she had been crouched. She was finally done with the last of the warding symbols, and her hands were cramped, not to mention her back and knees. Bobby seemed to be finishing up, too. She looked around at their handiwork—the entire abandoned warehouse they had set up shop in was covered floor and ceiling in spray painted symbols and traps. Over at a makeshift table, Dean was chuckling at them. "That's a hell of an art project you've got going there."

"Call me Picasso," Alex returned, tossing an empty can of spray paint onto the table.

"Traps and talismans from every faith on the globe," Bobby said, and looked at Dean questioningly. "How you doin'?"

Dean looked over the contents of the table he'd set up. "Stakes, iron, silver, salt, knife. I mean, we're pretty much set to catch and kill anything I've ever heard of."

"What about what we haven't heard of?" Bobby asked, and shook his head. "Uh huh, this is definitely still a bad idea."

"I heard you the first ten times," Dean said, not about to change his mind. "Whaddya say we ring the dinner bell?"

Bobby nodded reluctantly. He went over to the other table and took a pinch of some powder from a bowl, and sprinkled it into a larger bowl, which started to smoke. He began chanting in Latin.

Dean and Alex looked at each other simultaneously. Alex felt the first prick of fear now. Up until this moment she'd just been pissed and ready to kick the ass of whatever hell creature was trying to hurt her brother—this Castiel monster. But now, Bobby's warnings and reluctance replayed in her head. Her older brother winked at her. "Showtime," he said, his mouth lifting up into a crooked smile.
Twenty Minutes Later

The shotguns which had been gripped tightly and vigilantly when Bobby first did the conjuring now laid beside the three hunters who were beginning to become listless. Alex yawned widely. Beside her, Dean looked at Bobby impatiently. "You sure you did the ritual right?" Bobby gave him a bitchy look. Dean snorted. "Sorry, touchy touchy, huh?"

As if on cue, a loud rattling shook the roof of the warehouse, and the building, which had seemed solid a second ago, now felt like it might collapse on top of their heads. Immediately on their feet, Dean, Bobby and Alex backed in together, shotguns held tightly as the building continued to tremble.

"Wishful thinking, but maybe it's just the wind?!" Dean shouted over the noise.

Alex didn't think that was the wind. No way. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea... her stomach was sinking with dread. She clutched her shotgun tightly as she stared at the doors at the far end of the warehouse—they were quaking as if they were about to break in two underneath the weight of some invisible force even though they were bolted shut. The lights above began to flicker rapidly and then doors burst open with a whoosh, the bolt snapping loudly like it was a mere twig. The room was overcome with some invisible but palpable sense of blazing power even as the bursting lights overhead began to shower sparks across the entire warehouse. Through the chaos, Alex could see the distinct silhouette of a man standing in the doorway—was that Castiel? Her fingers tightened on her shotgun and she felt herself withering a little as the figure began to walk in toward them with slow and measured steps. Something about him inspired a sudden reverent fear in Alex and for a moment she forgot her shotgun, she forgot herself. She just stood there staring and terrified, already realizing this was no ordinary demon or monster. But what was he?

In between the flickering lights and raining sparks, she could see that he looked like just a man. A handsome, tall, average built man in his mid-thirties with dark and wild hair; he was dressed in a business suit, a blue tie, and a slightly over-sized tan trench coat. His expression was fierce and stony, and even though he looked very ordinary—not anything superhuman or monstrous—the entire room bore witness to the fact that he was something different and terrifying. He walked toward them in a stiff way, not blinking even once as lights snapped and exploded all around him, yielding to him, attesting to his strength and power.

Dean opened fire on him, and remembering themselves at the sound, Alex and Bobby followed suit, emptying their rounds—Dean had iron bullets, Bobby had salt rounds, and Alex had silver—the bullets all pummeled into Castiel like a sideways rain shower, but the creature didn't even stop to wince. He was completely unaffected by the assault, none of the traps seemed to have any effect on him, and he kept coming forward undaunted, his sights set on first Dean, and then Alex. His eyes flashed ominously in the flickering light and Alex was suddenly certain of one thing as she fired her last, completely useless bullet into his chest: today, I am going to die.

"Blade!" Dean demanded with a shout. Alex shakily tossed him the demon knife then shrank back behind her older brother. Castiel stopped in front of them, his blank face now calm and serene. The wind was gone, the sparks had stopped falling, the building was solid and still once again. Alex stared apprehensively at the man who had done all of that—his blue eyes were piercing and looking at her unabashedly. They flickered over her face—she could see him look at her lips, her hair, then they looked directly into her eyes—alarm and fear rippled throughout Alex's entire nervous system at the intensity there in the crystal depths. It was almost like he could see into her and she felt trapped underneath his gaze. He seemed curious as he looked at her and he took in the anxiety etched onto her features. The mildest confusion then showed on his face, as if he didn't
"Who are you?" Dean demanded gruffly. Alex could hear from his voice that he was shaken up just like her. She glanced down at the knife in his hand at his side—this was their last weapon against this guy. Please, please work.

There was a long pause and the creature's eyes finally left Alex. "I'm the one who gripped you tight and raised you from perdition," he replied. His shockingly deep, husky voice was filled with an authority that caught Alex off guard even further.

Alex felt Dean pause then hesitate. "Yeah... thanks for that," he said, and then without any further ado he reared back and plunged the knife into the creature's chest. And nothing happened. Looking down at the knife, Castiel considered it briefly then pulled it out, unconcerned, seeming to be a touch amused. Dumbfounded, Dean and Alex gaped.

Bobby, who had slunk back to the side was sneaking up, an iron crowbar raised high—but without even looking, Castiel grabbed the weapon mid-air effortlessly just as Bobby swung, effectively and easily blocking the strike with what appeared to be superhuman strength. Turning, the man touched a very surprised Bobby on the forehead with two fingertips. The Winchesters watched in shocked horror as Bobby's eyes rolled back into his head and he crumpled to the ground, lifeless. "Bobby!" Alex screamed, trying to rush forward. Dean swung an arm out to hold her back—he was terrified to let her near this powerful adversary.

Castiel looked at Alex with a slightly perplexed expression, eyes squinting up a bit, head tilting to the side just a little, as if he didn't understand her reaction. "He's fine," he said in a flat, non-emotional voice. Alex stared back, freaked, not sure about that. Bobby looked dead. The trench-coated stranger looked at her a little longer then turned his gaze to Dean again.

"We need to talk, Dean," the man said. His eyes went back to Alex meaningfully. "Alone." He made to move forward, his arm outstretched to touch her, and Dean all but shoved Alex behind himself as he stood at his full height and put himself between the man and his sister. Dean's expression was deadly.

"Touch my sister and you die, freak," Dean thundered. "Now what the hell did you do to Bobby?"

"Dean, you can't kill me. You just tried," the man replied in a reasonable and calm tone. He paused then withdrew slightly and seemed to become interested in one of Bobby's open books on the nearby table. "You don't need to worry; your friend is alive and I won't harm any of you."

"Damn straight you won't. Who are you?" Dean demanded.

Alex was glued to her brother in terror as she stared at this strange and powerful man who was currently flipping through Bobby's book nonchalantly. He seemed almost disinterested in Dean's question, paging through Bobby's book still. "Castiel." He spoke his name softly, firmly.

"Yeah, I figured that much, I mean what are you?" Dean demanded.

Castiel turned his attention to Dean and approached once again. Alex had a hand on Dean's back, grabbing at his jacket, and she could feel him tense as Castiel came nearer. And then, he said several words the Winchesters would never forget: "I'm an angel of the Lord."

Dean and Alex looked at each other, momentarily speechless. Alex wasn't sure if she heard right. She looked the guy up and down skeptically, and did not come up with angel in any sense—where were the flowing robes and the harp music and the puffy white wings? All she saw was a guy who didn't understand her expression.

"Who are you?" Dean demanded gruffly. Alex could hear from his voice that he was shaken up just like her. She glanced down at the knife in his hand at his side—this was their last weapon against this guy. Please, please work.
about six feet tall, in an un-tailored, slightly wrinkled trench coat. His blue tie was slightly askew, he had messy brown hair and a five o'clock shadow... it all made him look more like a tired fifth-grade teacher than anything else. "Angel?" she repeated. "You serious?" she asked, genuinely stumped.

"Yes, of course I'm serious," he replied, deadpan.

"You let me do the talking," Dean hissed at his sister and then quickly fixed Castiel with a dangerous glare. "You're not an angel. Get the hell outta here. There's no such thing," he spat.

Castiel observed Dean with little change in expression. "That is your problem, Dean," he said quietly. "You have no faith." Castiel drew in a deep breath and seemed to stand at his full height. And then lightning flashed inside the warehouse, and huge shadow wings were cast onto the wall behind Castiel in the flashes of light. The wings spanned perhaps twenty feet and the effect was dazzling—intimidating—mystifying. The lightning ceased and the shadowy wings disappeared. Stunned into momentary silence, the Winchesters again looked at each other, at a loss for the entire situation.

"The hell does that prove?" Alex whispered to Dean.

Dean shook his head ever so slightly, whispering back, "Fuck if I know." They were both completely weirded out. Dean especially was mistrustful and challenging; he turned his attention back to the so-called angel in front of them and crossed his arms, cleared his throat, raised his voice a little. "Nice trick. So riddle me this: what kind of angel burns out a poor woman's eyes?"

"I warned her not to spy on my true form," Castiel said. "It can be... overwhelming to humans, and so can my real voice. But you already knew that."

Alex frowned, not understanding, but Dean seemed to have figured it out. "You mean the gas station and the motel. That was you talking?" Castiel nodded, to which Dean set his mouth in a hard line. "Buddy, next time, lower the volume."

"That was my mistake," Castiel said woodenly. "Certain people, special people, can perceive my true visage. I thought you would be one of them. I was wrong."

"And what visage are you in now, huh?" Dean asked sarcastically, looked at the supposed angel with a flippant kind glance. "What, holy tax accountant?"

"This?" Castiel looked down at himself in seeming thoughtfulness, as if he hadn't even noticed what he looked like. "This is... a vessel."

"You're possessing some poor bastard?" Dean asked in disbelief even as Alex was shocked all over again. It made sense, she had to admit... demons used people to walk the earth—if angels were real, it made sense that they might do the same.

Castiel wasn't ruffled by Dean's aghast reaction. "He's a devout man," he said, referring to whoever it was who he was possessing currently. "He actually prayed for this."

_Some guy prayed for an angel to ride him like the rodeo?_

"Well, I'm not buying what you're selling, so who are you really?" Dean demanded angrily.

"I told you," Castiel said simply.

"Right. And why would an angel rescue me from Hell?"
"Good things do happen, Dean," Castiel said, although his tone lacked conviction.

"Not in my experience," Dean said. Alex heard the weight of his statement and it resonated with her.

"What's the matter?" Castiel's expression changed, as if he had figured it out. Understanding crossed his features. "You don't think you deserve to be saved."

Dean seemed shocked by Castiel's statement, his face going blank, and Alex's protective instincts raised up. "Hey," she snapped, stepping out from behind Dean defensively, her temper getting the better of her. "We're not interested in a therapy session."

Castiel looked at her, unfazed. His eyes were so very, very blue. "I'm simply stating the truth, Alex."

He knew her name, and hearing his deep, rumbling voice speak it aloud startled her. She felt scared all over again, freaked out under his intense stare. Why did he look at her like he knew her? Why did he assume to know Dean, too? Dean was pushing Alex back again, stepping forward to put himself between the supposed angel and his sister. He didn't seem to want to discuss whether or not he thought he deserved to be saved, instead he was getting to what everyone wanted to know.

"Why'd you pull me out?" Castiel was quiet for a moment, his eyes not even acknowledging Dean. He still stared at Alex deeply like he could see nothing else in all of existence.

"Hey, asshat, look at me!" Dean stepped into Castiel's line of sight, demanding the so-called angel's gaze. "Answer the question," he said gruffly. "Why'd you pull me out?"

Castiel remained unruffled. "Because God commanded it. Because we have work for you."

Dean's eyebrows raised and his bully demeanor fell slightly. "Work. God has work for me."

"Yes."

Dean barked out a short, biting laugh. "Oh interesting. How's the pay? Good benefits? I'm telling ya, the dental plan I have right now sucks."

Castiel frowned slightly. "This is no laughing matter, Dean. My Father has chosen you."

Dean couldn't seem to find any words, disgusted and dumbfounded by the entire exchange. "Chosen him for what?" Alex asked, her voice betraying the stark fear she was feeling.

Castiel looked at her briefly, frustrating her with his elusive answer. "It's complicated. It is not yet your time to know. It's God's will."

"This is freakin' rich," Dean muttered. "You really expect us to believe all this crap you're spewing?"

Castiel looked between the two of them, his face beginning to show what looked like annoyance. "Yes." He paused. "What reason do you have to doubt?"

Dean laughed in a hard brief bark, shook his head, at a loss but at least amused by it. Alex wasn't sure whether to laugh or get pissed. "Are we being punked right now?" she asked, looking around. "Are there cameras here?" Castiel looked at her with a questioning gaze. No cameras came out, he didn't start to laugh and say "gotcha." He seemed totally serious, which was all the more disconcerting. Alex's humor faded. "Dude, you're a whackjob."
His eyes gazed into hers unflinchingly and Alex lost some of her bravado, disliking how it felt like he could see through her. Something about him turned her stomach and sent a chill down her spine, made her regret her insolence. His expression cleared a little as if he thought of something. "You've learned to use your voice well, haven't you Alex?" he asked evenly, knowingly. Caught off guard, Alex stared, slack-jawed. Castiel almost smiled at her then, his dry lips curving upwards just slightly, and it felt ominous to her, him looking at her like that.

"Come again?" Dean asked roughly, his protective hackles raising.

Castiel looked at Dean, became stern once more as he refocused the conversation. "In time, I will be free to reveal more to you. For now, you have to have faith. Both of you." He seemed to hear a sound to his left, and with no grand fanfare, he announced, "I have to go." He looked at Dean, and then Alex, holding her gaze intensely. His voice seemed to get even deeper. "I'll see you again soon." And without any further delay he was gone completely, disappearing from in front of them with a sound like the wind rustling through fabric.

In silence, the siblings looked at each other with stunned expressions. "Dude. Did... did that really just happen?" Dean asked, his shocked exasperation mirroring how Alex felt.

She felt like the wind had been knocked out of her. She looked back at the spot where Castiel had been standing just a minute ago, her mind racing as she tried to put together the pieces. She was shaken up, mind and body both. "Angels." She muttered, frowning, considering the possibility that angels were actually real. "Angels...?!!"

"Oh come on," Dean said insolently, daring her to be stupid enough to believe it.

Alex was feeling doubtful, not convinced that he was an angel, but not convinced that he wasn't. She was crouching down by Bobby now, checking his pulse and breathing. Both were normal. "Most people think demons aren't real," she offered tentatively, not even sure how she could begin to consider this.

Dean didn't look amused. In fact, he rolled his eyes. "Oh geez. Yeah right. That wasn't an angel."

"I mean the guy had wings," Alex said, then squinted, thought hard as she looked up and around again, at the burst lights on the ceiling, at the cracked bolt on the door. The whole encounter had left her dazed. "I think."

The pair didn't have a chance to discuss it any further. Bobby began to stir, groaning. Alex began to help him up, then Dean came and got his other arm, hauling him to his feet.

"Unnhh," Bobby groaned, dazed. "What happened?"

"Well Bobby, looks like you were just touched by an angel," Dean joked flatly, his face stretched into a sardonic, wry smile.

Bobby stared. "Come again?"
Ghosts of the Past

"All the wounds that are ever gonna scar me, for all the ghosts that are never gonna catch me."
- My Chemical Romance

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

"So did he look like an angel?" Sam asked, hanging onto every word. Dean was standing, arms crossed, pacing slowly, grumpy. Alex and Sam were sitting at Bobby's kitchen table on opposite sides.

Dean shook his head darkly. "No fluffy wings, no halo, no harp music. Definitely strong though. Super powered."

"He just looked like some average guy," Alex added. She was avoiding looking her twin in the eyes. Instead she was acting very interested in the coffee mug she cradled in both hands.

"I still can't believe you guys didn't tell me what you were doing last night," Sam said, a note of accusatory bitterness in his voice.

Alex gave him a look. That was rich. "Well maybe if you hadn't snuck off in the middle of the night, we might've—"

"I didn't sneak off, I was trying not to wake you guys. Why do you always assume I'm the bad guy?" He demanded, his voice rising in defensiveness.

"Are you PMSing?" Alex rolled her eyes and set the mug down on the table with more gusto than was needed.

"Shut up you two morons," Dean said, rubbing his temples. "I'm trying to think. You're getting on my last damn nerve." He was on edge, more frustrated than he had been in awhile. "Maybe he's some kind of super demon or something."

Sam seemed skeptical. "A demon who's immune to salt rounds and devil's traps... and Ruby's knife? Dean, Lilith is scared of that thing."

Getting even more agitated, Dean huffed, picking up the speed of his angry pacing. "Well don't you think that if angels were real, that some hunter somewhere would have seen one... at some point... ever?"

"Yeah. You just did, Dean," said Sam.

"I mean, maybe angels haven't walked the earth since ancient Biblical times or maybe they erase memories of the people they encounter, or—" Alex started, only to be glared at by Dean.

"Really, you guys? Really? I'm not gonna believe that this thing is a freaking 'angel of the Lord' because it says so! It has to be something else, okay?"

"You chuckleheads wanna keep arguing religion, or do you want to come take a look at this?" Bobby cut in, and the three of them were slightly chastened—Bobby had been so quiet in his study
that they had forgotten he was there. "I got stacks of lore—Biblical, pre-Biblical. Some of it's in damn cuneiform. It all says an angel can snatch a soul from the pit," Bobby said, tapping a page of one of his books emphatically.

That piece of information caused a brief, loaded silence in the room. Then Dean crossed his arms, unwilling to be convinced. "Okay, but what else could've done it?"

"Airlift your ass outta the hot box? Far as I can tell, nothing."

Beside Dean, Sam looked encouraged. "Guys, this is good news. For once, this isn't just another round of demon crap. I mean, maybe Dean was saved by one of the good guys, you know?"

Alex looked at her twin brother sidelong. After meeting Castiel, she wasn't sure if angels were the good guys. He had seemed dangerous, not holy or angelic. However, she kept that thought to herself.

"Okay. Say it's true. Say there are angels. Then what? There's a God?" Dean scoffed.

Another can of worms right there for sure. "Geez Dean, can we just figure out angels first, then God?" Alex asked. She was serious, but she said it cynically for humorous effect.

"Fine," Dean said grudgingly. "What do we know about angels?"

Bobby got a little smirk on his face. He picked up a tall pile of ancient books and set them down with a loud thunk on the desk in front of Dean. "Start readin'."

Dean looked at the pile with resentment, then turned to Sam and Alex, cranky. "One of you clowns is gonna get me some pie."

"I'll do it," Sam said, sighing and grabbing the car keys.

Dean took a book off the top of the pile and had cracked it open like he was angry with it. "Care to join, Alexander?" He asked peevishly. He liked to use stupid nicknames whenever he was grumpiest. Weirdo.

She wordlessly took a book and gave him a meaningful, if not a little sassy glance while she did it.

And with that, they began paging through the books Bobby had pulled off the shelves. Alex never minded the research part of things. She was good at taking in a lot of information and figuring out how to apply it. She'd always liked reading ever since she'd learned.

Maybe thirty minutes later, Bobby swore softly as he ended a call on his cell phone. "Damn, she still won't answer."

"Who?" Dean asked, ready to be distracted from his reading.

"Olivia. She's a hunter friend of mine one state over. I've been trying to get her since angel-boy made his grand entry—she might have some leads on angels. But now I'm plain worried. It's just not like her not to call me back."

Alex was now interested too, peering at Bobby over the top of her book. "Do you think she might be in trouble?"

"Yeah," Bobby said, thought a long couple seconds, then stood up restlessly. "I should go check on her."
Dean was already snapping his book shut and standing up, seeming to be happy to find an excuse to get his nose out of the books. "We'll come with."

Alex, looked at Dean with a frown. "But there's research to do." She pointed to the tall stack of books waiting to be combed through.

"We can do it later," Dean retorted. She looked at him for a second, then back at the books.

"Why don't you guys go and I'll stay and sort the stacks?" She suggested. Dean, as predicted, didn't like the idea.

"You think I'm gonna let you stay here all by yourself?" He crossed his arms, daring her to fight him on the issue.

Alex looked at him over the top of the book both amused and challenging. "Yes, that's exactly what you're going to do. I'm going to sit here and scour all these books for angel stuff and when you get back in a day or two, I'll be an expert."

"No, I don't want you alone," Dean said. "Sam could stay with you."

Alex raised her eyebrows, becoming extremely serious. "No."

"Oh come on, aren't you two over your little spat yet?" he asked flippantly. Alex felt a genuine pang of sadness, losing a little of her fire momentarily. She stared at the books pages unseeingly. It wasn't a little spat. It was... not speaking to each other for four months. Dean inhaled heavily, relenting slightly, not needing her to say anything because he saw his answer in her quietness. "Then I'll stay with you."

At this point Alex softened—he was just trying to look out for her. "Dean—I'll be fine. You've left me alone tons of times before. You and Bobby and Sam go investigate and I'll do the boring stuff." She jerked her thumb toward the books. He looked at the books with slight distaste, mulling it over.

"She'll be fine here, Dean," Bobby added. "In fact, she might be safer here than with us. This place's basically Fort Knox."

Reluctantly, Dean agreed. "Yeah. All right."

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**The Next Day**

_In the AD 400's the Greek philosopher Dionysius the Areopagite described a hierarchy of angels. Based on his writings, angels are traditionally ranked in nine orders. The highest order of angels is the seraphim, followed by the cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, and angels.

According to this system, the first circle of angels—the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones—devote their time to contemplating God. The second circle—the dominions, virtues, and powers—govern the universe. The third circle—principalities, archangels, and angels—carry out the orders of the superior angels._

Alex looked up from the book she had in front of her and blinked several times, tired and glazed over. She glanced at the clock and realized she had been doing this all day. Scrawled notes on scrap paper were strewn all over the desk, and several volumes were open. She rolled her shoulders, sore from hunching over and reading. Her head was now packed full of angel mythology.
and lore, but she couldn't be sure what parts were real or not. It was mostly speculation and hearsay, but if Alex had learned one thing being raised in the hunter life, it was that most myths and legends came from an element of truth; sometimes a large element of truth, sometimes small. She didn't feel like telling Dean, but she was beginning to believe that Castiel really was what he said. There didn't seem to be anything else he could be. However, it was disappointing as she had pictured angels to be... different. As glowy, poetic, gentle and soothing beings with fluffy white wings. Not as... a somewhat robotic invincible guy who showed up and knocked out your friends then told you God had work for you.

She briefly remembered Castiel's promise: "I'll see you again soon." In his deep voice and under his piercing gaze, the words had seemed almost like a threat. She wasn't sure how she felt about that.

She shook her head tiredly and decided it was time for more coffee. She got up and cranked up Bobby's ancient coffee maker in the kitchen, and that's when she thought of Dad's journal—maybe it had some kind of clue to angels. Maybe she could find something there. She left the coffee brewing and went into Bobby's guest room—her room for the past few months. The small room had a bed, a dresser, and an old mirrored bureau. Her oversized duffel bag was plunked onto the bureau. She had never been in the habit of unpacking clothes, ever, as almost every day they were leaving the place they had been the day before.

Alex dug through the beat up duffel in search of the journal. All of her worldly possessions were right here—old socks, torn jeans, and few faded t-shirts (some were Dean's old band shirts from middle school), the odd knick-knack or memento. The whistle on a silver chain that she used to wear around her neck (Dad insisted, so she could always whistle for help), an oversized manilla envelope of some of her old notebooks she had used to talk to people with (her one-sided conversation collection, she called it). Her fingers bumped up against a small square of paper in the bottom of the duffel bag, and momentarily forgetting her journal hunt, she pulled it out, turning over the yellowing envelope in her hands. *Family Pictures* was scrawled across the front in Dad's handwriting. There was only one photo inside.

It was a picture of Mom standing out in the yard, holding her baby twins, one in each arm on either hips. She was smiling broadly. The twin on the right was staring blankly into the camera, and the twin on the left was chewing on his or her hand—Alex wasn't sure which one was her. Little Dean was standing beside Mom, arms at his sides, squinting at the camera. Alex searched her mother's face in the photo, trying to remember her. But she didn't, not at all. She wondered who had taken the photo. It had probably been Dad, since he wasn't in the picture. Or, he might have been gone at the time... that would match up with the rest of her life.

Alex tucked the photo back into the envelope and pulled out the journal from where it was nestled in the bottom of her bag. The familiar shape and weight of it always brought bittersweet feelings to her. She had been writing down some of their latest travels and encounters for the past few years, ever since Dad disappeared and then died. Seeing the page where Dad's handwriting ended and hers began always brought a moment of somber reflection.

The sound of her phone ringing in the study shook her from her thoughts and she hurried to answer it, journal in hand.

"Hey Dean," she greeted.

"Alex," he said, and even from that single word, she knew something was wrong. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. What is it?" She set the journal down on the study desk, listening intently.
"Something freaky," he said. "Some kind of vengeful spirit on steroids. A bunch of hunters this way are dead—I mean ripped apart dead. And Sammy just got attacked in the friggin' bathroom of this random gas station by the ghost of Henriksen."

"What?!" Alex's chest clenched in panic. "Oh my god—is he okay?"

"He's fine. No thanks to me. I should have called you sooner, but I had no idea these spirits were mobile."

Alex stopped, frowned, confused. "But... ghosts can't just show up where they want. How is that even possible for Henriksen's ghost to be at a random gas station?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out. Bobby should be back to you before we are, maybe a couple hours. We're a little further out. Get the salt, get the iron, blockade yourself in, you got it? I'm pretty sure all hunters are targets right now."

Alex pictured her brothers, far away from her and being hunted by vengeful ghosts, and her stomach turned in pain. "Damn. Okay, you guys be careful. I'll be fine."

She heard a heavy, gusty breath. "You better be." He sounded pissed at himself. "I knew I shouldn't have let you stay behind."

"Relax. I'm gonna go get the salt and iron now." Alex paused, thinking of Sam getting attacked. She swallowed, cleared her throat. "And, uh, tell Sam I, uh... love him."

Dean paused a little awkwardly. "Uh, okay. See you soon."

"And Dean?"

"Yeah?"

"I, uh, loveyoutoo." She hung up fast, not giving him a chance to reply. She wasn't super into expressing her feelings. It had felt necessary right then, but it still left her feeling highly awkward. She let out a breath and shook herself.

She began scrolling through her contacts to call Bobby and see how far away he was. Eyes glued to the phone, she turned around. But when she bumped up against a solid form, she shrieked, jumped back, and dropped the phone all at once, staring at the person in front of her in complete shock.

Unblinking, Castiel looked back at her, appearing just the same as he had the other night—trench coat, business suit, wild hair, blank expression. "You're not safe here," he announced, and reached out for her.

"Whoa don't touch me!" Alex warned, jumping back, her heart hammering from sudden adrenaline.

Her reaction caused him pause. "Do you assume... that I would hurt you?" he asked, seeming to be confused. She just stared at him then made a face—like, um, yeah I assume you might hurt me. I don't even know you. He looked slightly irked at her reaction. "Alex, if I wanted to hurt you, you wouldn't be able to stop me," he said.

Cocky son of a bitch, wasn't he. She raised her eyebrows. "Well that sure as hell wouldn't stop me from trying, angel wings."

His eyes narrowed just slightly, as if he didn't understand. "My name is Castiel, not 'angel wings."

She paused for a beat, thrown off. "Uh, yeah, I get that," she said tersely, "now go away."

He seemed mildly perplexed. "I don't have time for this. Take my hand." He held out his hand to her and she looked at it like it was diseased.

"Uh what?" Alex was growing more confused by the second. She edged away from him even more. "Shouldn't you be bugging Dean about becoming a servant of God? He's not even here."

Castiel ignored her attitude. "I know that. I've been ordered to protect you."

Alex could have done a double take at that admission. "...What? Why? Since when?"

"The reason why was not made known to me," he replied with no emotion. "Something about you makes you important to my Father."

Alex looked at him weirdly. Was he joking? She shook her head, feeling extremely suspicious. This just didn't feel right. First Dean, and now her? This was getting ridiculous.

He held out his hand again, but she stood her ground, silently refusing. A muscle jerked in his cheek—was that impatience? "I won't force you to come with me," he said. "But I highly advise you to. You're in grave danger."

"I'm _always_ in grave danger," she countered sarcastically, to which his frown deepened slightly. "I told you. I don't want your help—get lost. I'm not gonna say it again."

He stared at her for a couple seconds blankly, then clear annoyance showed. "Fine," he said, and in a blink of the eye, he was gone, leaving Alex in shocked silence. _What... the... hell. Weird._

Remembering Dean's phone call and her promise to arm herself, she turned to go downstairs where all the weapons were—and not only them, but the panic room she and Bobby had built two months ago—but before she could take a single step, the radio suddenly turned on, crackling on white noise. _Uh oh_. Alex slowly looked over at the radio, her blood beginning to pump through her veins quicker. The lights flickered on and off, once, then twice. And then, she felt it. The room had gone cold—ice cold. She exhaled, her breath a small cloud in front of her. "Ah crap," she whispered, cursing herself for not grabbing a weapon already. She could feel a strange presence behind her, and she swallowed nervously. The hairs on the back of her neck were standing straight up. Alex braced herself, turning around slowly, unsure of who would be standing there, just knowing she was in the presence of a ghost.

A small young woman with dark hair and delicate features gazed back at her. She was dressed modestly, her hair parted precisely and braided neatly to the side. A small silver cross hung around her neck. Recognition dawned on Alex. "N-Nancy?"

"Hello, Alex," said Nancy. She looked very pretty, even with the pale, cool cast that death had left on her ghost. Alex recalled with growing horror that Nancy had been one of Lilith's most recent victims—killed mercilessly after helping Alex and her brothers narrowly escape the clutch of death.

Alex swallowed. "You, uh... don't look so good," she said lamely.

"Yeah, well, death does strange things to a girl," Nancy replied, her voice too cheerful and too pleasant, resulting in a strange, sinister quality.

"I'm... sorry you died," Alex offered honestly, even as she was trying to think of what nearby would work as a weapon.
"Me too," Nancy said with dramatic sadness, and she sighed. "It was the worst pain I ever experienced." She became more somber, the air of theatre leaving her voice in favor of dark anger. "Lilith flayed my skin off me, bit by bit. It was agony—pure agony. Where were you? You should have saved me. I needed to be saved." Alex felt herself grimacing, knowing exactly where this was going. She was slowly, slowly edging sideways and backward, where she knew the iron fireplace tools rested. "I died a virgin, you know," Nancy said sadly. Her eyes seemed to darken, and a menacing little smile crept across her face, and her voice went soft and sing-song. "And so will you."

Alex's stomach lurched in total surprise and she froze. "How the hell do you know—" she stammered, and Nancy smirked, rolling her eyes. Alex was dumbfounded and mortified, set off balance by the knowledge that this random vengeful ghost knew her most humiliating secret.

"Oh, Alex, you're so precious. I know everything about you. How you feel so inadequate and long so badly for a chance to prove yourself to your brothers, and for a chance to be noticed by the big, beautiful world out there..." Nancy smirked, clearly enjoying Alex's horrified expression. "Poor little Alexandra, she never did have friends like the other little kids, did she? I mean, who wanted to be seen with the weird little silent girl? Every new school, same old story... how did it feel to be ignored and written off your whole childhood?" Nancy laughed. "And forget the possibility of a boyfriend... what did you have to offer?" She cocked her head to the side. "The same thing you have now. Nothing."

Alex's insides burned from anger and shame as Nancy continued on, throwing verbal barbs with obvious pleasure. "No one liked you then, because you were defective. And no one likes you now, either, because even though some power-that-be restored your voice, you're still the same. Broken. Weird. Freak." Out of the corner of Alex's eye, to her left just a bit more near the fireplace, was the fire poker and shovel. She wet her lips, wondering if she could make it. It was now or never. "You're a total freak," Nancy repeated, pleased with the verbal whipping she had just delivered.

"Look who's talking, bitch," Alex spat back. Nancy's expression turned to stone even as Alex grabbed the fire poker and wildly swung it like a baseball bat at the space that Nancy's apparition occupied. The ghost's image dissipated like smoke at the blow.

"Ouch," Nancy said, giggling, and Alex whirled to see Nancy standing behind her, looking smug. "You know, the night I died at the police station, I really appreciated you speaking up and offering yourself instead of me, Alex. Oh wait... that's right! You didn't," her expression became deadly for a moment, before she resumed speaking in her perky, enthusiastic tone. She advanced on Alex slowly. "I mean, two virgins in one place... what are the odds, right? You coward. You could have saved us all." The clock struck three in Bobby's study behind them and Nancy dipped her chin down, smiled broadly without showing teeth. "Well well well, look at the time. It's your turn to die."

Alex again swiped the poker wildly and Nancy's apparition melted into the air, but then reappeared behind Alex and slammed her across the room, smashing her face-first into the kitchen counter where she and a bunch of stuff from on the counter tumbled to the ground. Alex groaned, pain blossoming in her ribcage as she struggled to get up. Rolling to a stop near her foot was a large can of kosher salt. Alex snatched the can up despite the stabbing pain in her ribs. Nancy was approaching slowly, her expression enraged. Without even touching her, Nancy flipped Alex around wildly like a rag doll, and sent her slamming back to the floor, face down. There was a horrible cracking sound as her chin hit the floor, and Alex screamed in pain, only just managing to hold onto the can of salt.

Nancy began dragging Alex, who was opening the top of the salt in clumsy desperation, the
blinding pain overwhelming her motor skills. She jerked the can hard over her shoulder, sending a 
huge spray of salt backwards at Nancy. Weakened, Nancy flickered out for a few seconds, giving 
Alex enough time to scramble to her feet and run staggeringly to the basement, down the stairs, and 
toward the iron panic room. All without sight or sound of Nancy—until Alex rounded the corner 
and saw Nancy standing in front of the door of the panic room, grinning wickedly. "Running from 
your problems is never a true solution, now is it?"

Again, she sent Alex flying backwards at full force. Alex crashed hard into the staircase, sideways 
—more pain exploded in her side and Alex heard screams of agony—then realized they were her 
own. She crumpled to the ground onto all fours, barely able to breathe from the shooting pain in 
his ribcage. She was still gripping the can of salt in one hand for dear life. She saw Nancy's feet in 
front of her, and then felt the ghost lifting her by two fistfuls of Alex's jacket. "You. Should. Have. 
Saved. Me!" Nancy roared, all the former playfulness gone and replaced with sheer rage. Wheezing 
and gasping for air against the pain, Alex turned her hand and shook the entire remaining contents 
of the salt container onto Nancy's apparition, and she fell to the ground as the apparition dissolved, 
shrieking in anger. With a speed she hadn't know she possessed, Alex raced the final few steps, 
yanked the door of the panic room open, and slammed it behind her, shaking violently. Adrenaline 
fading, she collapsed into a sprawled sitting position on the floor, barely able to breathe—were her 
ribs broken? Were her lungs punctured? She could barely see from the pain. She wrapped her arms 
around herself, teeth gritted in torment. She could taste blood in her mouth and her chin and jaw 
feel broken, shooting pains were running through her entire face and neck.

"Oh Al-eeeex," came Nancy's sing song voice on the other side of the wall. "Don't mind me. I'll just 
wait out here for you. I have allllll day, Alex. And when your brothers get here to save you..." she 
trailed off and laughed, a soft, haunting sound full of foreboding.

Alex sobbed, gasping. It was like breathing through a straw. She wondered if she were dying—her 
chest felt strange and heavy, and the world was spinning oddly in front of her. She was going to 
pass out soon, she was pretty sure. She'd passed out enough times in her lifetime to recognize the 
horrible lead-up.

"I told you there was danger," came a deep voice, and Alex swore in surprise, flailing backwards 
up against the wall. She almost fell over as she looked up into the grim face of Castiel. He 
crouched down in front of her. "Hold still," he commanded, reaching for her.

"W-what are you going to—"

"Trust me, Alex." He looked into her eyes and she went still and stared at him, breathless and 
pained and unsure. His face had an actual expression on it. He seemed imploring, vaguely 
concerned. He held her gaze a moment longer, then his hand, warm and solid, came to rest over the 
area just above her stomach, and soothing white light came out of his hand, startling Alex. 
Underneath his hand and inside her muscles, bones, skin, she could feel a strange and fiery 
sensation. Not unpleasant, but so foreign that she didn't know how to process it. She looked at his 
hand there on her ribs, the light glowing beneath it, then back at him—he was looking at his hand 
in intense concentration. When the light died away, Alex realized all the pain in her ribs was gone, 
that she could breathe fine.

Stunned, she looked at him in a new kind of awe, unable to hide her surprise. There, again, was 
that almost-smile he'd given her the other day. His hand came up to cup her chin, his thumb lightly 
resting on the center of it and she jumped slightly at the unexpected touch of his hand. Again, 
warm light, a fiery sensation, and his frowning stare was on her chin, not her eyes. She stared at his 
face as he healed her, because without his eyes studying her, it was safe to do such. He was 
handsome, more handsome than she remembered noticing before. He had a clefted chin and
defined jaw; his nose was strong and pleasant, his brow fierce and broad. He had strange, wide lips that offset those brilliant blue eyes. Eyes that appeared to be both weary and curious all at once. Age lines scattered his face, but somehow he still seemed boyish and youthful to her. His eyes moved up and met hers right then, like he felt her gaze. Alex looked away quickly, realizing that her chin and jaw were normal, fine. Healed.

"T-thank you," she said softly, feeling very odd indeed... humbled by his help and a little stupid for not listening to him in the first place. She chanced a glance at him.

"You're welcome," he replied, his deep voice sending chills up her spine again. His hand then fell away, but his intense gaze did not. Alex suddenly felt that he was too close. Much, much too close. As if he read her mind, he stood up and offered her a hand. Usually she never would have accepted the help, but a little awed by and indebted to the man—no, angel—who had just saved her life, she took the hand and stood, feeling as though she were in the presence of a superhero or god, almost. However, she would immediately regret the trust she'd placed in him by giving him her hand.

Even before she had finished standing, she heard a strange, metallic clicking and felt something cold snap onto her wrist—handcuffs?! Castiel locked the other half onto the gun rack that was bolted into the wall with surprising speed. "Hey—what the hell?" Alex exclaimed in alarm. "What are you doing?! Take this off of me!"

"I just saved your life," he replied, as if commenting on the weather. "Twice." He held up a small silver key, showing it to her, and then placed it on the little desk at the other end of the room, far from her reach. "Do not leave this room. You'll be safe here."

"Hey!" But he was gone again, leaving Alex frantically tugging at the handcuffs.

"Castiel! CASTIEL!" she shouted as she rattled the cuffs in desperation—but he didn't reappear, and no answer came to her screams. She had no phone, was surrounded by ghosts, and was locked in the basement where Bobby couldn't hear. She was unable to warn anyone in any way. She yanked at her restraints again, howling in frustration. "Son of a bitch!"
After shouting herself hoarse and no sign of Castiel (or anyone, for that matter), Alex finally gave up and resorted to fuming about being handcuffed to the gun rack. She wanted to be thankful for being so miraculously healed—she was pretty sure she had been dying before Castiel had touched her—but knowing her brothers and Bobby would be walking into a death trap with no warning had left her in quite the state.

For awhile, she tried to get the handcuffs off, at first by grabbing a shotgun to maybe shoot the chain in half—but as her luck would have it, none of the guns in her reach were loaded and the ammo was on the other side of the room where she couldn't get to it. She tried awkwardly pounding at the chain of the cuffs with the butt of the gun, but that didn't work either. She pulled as hard as she could, trying to get the rack to separate from the wall where she could then drag herself over and get the key, which was maddeningly close but out of reach. Unfortunately no amount of tugging or twisting did anything to the chain or to the rack. She felt her head for bobby pins—she hadn't put one in for weeks, but she was desperate, thinking maybe there was one there, and if there were, maybe she could use it to pick the lock. No such luck. After awhile, she was forced to give up trying escape. Angry tears pricked her eyes as she realized she was completely helpless and stuck.

Habitually, she began to say a prayer for help—it was an impulse she had retained from childhood, Sam had sometimes prayed aloud for her. The second she started, Alex stopped short, appalled. It had been, after all, a supposed angel who had handcuffed her there and then left her without help. She wanted to scream—she had not imagined angels to be like this. Instead of screaming in frustration, she growled and muttered foul things aimed at Castiel, then became despondent and sullen. She resigned herself to the fact that she just had to wait and hope that Bobby and her brothers would be able to make it down to her before any more ghosts attacked. She focused on deep breathing and staying calm. Losing her shit wasn't going to help anyone.

She fiddled with the ring on her index finger in frustration—it was Dad's silver wedding band. Even though her mom had been dead for all but six months of Alex's life, she had never seen Dad without the ring. When he died, Sam and Dean gave it to her. After getting it resized, it had never left her hand. She wore it to remember him by, even though most of the memories were bitter and tainted and painful. He was still her father. And she had loved him very much, in between the more complicated feelings.

Dad had been many things. Negligent as a parent was one of them. He had been gone for a lot of long periods, missed important things and moments, placed Dean in the unfair position of parent to Sam and Alex, had constantly disappointed his children day in and day out. He'd saved their lives countless times—but had also endangered their lives countless times. But one thing he'd never done was step out on them forever. Over the years, Alex had come to view that as loyalty, more or less. Still, Alex had often wondered if she'd missed out on something—she'd seen a lot of kids as they passed through town after town, kids who had parents who seemed so involved in their children's lives, so caring and present. She had never and would never know what that was like. She had a lot of pain associated with the memory of her dad, a lot of confusion and deep, raw wounds. She left them alone, because ignoring them was easiest. Sometimes she wasn't sure why she still wore the wedding band, but taking it off didn't seem to make sense, either. There was love
there yes, but there were many confused, hurt feelings there too.

When she was eighteen and Sam left for college, things had changed in the Winchester family. For the worse in some ways and the better in others—Dad seemed to have some kind of wake-up call, and for the next few years had finally included Alex in most of the jobs they did and finally treated her somewhat like an adult. She sometimes wondered if he had replaced Sam with her, but she'd never gotten up the courage to write him and ask about it—she had just been so glad to finally be doing something. Instead of being left behind in a motel or being the getaway driver or doing long-range surveillance, she was a full-fledged part of the family business and had finally seen her dad more than once every few weeks. She got to know Dad pretty well those last few years. They still hadn't been that close—it was hard to be close to a father who had hurt you and been absent for so much of your life—but they were making tiny little steps toward maybe, possibly undoing a lifetime of damage. Then, he had disappeared.

Alex wasn't sure how to describe the way she felt about Dad. She wished she had known him better. She hated many of the things he had done and not done. She desperately loved him and idolized him for other things. She wished he could have heard her speak. Just once. Never being able to actually speak with your father wasn't fair. But then again, none of her life had been. Losing him was one of the greatest pains in her life, and also one of her greatest reminders of why she chose to be a hunter. Because she refused to allow his life and legacy to be wasted. The world was in short supply of those willing to face and fight the undead.

She heard noise outside the door and tensed, ready for a fight, although it might not go so well. She swallowed, heart racing. If it were anyone besides her brothers or Bobby... but the door creaked open and Bobby was peering in, then upon seeing her, exclaiming, "The hell...?"

With Bobby were two familiar faces. "Oh my god—" Sam rushed to her, aghast. "What happened? Why are you—"

"Who did this?!" Dean thundered, looking for someone to rip the head off of.

"Are you guys okay?" Alex asked, yanking at her handcuffs and anxiously motioning to the table where the key was. "Get these off of me!" She commanded.

"Alex, who did this?" Sam repeated Dean's question, clearly pissed as hell. She shocked everyone when she told them, "Castiel." Dean fiddled with the lock and the tiny key as she tried to explain everything quickly to the very angry looking men. "He—I—he showed up and told me I was in danger, that God told him that he was supposed to protect me, I told him get lost, Nancy's total bitch of a ghost attacked me and almost killed me, I made it in here, Castiel magically healed me, and then he handcuffed me to the damn gun rack." The handcuffs fell off as Dean finally succeeded and Alex sighed in relief, rubbing her wrist thankfully. "Long story short, I'm annoyed but I'm fine. What about you guys?"

Sam had a gash above his eye, Bobby appeared shaken up, Dean looked more tense than usual. Dean ignored her question. "He told you he was assigned to protect you?" he asked suspiciously.

"And he healed you?" Sam repeated. Both of them sounded totally skeptical. Sam looked around as if noticing the room for the first time. "And Bobby... is this a panic room?!"

Bobby shrugged modestly and Dean glanced at him briefly. "Bobby. You're awesome." His gaze was back on Alex now, and he looked severe. He got very pissy when he felt uninformed. "But more to the point, you need to tell us exactly what happened here, Al. Now."
Alex explained in more detail as fast as she could everything that had happened—recounted Castiel's bizarre appearance and speech about protection, Nancy's attack (she left out the details of Nancy's exact words to her), Castiel's reappearance and how he had healed her with just two touches, and then the handcuffing. Needless to say, her brothers were not pleased about that. Dean was straight up pissed, while Sam tried to come up with some theories on the reasoning behind Castiel restraining Alex. Not wanting to dwell on it, Alex demanded they fill her in on their end of everything. Basically, after finding other hunters shredded by ghosts and then Sam's attack in the bathroom, the three men had realized something was after hunters in particular and hurried back. Bobby had made it first and been trapped by some angry little girl's spirits in the salvage yard until Sam had managed to get him free. Dean had been looking for Alex when he too was confronted by the spirit of Henriksen.

"When we first got here and couldn't find you anywhere... we thought maybe they got you," Sam said. His voice hitched slightly, and Alex finally met her twin's gaze for the first time in months without glaring or frowning. She was reminded of how much she really did love him and how guilty she felt about the crap status of their relationship lately. It didn't matter that they were at odds, fighting, and mad at each other. She would take a bullet for him, hands down, even now.

"I was just pretty freaked that I couldn't get out of here to warn you," she replied. She thought about losing one or both of her brothers again and couldn't bear it. "Really glad you're okay," Sam nodded, and they shared a truce of a smile in that moment.

"Well, we're all in one piece," Dean said. "But I think we're all lucky to still be breathing." It was what they were all thinking.

Bobby, who had settled at his little desk with a book, looked up at her. "Kids, can we continue this conversation over some arts 'n crafts? We need to get some salt and iron rounds ready. Can't stay in this little room forever."

The Winchesters set to work prepping the rounds quietly. Alex shared some of the highlights of her angel mythos research—angels appeared in most major mythologies and religions, angels always came with the assumption of a god in charge of them, they had powers of healing and were somewhere between corporeal and not. Dean listened with a sour expression on his face, and when she concluded, there was a long silence as everyone digested.

"So, if angels are real, then God is too. Right?" Dean muttered, seemingly to himself. Another long silence passed. "No. See, this is why I can't get behind God."

Sam gave his brother an odd look. "Huh?"

"If he doesn't exist, fine. Bad crap happens to good people. That's how it is. There's no rhyme or reason—just random, horrible, evil—I get it, okay. I can roll with that. But if he is out there, what's wrong with him?" Dean threw his arms wide. "Where the hell is he while all these decent people are getting torn to shreds? How's he live with himself? You know, why doesn't he help?"

Alex snorted. "That's what you and every other philosopher ever wants to know," she said with a cursory glance his way as she shoved more rock salt into the shell she was holding. Sam remained in silent discomfort, mulling over Dean's rant.

"Found it," Bobby said, breaking the silence.

"Found what?" Sam asked.

"The symbol you saw—the brand on the ghosts... it's the Mark of the Witness."
"What symbol?" Alex asked. Bobby held up the page and tapped a strange little symbol there.

"I saw it on Henriksen," Sam explained. "On his wrist. Did Nancy have one?"

Alex frowned. She hadn't seen it, but Nancy's skin had been covered up entirely except for her hands, part of her neck, and face. "She might've—I didn't notice it though."

"Well, it's the mark of the unnatural," Bobby explained. "None of them died what you'd call ordinary deaths. See, these ghosts—they were forced to rise. They woke up in agony. They were like rabid dogs. It ain't their fault. Someone rose them... on purpose."

An ominous assertion. "Who would do that?" Sam asked.

"Do I look like I know? But whoever it was used a spell so powerful it left a mark, a brand on their souls. Whoever did this had big plans. It's called 'the rising of the witnesses.' It figures into an ancient prophecy."

Intrigued, Alex stopped loading rounds.

"From where?" Dean asked, his tone decidedly suspicious.

"Well, the widely distributed version's just for tourists, you know. But long story short—the book of Revelations." The bible. Alex felt her face growing a little less enthused. "This is a sign, kids."

"A sign of what?" Sam and Dean chorused as their sister looked on in apprehension.

Bobby cleared his throat. "The apocalypse."

Silence. Everyone stared at Bobby, wondering if he were joking. Dean broke the silence. "Apocalypse? The apocalypse? The four horsemen, pestilence, five-dollar-a-gallon-gas apocalypse?"

"No, the other one," Bobby said sarcastically. "Yes, that one. The rise of the witnesses is a—I dunno, a mile marker."

Alex gaped, and Dean looked dubious.

"Okay... so what do we do?" Sam asked. He sounded dazed.

"Road trip. Grand Canyon, Star Trek Experience. Bunny Ranch." Dean said, getting a dirty look from Sam and an eye roll from Alex.

"First things first," Bobby said. "How about we survive our friends out there? This here's a spell," he indicated the paper in front of him, "to send the witnesses back to rest. Should work."

"Should. Great." Sam commented wryly.

"If I translate it correctly. I think I got everything we need here at the house."

"Any chance you got everything we need here in this room?" Dean asked a little hopefully.

"So, you thought our luck was gonna start now all of a sudden?" Bobby said. "Spell's gotta be cast over an open fire."

"The fireplace in the study?" Alex asked reluctantly.
"Bingo."

"That's just not as appealing as a, uh, ghost-proof panic room, you know?" Dean looked uncharacteristically nervous.

"Nope," Bobby said, and snapped the book shut and put it under his arm. "Everyone load up a shotgun."

They almost didn't succeed in casting the spell and sending the ghosts back. It was like the entire house had been possessed—angry spirits seemed to be around every corner—familiar faces of people who had died when the Winchesters had gotten involved in their lives. After fighting their way to the study and salt-circling themselves in, Bobby had sent Sam after a hex box upstairs and Dean into the kitchen for ingredients. Alex and Bobby could see Dean from where they were, but when the ghost attacks became more violent, Alex had raced up the stairs, afraid for Sam who was by himself.

She stopped short at the top of the stairs when she heard a female voice around the corner and down the hallway "...what you're doing with that demon, Ruby..." Alex's breath seemed to stop and she shrank back, confused. "How many innocent bodies has Ruby burned through for kicks?" the voice continued. A voice she recognized as the demon Meg. "How many girls just like me? And you don't send her back to Hell? You're a monster!" There was a pause, and then Alex jumped when a rifle blast sounded. Holy shit, was Sam fucking around with the demon Ruby? Alex turned and ran back down the stairs, shaken to the core. Downstairs, she found Henriksen's ghost attempting to rip Dean's heart out. She blasted through the ghost with her shotgun and dragged a rattled Dean back to the salt circle, where Sam had just returned. With all four of them together, the angry spirits were drawn like flies to honey.

They barely survived the following attack and just barely managed to cast the spell in time to save their own skin.

Now, the four hunters were exhausted, sore, and in shock after battling so many ghosts at once. Bobby had retired to his room to rest (one does tend to need a little time after a ghost attempts to rip out your internal organs) and Dean declared he was going to take a damn shower. This left the twins to themselves. Pretty much as soon as they were alone, Alex had demanded that Sam follow her outside.

She led him in stony silence to the junk yard, and turned on him, not bothering to hide her anger.

"What's up?" He asked in a guarded tone, looking at her cautiously. He was already on defensive, his hands shoved in his pockets.

"What's up?" She repeated incredulously. "Sam, why don't you tell me why Meg seemed to think you're still palling around with Ruby?" The two names she dropped made Sam's face falter in clear, caught out surprise. "You told Dean that Ruby was dead." Alex accused. Still, she tried to do the right thing and give him some small benefit of the doubt. "Is Ruby still alive, Sam?"

Sam swallowed, wet his lips, and it looked like he was attempting to come up with an answer. "You heard that," he said, then cleared his throat and shrugged his shoulders, trying nonchalance. "Well, uh, Meg's ghost lied. She was just making stuff up to try and get me mad."

Alex felt insulted—she was being lied to. Her voice took on a tight, growling quality as she tried her damndest to give him another chance to tell the truth. "Sam, Nancy knew everything about me. Everything. Why would Meg lie?"
Sam was getting irritated and his hands were out of his pockets so that he could talk with his hands by using abrupt, sharp gestures. "Well I don't know what to tell you, what Meg said isn't true."

"Stop lying!" Alex exploded, completely losing her cool at this point and using her hands, too, spreading them wide in an are you kidding me gesture. "How the hell can you lie to my face like that, huh? I know what I heard! What is with you, Sam?" She was so angry that she was shaking and she pointed an accusing finger at him, tried lowering her voice. "You've been acting all kinds of weird ever since Dean got back and sneaking off and I'm—"

Sam cut her off, short on patience. "Okay, Alex look, fine!" He let his hands go wide and slap against his sides as he admitted the truth. "Yeah, Ruby helped me out for awhile after I left you and Bobby." His face was twisting into an insolent look, like she was inconveniencing him at the moment. "What's the big freaking deal?"

"Helped you out?" Alex repeated.

"Yeah, like before. She helped me track stuff down and look for ways to bring Dean back. Uh, I lost touch with her like a month ago I guess." Sam sighed loudly, taking a minute and regulating. He was beginning to look genuinely sorry instead of just pissed. "Alex—just, just please try and understand... I was in a dark place. I lost my big brother. And I lost my little sister, too." He was trying to give her one of those sad puppy faces he did, but she crossed her arms and looked away. He couldn't undo the lies and hurt with a sad face aimed her way. "I did all kinds of crazy crap," Sam continued desperately, earnestly. "But Dean's back and I'm on the straight and narrow! Promise."

Alex looked at him again, in the eye. He looked hopeful and vulnerable, like he really meant what he'd said. Looking at her twin—a person she was supposed to be close to, to be able to trust—she felt her heart sinking. She really didn't know him anymore and Alex shook her head, overwhelmed and unsure how they had come to this. "I can't tell when you're telling the truth anymore." She spoke the words softly, but when she said them, he looked like he'd been hit by a ton of bricks. Maybe he realized what she just had.

He grew stoic, the hopefulness he'd had a moment before gone. When he spoke again, he avoided looking at her. "Look. Can you just not tell Dean about this? He's not too happy with me right now and this would just make it worse."

Alex chuckled sharply, bitterly. "No kidding."

Sam was beginning to beg now, his eyebrows drawing together intently. "Please, Alex. How many times have I covered for you in the past?" Alex darkened a little. She had to admit that was true. Sam's voice softened earnestly. "I'll tell him, soon. I promise."

Alex was disappointed, angry, heartbroken, and over the conversation. She grew gruff, refusing to show how sad she was. "Yeah, fine. You tell him. Cuz if you don't, I will." She had to fight not to cry at this point. "I'll tell him all about how you left your sister to work with some fucking demon instead." She turned around and began to stalk away, her world yet again shattered. She didn't look back. If she had, she would have seen that her brother was just as torn up and heartbroken about it as she was. Maybe even more.

Dean and Sam crashed in the living room late that night after going through Alex's notes on all the angelic crap she'd sifted through when they had been gone gone. Alex had shut herself in the guest room hours and hours ago, clearly not happy about something or another. Dean knew she'd come around. She always did.
He listened to the sound of Sam's deep, even breathing and smiled to himself despite everything. Down the hall, Alex was asleep in her room, safe and sound, and nearby, his goofy dork brother was snoring softly. Even though the twins were in rare form right now, having them close to him again was so much more comforting than he wanted to admit. When he had gotten out of the shower, he'd found Sam sulking in the study on his laptop, clearly wanting to be left alone... and Alex had been out in the junk yard nonchalantly smashing old car headlights with a hammer and drinking Jack. Funny how his siblings chose to deal with their latest near death experience. But, their prerogative.

Dean laid awake for a long time, trying to decide if he could believe in angels or not. He believed in demons, he knew those suckers were real... but he wasn't so sure about angels. Dean's mind turned to his years in Hell. To his brother and sister, it had been a little under five months. It had been so much longer there for him. He ground his teeth as he tried not to think of the pain, the torment, the utter hopelessness he had endured. The scorching heat, the screams, the never-ending pain and suffering. He suddenly woke, a little confused, not even realizing he had been asleep. Sam was still sleeping deeply on the couch, and silver slats of moonlight lined the floor. The house was silent.

Dean sat up, looking around, feeling like he was being watched. That's when he saw a familiar silhouette in the kitchen. Dean got up, on guard, and silently went into the kitchen, where Castiel leaned casually up again the kitchen counter. He looked exactly like he had before—stern, and maybe a little constipated, too. "Excellent job with the witnesses," Castiel said, not bothering with pleasantries.

"You knew about that?" Dean asked, a little taken aback. He shouldn't have been surprised, he guessed, and got gruff. "You know, a heads up would have been nice. Oh and thanks a whole lot for handcuffing my sister to the damn wall. What was that all about?"

"I saved her life," Castiel said without batting an eye.

"By trapping her in a panic room?" Dean was flabbergasted at the dude's nonchalance.

Castiel looked at him for several beats, his blue eyes narrowing just slightly. "If I hadn't made sure she stayed in that room, Nancy's spirit would have killed her easily when Alex left the room to assist you. And Alex would have left the panic room to do such. It was a certainty." Castiel's mouth twitched as if in impatience. "I didn't enjoy having to restrain your very stubborn sister. If she had just listened, it would have been much more pleasant." He looked at Dean almost contemptuously. "You're welcome."

Dean smirked slightly. That was Alex—stubborn as hell. And it was kind of funny to see the angel guy annoyed over it, too. But, Dean supposed he did have to give Castiel credit for one thing and his smirk fell. "Yeah, she, uh, told me about your magical healing powers. I guess I do owe you one." But, Dean wasn't going to let Castiel leave without finding out more about one very, very troublesome claim. "You wanna tell me exactly why you told her you were assigned to protect her?"

"Because it's the truth," was Castiel's plain, straightforward reply. "God commanded it."

Dean's big brother hackles were definitely raised. He didn't like the sound of this. "What could God possibly want her for?"

Castiel shook his head slightly, disinterested. "I wasn't given a reason, nor do I need one. I do what is commanded of me."
That was rich, and Dean was indignant. "So where the hell were you when she was getting kicked around by Nancy in the first place?!" He demanded. "And, hey, I could've used a hand myself—I almost got my heart ripped out of my chest!"

"But you didn't." Castiel's stoic attitude and expression were getting on Dean's last nerve and he was past the point of caring whether he offended the dude or not.

"I thought angels were supposed to be, I dunno... fluffy wings, halos," he retorted. "You know, Michael Landon. Not dicks."

Castiel was resolute and unruffled. "Read the Bible. Angels are warriors of God. I'm a soldier."

Dean laughed, in a short, incredulous huff of air. "A soldier? Then why didn't you fight? And where the hell is God, anyway, if he even exists? I'm not convinced. 'Cause if there's a God, what the hell is he waiting for, huh? Genocide? Monsters roaming the earth? The freaking apocalypse? At what point does he lift a damn finger and help the poor bastards that're stuck down here?"

Castiel's gaze faltered and he looked away. Almost reluctantly, he said, "The Lord works..."

"If you say 'mysterious ways,' so help me, I will kick your ass." Dean growled. "So, Bobby was right... about the witnesses. This is some kind of a... sign of the apocalypse."

"That's why we're here," Castiel said. "We. So there were more of these idiots. Just great. 'The rising of the witnesses is one of the sixty-six seals.'"

"Okay. I'm guessing that's not a show at Sea World." The joke was lost on Castiel, who didn't seem to understand the reference. In fact, his expression had gone from mostly blank to introspective.

"Those seals are being broken by Lilith. And even though you sent the witnesses back, the seal was broken."

"And that did what?" Dean asked.

Castiel's almost worried expression was disconcerting. "You think of the seals as locks on a door."

"Okay..." Dean prompted, not seeing where the dude was going with this. "Last one opens and..."

Castiel looked at him tensely. "Lucifer walks free."

Dean's eyebrows shot up. Okay, not what he had expected. "Lucifer?" He repeated. "But I thought Lucifer was just a story they told at demon Sunday school. There's no such thing."

"Three days ago, you thought there was no such thing as me," Castiel pointed out. "Why do you think we're here walking among you now for the first time in two thousand years?"

Dean looked at Castiel in reluctance, seeing where this was going. "To stop Lucifer."

"That's why we've arrived."

A little uncomfortable with all of this new information, Dean resorted to his favorite defense mechanism: sarcastic insults. "Well... bang-up job so far. Stellar work with the witnesses. Nice job letting my little sister get kicked around by a ghost. Two thumbs, way, way up."

Castiel seemed to be losing patience. "We tried. And there are other battles, other seals. Some we'll win, some we'll lose. This one we lost. Our numbers are not unlimited. Six of my brothers died on the battlefield this week." He looked at Dean with resentment. "You think the armies of Heaven
should just follow you around? There's a bigger picture here." He was stepping closer, his voice even lower. Almost menacing. "You should show me some respect. I dragged you out of Hell. I can throw you back in."

Without giving him a chance to reply, the angel was gone, leaving Dean standing alone in the kitchen. A moment later, Dean was blinking back sunlight and laying on the floor where he had fallen asleep. For a second, he was confused and disoriented. Then he realized what had happened. *I'll be damned.* The angel had come to him in a dream.

Now if *that* wasn't Biblical…
She was all alone in a place where the darkness gnawed and devoured. Alex opened her mouth to call for help, but nothing came out—not a word, not a sound. Claws swiped at her, invisible and fiery. Somewhere far away, she heard her brothers calling for her, but she was drowning in the nothing and left without words. And then, she saw Dean—impossibly far away. He saw her somehow, and reached for her—then was violently dragged from her, screaming. She tried to reach out, but her limbs had turned into water. She tried to shout his name, she tried to shout for Sam, but Dean was gone. Overwhelming despair overcame her and she twisted, rolled, struggled against the dark creatures that tumbled around her. *Boom, boom, boom.* Sam was suddenly there within reach almost, but when he saw her, he just stared. *Boom, boom, boom.* Alex screamed out in silence, begging her brother to help her, save her. *Boom, boom, boom.*

She heard herself gasp and her eyes flew open to see daylight and the familiar ceiling of Bobby's guest room. She had been dreaming. Her heart rate was skyrocketed and her breathing was hard too. She began to calm when she realized it wasn't real.

*Boom, boom, boom.*

"Hey, I've been banging on this door for like five minutes!" Came a loud voice. "Are you asleep or what?!!" Dean demanded from outside the room and behind the door he was pounding on. Disoriented, Alex scrambled out of bed and pulled the door open, squinting at her oldest brother. "Yikes, ever heard of a hairbrush?" he quipped. His good humor faded when he took in her expression. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Fine. Bad dream." She rubbed her eye with the heel of her hand tiredly. That was the only problem with sleeping a whole night through. There were always nightmares.

Dean looked sympathetic and gave her arm a good, enthusiastic 'cheer up' whack. "Well, come on. Up and at 'em. We're hitting the road soon. Pack everything."

"Might take me awhile," Alex wisecracked, deadpan—yes, it was early, but never too early for sarcasm. She grabbed her duffel and slung it over her shoulder. She was already dressed except for shoes—she didn't own any pajamas. "Ready when you are."

"All girls should be like you," Dean said teasingly, and hooked his arm around her neck, giving the top of her head a hard scrubbing with his knuckles. Alex protested the noogie with a yelp and a kick in her brother's shin. In the living room, Sam watched, separate and silent.

They were piled into the Impala, on the road again. After a few minutes, Alex realized she was missing one vital piece of information. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"West," Dean said impassively. *Allrighty then,* Alex thought to herself. After another minute, he glanced back at her in the rearview. "So, uh, interesting thing, Al. Castiel came to me in a dream last night."

"TMI," Alex wisecracked, and in the front seat sullen Sam even had to smile momentarily.
"Ha ha," Dean retorted. "I'm serious."

"Yeah? So what did Mr. Handcuffs have to say?"

"A whole lot of self-righteous crap about how he's God's warrior. Oh yeah, and the apocalypse is nigh."

He suddenly had her full attention. "Huh?" she asked eloquently, mouth hanging open. She hadn't thought about the prophecy of the witnesses since yesterday—she had been too busy fuming about Sam.

"He said that Lilith's game is to break these seal things," Dean said.

Alex frowned. "Wait. The seals from Revelations?"

"Hell if I know," Dean said. "Why?"

"It's just, I read the sparks notes on Revelations while doing the angel research," Alex said, trying to remember exactly what she'd read. "There were these seals that were supposed to bring all this crazy hell on earth, Judgement Day crap if they got broken."

"Well, Cas said there are sixty-six seals," Dean said. "Those ghosts yesterday were one of these seals. And my favorite part—if they all get broken, Lucifer is coming to town."

Alex sat forward in the backseat so that her head was between the front seats. "Lucifer? Lucifer. The devil. Satan."

"That's the one," Dean confirmed.

From their grim expressions, Alex got the feeling her brothers were both already on board with the theory. Alex was a little blindsided. "And... you're just buying it?"

Dean's knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. "Yeah. Yeah, guess I am."

"Sam?" Alex asked.

He barely looked at her. "I mean, yeah, I believe it. It's too crazy not to be true."

Alex sank back into her seat, feeling unsettled and suddenly very overwhelmed. "But what are we supposed to do? Why did Castiel tell you all this, Dean?"

Dean let out a heavy breath. "Cas has a bad habit of disappearing before I can get a straight answer from him." Shaking his head, Dean avoided her pointed gaze in the rearview mirror. "He seems to want me for something. I just don't know if I can trust the guy."

Alex kept watching the side of Dean's thoughtful, brooding face. She didn't know if they could trust him either.

It was late at night at the Willow Tree Motel and Dean had fallen asleep a few hours ago. He had driven all day long, and the siblings had remained mostly silent, each lost in their own thoughts. Sam had mostly stared out the window and complained about Dean's music choices, Alex had added a little to Dad's journal—angels required a lengthy if unfinished, entry. There was still a lot they didn't know and might never know. Alex mulled over Castiel's brief appearances and stilted mannerisms, the flashing light and his dark shadowed wings—and, of course, the whole handcuffing thing. His words to Dean about the apocalypse were troubling. If it were true, this was
bigger than anything they had faced before... and they were facing it as a family that had fallen apart. Was it true? Any of it? There were all these things that made zero sense to her: God wanting Dean for some kind of heavenly mission… God supposedly ordering protection over her of all people… and the impending apocalypse? Alex realized she was chewing the inside of her cheek and made herself stop. She watched the scenery outside fly by. She'd only gotten more and more troubled as the hours passed.

After arriving to the motel and settling in, Alex and Sam had exchanged short, necessary conversation here and there (stuff like "do you want to shower first?" and "which bed do you want?"). Dean had halfheartedly told them to "quit being bitches" and then turned in, either fed up or exhausted. Maybe both. Sam had hunched over his laptop at the table and ignored his sister completely. After moments of excruciating silence in which Alex only became more and more pissed thinking about her twin and yesterday's fight, she grabbed her jacket and left for a walk. She needed to be away from the forced silence, and she was tired of holding still. The night air was chilly, numbing her nose and cheeks. She walked next to the main road, where traffic was still pretty heavy. For awhile, she stood on the sidewalk and just watched cars pass. These normal people with normal lives and worries she'd never had. Like a 401k or planning a Christmas party or what new diet to try. She was worried about the freaking apocalypse. She was worried that one of her brothers would be taken by God, and that the other one would remain apathetic and refuse to have a real relationship with her—that he'd rather side with a demon than his own sister.

There was suddenly a strange feeling that she was being watched, and Alex looked around quickly, trying to locate a watcher. But there was no one nearby. Old paranoia, she reasoned, and brushed the feeling away.

After a while, Alex returned to find the motel room dark and Sam in bed, seemingly asleep. She crawled into her bed, too, not taking off her jacket or shoes and not using a blanket. She rarely did. She laid still, wide awake. She listened to Dean's deep wheezy sleep-breathing, which could almost be called snoring—it was a sound she had missed these past four months. An hour or more passed and Alex cursed herself for not being able to fall asleep yet again.

She heard the springs squeak on Sam's bed next to her, like he had gotten up. Alex tensed, her pulse speeding up a little bit. She pretended to be asleep—please, Sam, just be going to the bathroom—she waited with bated breath as his soft footsteps slowly went toward the door. With a sinking feeling in her stomach, she listened as the door opened softly and clicked shut. Opening one eye to confirm he really had left, Alex then jumped up and slipped over to the window to watch as he rounded the corner outside. Again, he kept throwing glances around like the last time he'd snuck out. Goddammit, Sam. Alex slipped out the door too, and keeping to the side of the building, she followed Sam at a distance to the back corner of the motel. He walked past the Impala without a second glance, further mystifying Alex. Where the hell was he going? She stayed behind the parked cars, crouched low, to avoid being seen. Sam neared the end of the building, where a car was parked and idling.

Alex hid behind a Mustang and peered over the hood. Sam got into the car—as it pulled away, Alex could see the driver in one flash of light from the motel sign and recognized the girl from the motel the day that Dean had come back. Confused, Alex watched the car pull into the main road and speed away. Who was that, and why was Sam sneaking out to go somewhere with her? And then, suddenly, in light of yesterday's confession from Sam, it made sense. Cold realization overcame Alex. Ruby. It had to be Ruby. Alex couldn't move for a few minutes, the reality of the betrayal and the lies sinking in. She was hurt, and deeply. What the hell was Sam doing? Had he been sneaking off to see her that other night, too? She shook herself off and hurried back to the room in a severely upset state of mind. She was going to wake Dean up and they would get to the bottom of this. Tonight. Alex burst back into the hotel room, expecting to find Dean still sleeping.
But instead, she found something very different. Dean was up, and Castiel was there.

The sight of the angel in the trench coat startled her, and immediately, she was on guard. The last time she'd seen him, he'd handcuffed her to a damn gun rack. She edged closer to her brother. Castiel looked at her as she did such, his expression almost wary. "Hello, Alex."

His husky voice was deeper than she remembered and she shrank to Dean's side even more. Alex looked at the angel carefully, doubtfully, unsure what to make of his unexpected presence there—and when she looked at Dean, she could see that he seemed positively shaken up. From the two men's expressions and tense body language, Alex realized she had walked in on something important. "W-what's going on?" She asked, her nerves fluttering with dread.

"Oh, he just popped in for a quick trip back to the future," Dean interjected sourly.

Alex glanced at her brother. "...what?"

"I'm here because of Sam," Castiel said to Alex grimly, looking her in the eyes, and her stomach dropped in foreboding. Castiel looked almost conflicted or sympathetic. He turned his attention back to Dean, seeming to pick up where he'd left off before Alex had interrupted. "We know what Azazel did to your brother..." at the mention of Yellow Eyes, Alex's blood went cold. "What we don't know is why—what his endgame is. He went to great lengths to cover that up."

"Wait... what did Azazel do?" Alex asked, looking between Castiel and her brother and feeling extremely out of the loop.

Dean looked at her and she could see how angry he was. "Demon blood. He dripped freakin' demon blood into Sam's mouth the night of the fire." Horrified, Alex looked at Castiel speechlessly, not understanding.

He met her gaze. "For unknown reasons, he did not do the same to you."

"No, he just took away her ability to speak," Dean said bitterly. Castiel's gaze faltered a little.

Alex's stomach jumped in surprise. That had always been the theory—but there had never been any reason or logic behind as to why Azazel would have done it. Yellow Eyes had not confirmed or denied it when Dean had demanded to know. He'd only laughed. After Dean had killed the demon, nothing had changed and she'd still been mute. Not that his death would have broken the curse or spell or whatever it was... but it had been months after he died that her voice had, out of nowhere, returned.

Dean was fired up and looking ready to kill someone. "Okay Cas, where's Sam?"

The sudden use of a nickname for Castiel caught Alex's attention. "He's headed to four-twenty-five Waterman," Castiel replied.

Alex swallowed, steeling herself for Dean's reaction, because she knew something Dean didn't. "And, uh, Dean—I'm pretty sure he's with Ruby."

Dean's expression was momentarily aghast and he looked at Alex like he didn't want to believe that. "But he said—"

"He lied, Dean," Alex said darkly. "It's what he does these days I guess."

Dean muttered something and grabbed his keys, heading for the door where Alex still stood.
Castiel remained stock still. "Your brother is headed down a dangerous road. Even we're not sure where it leads. So stop it." Castiel's eyes shifted to them, his gaze chilling. "Or we will." And then he was gone. Alex stared at the spot he'd been standing in, uneasy and a little sick.

"Come on," Dean said to Alex. There was murder in his voice. Even the way he walked was angry.

"Okay, what just happened back there while I was gone for all of two minutes?" Alex demanded, doubling her stride to keep up with her brother.

"Time travel," Dean said tersely as he unlocked his door.

Alex paused and looking at him across the top of the car like he was crazy. "Are... you on drugs?"

"Man, I wish I were."

The Impala flew down the road in the darkness of night as a stunned Alex took in everything Dean had just told her—Castiel's appearance, time travel back to 1973, meeting Mom and Dad... all under Castiel's command to 'stop it'—it being the nursery fire—only at the end to find that Dean couldn't have changed any of it at all.

Alex shook her head. "So he let you see all of that and try to stop it... and then said you couldn't have changed it anyway?"

"Yeah. Effed up, right?"

"Majorly." Alex was stumped, wracking her brain. "So why make you go through that at all? I don't get angel logic."

"Yeah, me either, but that's beside the point. You need to tell me how the hell Sam can be with Ruby? She died." Dean punched the gas of the car, running a red light haphazardly.

"Geez, Dean!" Alex was gripping her seat with both hands. She shook her head, flustered. "I don't know. It makes no sense. I overheard Meg's ghost yesterday talking to Sam about what he was 'doing with Ruby.' I confronted him later and he lied about everything. Everything. And then when I called him on his crap, he admitted that he'd been working with her until a month ago, trying to find a way to get you back." Her face twisted into a sour expression. "I should've known that was a lie, too."

Dean let out a very heavy breath through his nose, his hand gripping the steering wheel like a vice. "Wanna tell me why you didn't tell me about this?"

Alex didn't like being the target of her brother's anger and usually tried to avoid it, but right now she was overcome with a huge, unbearable amount of heartache, thinking of Sam. "He said he wanted to tell you. I know I should've told you... but I wanted to give him a chance." She barely kept her voice from cracking as she looked at Dean, wishing he could give her an answer. "Dean... what the hell happened to him?"

His jaw clenched and unclenched, and his voice was uncharacteristically broken. "I don't know if I wanna know." He cleared his throat, slowing down. "I think this is it."

An old processing plant was up ahead, by all appearances abandoned. Dean switched off the headlights, got a bit closer, then pulled over and popped the trunk. He took out the demon blade and looked at it with great intensity as Alex stood back grimly. Dean silently slid the knife into his pocket and jerked his head toward the building, indicating that he was ready.
425 Waterman was the kind of place they frequented—a decrepit old building in a rundown part of town. Under the cover of night, it was easy to slip up to the building undetected. Following the sound of voices—two unfamiliar and one familiar—Dean and Alex were able to make out three figures inside one of the rooms through a metal grate.

Sam towered over a man who was tied to a chair that was surrounded by a crude devil's trap painted on the floor. "Where's Lilith?" he demanded.

"Kiss my ass," the man replied. His eyes went black.

Sam sounded almost amused. "I'd watch myself if I were you."

"Why? Huh? Because you're Sam Winchester, Mr. Big Hero? And yet here you are, sluttin' around with some demon." The man grinned at the woman, who was watching with her arms crossed, leaned against the wall, giving the impression of casualness. "Real hero," the demon cackled, looking back at Sam.

"Shut your mouth," Sam said, trying to sound confident. Instead, he just sounded like he was about to lose it. Next to Alex, Dean looked like he was seeing red.

The demon smirked. "Tell me about those months without your brother or sister around to censor you or boss you around. Tell me about all the things you and this demon bitch do in the dark." He grinned wickedly, then his expression fell. Sam was raising his hand, slowly and steadily. The demon lost his bravado, beginning to cough, and suddenly thick black smoke began to pour out of his mouth.

Alex gaped, horrified and awed at the same time. She looked at Dean, who looked back at her in alarm. Their worst fears were true. The demon screamed, and then collapsed as the last of the black smoke disappeared, leaving the man groaning.

"You follow my lead, Alex, hear me?" Dean hissed, and gave her no time to reply. He was already on his way in, his face murderous.

Sam froze as Dean entered. "So... anything you wanna tell me, Sam?" Dean demanded. The question was laced with barely-contained anger. Alex hung back behind Dean a few steps, unsure what was about to happen.

"Okay guys, just hold on, okay? Just let me—" Sam began, but Dean cut him off.

"You gonna say, 'let me explain'? You're gonna explain this? Are you serious right now? You're here with Ruby, who you said was dead—doing what you told me you had stopped doing?! Yeah, explain that, please. To the whole class."

Sam didn't seem to know how to respond, but Ruby, smiling evenly at the newcomers, stepped forward. She looked different than she had in her last body—she was now a brunette with dark wide eyes and a face that looked pleasant and pretty. "It's good to see you two again," she said, and Alex wanted to punch her in the fucking face.

"Can't say the feeling's mutual, bitch," she replied acidly, coming to Dean's side.

She felt Dean tensing next to her. "That's really Ruby?" he demanded of Sam, who didn't respond. Ruby's smile was fading at the murderous look in the oldest Winchester's eyes. Dean lunged forward, shoving Ruby up against the wall, even as he whipped out the demon blade.

Sam grabbed his brother's wrist, shouting, "Don't!" The knife clattered to the floor and Dean used
momentum to throw Sam up against a wall, letting Ruby go. Alex grabbed the knife off the floor and jumped Ruby. Both of the girls tumbled to the ground fighting viciously, Alex trying to bring the blade down on Ruby, Ruby just barely holding her off. Sam let go of Dean and lunged at Alex, pulling her off of Ruby and yanking her back, holding her tightly. The knife again went clattering to the ground.

"Let go of me!" Alex protested, struggling against Sam's iron grip. Ruby had crouched and taken the demon blade off the ground where it laid, and was eyeing Dean with a murderous expression.

"Drop the knife, Ruby," Sam said, still restraining Alex in a vice-like grip. Ruby looked back at him defiantly, making him wait. Then she did as he said and dropped the knife.

"Well, aren't you an obedient little bitch?" Dean asked mockingly. The demon glared daggers at Dean, clearly ready to fight again.

Sam finally let go of Alex, who angrily yanked away from him and met Dean's gaze. This hadn't turned out in their favor. Sam glanced at Alex apologetically, then turned his attention to Ruby, indicating the man who was possessed earlier. "Ruby, he's hurt. Go."

The demon gave Dean another look, and helped the dazed man up, hauling one of his arms over her shoulders, ready to take him out. "Where the hell do you think you're going?" Dean demanded.

"The emergency room," Ruby retorted. "Unless you want to go another round first." With that, she left, and Dean proceeded to give Sam a severely dirty look. Alex watched in confusion.

"What the actual hell is going on here?"

"You okay?" Dean asked Alex, who was picking up the demon blade. He didn't take his eyes off of Sam for a second.

Alex had the knife and was staring at Sam in a mixture of balefulness and mistrust. "Peachy."

"Let's get outta here," Dean said, and turned away, ignoring Sam's anxious, questioning look.

"Dean," Sam implored. Dean didn't stop, didn't turn back. He just walked out the way he'd come in. Sam's voice got more desperate as Alex neared the doorway. "Alex!"

She whirled, angry, knife still in her hand. "What?!"

"Look, if you'll just hear me out—" he started, coming a couple steps closer, imploring her.

Alex shook her head, not able to keep the tears from springing into her eyes. She couldn't summon any of the anger anymore. It was all heartbreak, and she pointed at him using the knife. "I thought I could trust you, Sam!" His face was twisted in remorse and shame and his eyes fell away from hers. Alex felt the hot tears roll down her cheeks. Tears because she felt she had lost Sam completely. He had clearly chosen where he wanted to be—with a demon. She was at a complete loss and she tried to cover her sadness with anger. "I don't know you at all anymore." He looked at her miserably, but said nothing.

And with nothing else left to say, Alex turned and followed her oldest brother.

After awhile of second guessing himself and trying to think of how to explain everything, Sam returned on foot to the motel room only to find it empty. He waited into the morning, at first upset to the point of feeling physically sick, then feeling angry and attacked, then guilt-riddled and confused. Finally, around nine o'clock, he heard the familiar grumble of the Impala. He swallowed...
nervously. Time for round two of Dean and Alex's wrath.

Dean swept in alone, ignoring Sam completely. He began to stuff his shirts into his duffel wordlessly. Sam's stomach twisted. "Dean, what are you doing?" Dean didn't answer. Sam tried again. "Where's Alex?"

"I'm right here," she said, and he turned to see her standing in the doorway, arms crossed as she leaned into the door frame. She looked like she hadn't slept, and her expression was stony. Sam looked between his siblings, unsure of what was happening.

"What, are you, are you leaving?" Sam asked as Dean finished shoving things into his bag.

"You don't need us. You and Ruby go fight demons. Real fuckin' heroes." Dean churlishly grabbed the bag and started for the door, only to have Sam physically block his way.

"Hold on—Dean, come on, man!"

Without warning, Dean hauled off and socked Sam in the jaw, the force sending Sam whirling. Reeling temporarily from the blow, Sam turned back, wincing. "You satisfied?" In reply, Dean again punched him in the jaw, this time drawing blood. Sam panted, recovered, swallowed. "Guess not," Sam said, touching his split lip and looking at Alex, who was still at the door. "You gonna hit me, too?" She just looked away with a tight jaw.

Dean got in Sam's face, blocking his view of his sister. "Do you even know how far off the reservation you've gone? How far from normal? From human?"

Sam held his hands out defensively. "I'm just exorcising demons!"

"With your mind!" Dean yelled. He took a pause, trying to calm himself. "What else can you do?"

"I can send them back to hell! It only works with demons, and that's it."

Clearly not convinced and even more pissed off than before, Dean grabbed a hold of his brother and pushed him backwards violently. "What else can you do?!"

"I told you!" Sam protested emphatically. Dean looked like he might punch Sam again.

Alex had crossed into the room and was now gripping Dean's shoulder tightly, her expression fierce. "Hey—you need to cool it," she told him levelly. Dean jerked back from her hand, but seemed to take her suggestion to heart and he retreated slightly.

Sam looked at his twin reluctantly. She was looking at him distrustfully, arms crossed again. He remembered when they had been so close. He had told her everything. Now, she was looking at him like he was a stranger. Like she didn't know him. His gaze faltered. "Look, I should have said something," he said, feeling pathetic and low.

"Yeah, you think?" She replied.

"I'm sorry. I am," he said. "But try to see the other side here."

Dean, who had been standing with his back to them, turned around. "The other side?" He repeated incredulously.

"I'm pulling demons out of innocent people," Sam said, not sure why Dean couldn't see the staggering positivity of that fact.
"Use the knife!" Dean said, his voice yet again raised almost to a yell, exasperated.

"The knife kills the victim!" Sam protested, almost yelling now too. "What I do, most of them survive! Look, I've saved more people in the last five months than we save in a year."

"That what Ruby wants you to think?" Dean asked. "Huh? Kind of like the way she tricked you into using your powers?" He shook his head sadly. "This is a slippery slope, brother. Just wait and see. Because it's gonna get darker and darker, and God knows where it ends."

"I'm not gonna let it go too far," Sam insisted.

Dean chuckled humorlessly, and then without warning he flew into a fit of rage and hit the lamp on the nearby table, sending it crashing into the wall. The twins winced in unison as Dean took over the room like a raging storm. "It's already gone too far, Sam!" His next statement hit them all like a ton of bricks. "If I didn't know you... I would wanna hunt you!"

The room went dead silent when he said that. Sam's eyes shone with tears, and he nodded while looking down. Alex had shrank back slightly at Dean's outburst and felt tears in her eyes, too. The pain that had been deeply lodged inside her heart was suddenly taking over her entire body and it was awful. Horrible. How had they come to this crossroads?

Sam shook his head, looking at his big brother pleadingly. "W-what was I supposed to do?" He implored. "You were gone. I was here."

"I was here, too," Alex reminded him, her voice wavering with emotion as she tried so hard to be honest and let Sam know how hurt she was. "And you go and decide this was what you wanted? That you'd rather work with a demon than your own sister?" She hated how heartbroken she sounded, but it was reflective of the truth. She was completely devastated to learn about what he'd been doing.

"It wasn't like that, I just—you weren't going to try to bring Dean back and... that's all I could live for anymore." His hazel eyes flickered with guilt. "I knew you wouldn't approve." His face was a mask of pain that he fought off, trying to appeal to his brother and sister again. "But what I'm doing... it works."

Alex shook her head mournfully. "Not for me, it doesn't."

Dean, whose face was scrunched in an unreadable expression, approached Sam again. "Yeah and if it's so damn terrific... then why'd you lie about it to me? To Alex? Why'd you hide it all this time?"

"Cas said if we didn't stop you... he would."

"See, I take that as meaning that God doesn't want you doing this. So, are you just gonna stand there and tell me everything is all good?" He asked, and Sam, the picture of turmoil, looked between his brother and sister, torn.

"Sam, please. It's not too late. Is it? You can stop. Right?" Alex asked. Her twin looked at her long
and hard, uncertain, surprising her with his silence. Her heart sank a little. Why did he look so resigned to a doomed fate?

Suddenly, Sam's phone rang. He scrambled to pull it out of his pocket, clearing his throat and answering, maybe glad for a distraction. "Hey, Travis. Yeah, hey." He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to collect himself. "It's good to hear your voice, too, yeah. Um, look, it's not a really good time right now. It's-" he paused. "Yeah, okay. Uh, well, just give me the details, and, uh…" Sam walked over the the bedside table and grabbed a notepad, scrawling on it. Alex looked at Dean, whose expression was so many things—angry, hurt, sad. He saw her gaze and he looked away, shaking his head.

"Yeah, okay, thanks Travis. Bye." Sam put his phone down and looked at Dean, then Alex. "Travis has a lead in Missouri." He looked down, his jaw working oddly. "Listen, I know you guys have no reason to trust me or to let me come along, but—"

Dean grabbed his duffel off the floor, his face a mask. "Shut up and let's go."

They made good time to Carthage, Missouri—about eight hours of driving nonstop. Dean told Sam about Castiel taking him into the past, and for a few moments as Dean told them about how young and full of life their parents had been, there was peace. Of course, when Sam slipped up and mentioned Azazel dripping demon blood into his mouth without Dean or Alex mentioning it to him… yet another fight followed. Sam said he was sorry, and Dean had retorted that Sam had been saying that a lot lately, and more stony silence had settled over the car.

When they got to Carthage, they looked up Jack Montgomery, the lead Travis had told them about. The guy Jack had been eating raw ground beef out of his refrigerator when the Winchesters had checked in on him. After witnessing that, they met up with Travis, who was an old friend of Dad's. Alex remembered seeing him once or twice, but it had been a long time ago. Travis complimented the Winchesters, saying their dad would have been proud of them for sticking together, then he oohed and aahed over Alex's voice, and embarrassed her thoroughly with his amazement. He then sat the siblings down and told them that Jack Montgomery was a Rugaru—a monster that manifested in the subject's mid thirties and would wreak murderous havoc on everyone around him if and when he gave into the desire to eat humans. The Winchesters parted ways with Travis feeling less hungry than they had before.

"All right, so we're gonna go have a little chat with this guy, and see where he's at," Dean was saying as they drove down the road, heading back to Jack's home the next day. Dean looked at Sam pointedly. "But I just wanna make sure, if push comes, you're gonna shove."

"Meaning?"

"Well, odds are we're gonna have to burn this guy alive," Dean said, referring back to Travis's information. The only way to kill Rugaru was with fire.

"This guy has a name and a wife," Sam replied intensely, obviously disliking Dean's statement. Alex drew in a deep breath. She could already hear the fight coming on and didn't think she could take another one.

"Yeah, who we're probably gonna make a widow, okay? I mean, you heard Travis. He's gonna turn. They always turn."

"Well, maybe he won't. Maybe he can fight it off," Sam said.
"And maybe he can't, that's all I'm saying."

Sam was on edge. "All right, we'll just have to see then, okay?" He retorted, then made a face. "And why aren't you asking Alex if she's gonna shove?"

"Because I know what she'd do," Dean said bluntly with zero hesitation. He sent his brother a dark glance. "Come on, Sam. You're side-railing. You sure your emotions aren't getting in the way here?"

Sam was defensive. "What are you talking about?"

"You know, nice dude, but he's got something evil inside," Dean said. "Something in his blood. Maybe you can relate."

Even Alex had to look up at that comment. Ouch. Sam was silent, then with eerie calm he said, "Stop the car."

"What?" Dean asked.

"Stop the car or I will!" Sam repeated, forcefully this time. Dean scoffed and pulled over, but even before he had completely stopped, Sam was getting out, slamming his door with gusto. He took several steps away, clearly trying to calm down. Dean followed him after throwing the car into park, and Alex got out, too, but hung back near the car.

Sam whirled around to face Dean wrathfully. "You wanna know why I've been lying to you, Dean? Because of crap like this!"

"Like what?" Dean demanded, clearly fired up and ready to fight.

"The way you talk to me, the way you both look at me like I'm a freak!"

"I do not," Dean replied lamely.

"You know, or even worse, like I'm an idiot!" Sam pointed an accusing finger at Alex, his voice raising more and more. "Like I don't know the difference between right and wrong!"

"Well do you?" Alex asked, no longer leaning against the car. She was being drawn into the argument like a moth to a flame.

"You have no idea what I'm going through," Sam said darkly, looking at her bitterly. "None."

"Yeah, because you've been gone the past four months!" Alex accused, not bothering to regulate her anger anymore. "By your own choice! So don't lecture me about what you're going through, because you aren't the only one going through crap right now!"

Sam got a self-righteous, joyless smile on his face. "Oh please, Alex, don't act like the victim here."

"Really, Sam?" Alex asked, getting more pissed off by the second at his completely jackass behavior. "Because that's all you've done the past few days. Act like someone held a gun to your head and made you go screw around with psychic demon mind powers... sorry, but I'm not gonna cry a river for you."

Sam shook his head and scoffed in disgust, looked away from her pointedly. "And you wonder why I didn't want to be around you," he muttered, looking at her like she was detestable. "You don't
even try to understand my point of view!"

"Oh, the one where it's okay to lie to your family and mess around with evil for kicks?" Alex retorted in a voice drenched with cynicism. Dean was watched everything unfold with a sickened expression on his face.

Sam huffed as his voice darkened dangerously. "You know what, Alex—"

"Sam don't," Dean interjected faintly.

Sam whipped his head to the side to look at Dean and bore down on him without warning, his temper getting the better of him. "Stop telling me what to do Dean!" He thundered, and by all appearances, it looked like Sam was about to hit his brother. Dean's expression darkened, and he got ready for a showdown.

And then Alex grabbed Sam by the sleeve of the jacket and yanked hard. "Stop it!" She wedged herself between her brothers, a palm hitting either of their chests to keep them apart. And they stopped when she did that—not because she was strong enough to literally hold them apart, but because of the look on her face and maybe the realization of what was happening. Still, they glared daggers at each other, breathing heavily, and Alex shoved both of them at once. "Just stop!" Her face was haggard with furious disbelief and after a couple seconds, both brothers backed off and Alex threw her hands out in absolute frustration as she ground her teeth together. "Are you kidding me?!" She looked like she was going to cry or scream or shoot someone, like she was about to flip out completely. "The three of us are the most—" she was holding her hands on either side of her head, "fucked up excuse for a family—I'm sick of it!" She was at the point of shouting now and looking at both of them now, not just Sam. "All we do is fight each other and lie to each other—I mean, we can't even stand to be around each other! Why are we even doing this? Huh?! Cuz Dad would have wanted it? He would be ashamed of us." She let silence span for a few beats, then looked at Sam and jabbed her pointer finger at him. "Sam if you don't want to be here, don't be here! It's that simple."

"Come on, Alex. We're family, like it or not. No one's leaving," Dean said, his tone commanding. Alex looked at him insolently. "I am not letting this family fall apart," he said fiercely.

"We already have, Dean," Sam said furiously. "And you know what, I'm tired of being the odd man out."

Dean looked like he had never heard anything more ridiculous. "What are you talking about?"

"You," Sam poked a finger at Dean, "have always taken her side, every time! You two want to act all high and mighty, like you've never messed up."

"Well I don't recall either of us ever, you know, using our freakin' minds to exorcise demons!" Dean snapped.

Sam shook his head, at a loss, taking a moment. "Why am I even here right now? I can tell when I'm not wanted."

Dean's eyes narrowed. "So now you're trying to make this look like we're ganging up on you?"

"You are! You've both made up your minds that I'm the bad guy without even having all the facts!"

"Which are?" Dean asked, arms crossed.
"I've got demon blood in me!" Sam shouted. "This disease is pumping through my veins, and I can't ever rip it out or scrub it clean! I'm a whole new level of freak! And I'm just trying to take this—this curse... and make something good out of it." He breathed deeply, taking a second to calm himself. "Because I have to."

His outburst hadn't fallen on deaf ears, and Alex could hear the fear he was holding onto. She appealed to him the only way she knew how, because she saw what he was saying, but she also saw a bigger problem. "Listen, Sam... yeah you've saved some people, but at what cost?" She studied him for a moment, filled with sudden worry. "We don't know what this is doing to you." She paused, growing dour. "Only what it's doing to this sorry excuse for a family."

Sam seemed to bristle at that statement. "Last time I checked it took more than one person to make a family work."

Alex stared at him stonily, then shook her head in frustration, gave up and turned away.

Dean threw his hands in the air, dumbstruck. "Okay—before I died, you guys fought... but this is a whole new level of screwed. You two want to tell me why you can't look at each other anymore? Why the kids who used to be inseparable are... this?" He indicated vaguely with his hands.

Alex looked at her twin sidelong and from underneath her lashes. There didn't seem to be any going back from the damage that had been done. She didn't know how to fix this. They were both wounded, and unlike Dean, they didn't seem able to just push those feelings aside. Sam shrugged grimly, speaking for them both. "Dunno what to tell you, Dean. Times change."

Dean looked less than pleased, his jaw clenching tightly. "Apparently." After a moment, he jerked his thumb at the Impala. "Look, let's just go talk to Jack."

Alex looked at Dean in semi-disbelief. Were they really going to just drop this whole thing? Sam seemed to be thinking the same thing, but after a moment of deliberation, gave a small, brusque nod. Alex wordlessly watched her brothers get in the car. Without a choice, she did too, but not happily.

They parked behind and beside the Montgomery residence, after the silent ten minute drive. "I'll do the talking," Dean said gruffly, looking back at Alex, who wasn't moving. "What, you're not coming?"

She shot him a sharp look. "No."

"Suit yourself," he muttered, and he and Sam got out of the car, slamming each door a little harder than necessary. Alex watched their retreating forms and sank down into the seats, glad to finally be by herself. The silence was better now. It wasn't so heavy and bated. She stewed for a few minutes, halfheartedly looking around at the neighborhood they were in. It was upper middle class... beautiful new homes with manicured lawns and pretty mailboxes and nice cars parked in the driveways. The definition of normal.

Across the street, a middle aged man was polishing his motorcycle in his garage, lovingly shining the chrome details. It was some kind of vintage Harley, with black trim. Alex gazed longingly at the bike. She could ride that thing forever, until the roads themselves ended. Away from the fighting, away from the apocalypse. Or at least away from the heavy anger that hung over this family. Maybe without her, Dean and Sam might get along. Maybe they wouldn't suffer from the third wheel vibe she brought to the mix. She leaned against the window, chin in her hand, staring at the motorcycle.
At that moment, a woman came to the garage door and beckoned the man inside. She was holding a pitcher of iced tea. The man wiped his forehead and went inside, leaving the bike unattended.

Alex’s heart rate picked up just slightly, the opportunity of the situation striking her. She looked back toward where her brothers had just gone. No. She couldn’t leave them—not right now. It was too selfish. But then she thought back to the last couple days. The angry words, the accusations, the oppressive environment. She just wanted some time to sort out her thoughts and figure this mess out and not feel like her life was a constant war zone. She looked back toward the garage where the motorcycle waited, beckoning to her. She swallowed, knowing she needed to decide, and now. She pressed her lips together, weighing her options. She was a textbook over-analyzer, but today, she decided she just needed to be impulsive. So without any further thought, she ripped a blank piece of paper out of one of the notebooks in her duffel.

About five minutes later, Dean and Sam returned to the empty Impala. On the middle seat, there was a sheet of paper bearing Alex’s neat, familiar handwriting.

**Need some time to myself. Don't come after me. I'm already far away. I'll find you in a couple of weeks.**
Abandon Ship

"Then I heard your heart beating, you were in the darkness too. So I stayed in the darkness with you."
- Florence and the Machine

Even as Alex sped down the road on the stolen bike, she almost turned around and went back, conflicted on the impulse decision and sort of terrified to follow through with it. But she kept going, driven by many emotions and thoughts she couldn't quite put into words. Mostly anger leftover from the fight she had just had with her brothers. She was tired of being angry and feeling kicked around and ignored.

Alex could picture what it would be like when they found the note she left—they would argue, predictably, about going after her. Dean would immediately want to drop everything to track her down. He'd be pissed off and worried and ready to go find her, come hell or high water. Sam would use the cover of brotherly sensitivity to urge Dean to respect her wishes and, besides, he would point out, they were in the middle of a job, Alex could take care of herself, etcetera, etcetera. Sam would soothe Dean by saying they'd track her down when they took care of the job at hand. Dean wouldn't like it, but then would agree, swearing right after the job, they'd follow her. But Alex didn't want to be found. Not right now. The apocalypse, angels, demons, ghosts and even her stupid brothers could all go screw themselves. She was too stressed out for this. She was going to get cigarettes, weed, booze, and space the hell out. God knows I fucking need it.

The miles continued to fly by as she headed North, coaxing more speed out of the stolen bike and not caring where she ended up, only wanting to be far away from everything her life was.

Nine Days Later
Kimball, Nebraska

Alex laid on her back on the floor of the abandoned cabin she had been squatting in for the past few days. She had one arm behind her head as she stared at the ceiling. It was sometime near sunset, and it was getting dark inside the small house. Beside her half-consumed bottle of whiskey sat, temporarily forgotten. She was idly smoking a cigarette, watching the haze of smoke dissipate above her head. She wasn't a straight up chain smoker, but she liked to here and there, especially in times of high stress or boredom. It had started as a teenage act of rebellion. She'd wanted to do something that would get her in trouble, if not with Dad (who was not around enough to pick up on the secret habit), then with Dean or even with Sam. Only, no one had noticed it. She had snuck off multiple times, but neither of her brothers picked up on her secret. So she started trying harder to get caught.

Finally, Dean had smelled it after she had snuck a smoke in his car—and he had immediately accused Sam of smoking and launched into a tirade about drugs, alcohol, and how Sam was a bad example and liar, headed for prison. It had been really harsh and somehow ironic coming from Dean, who had dropped out of school at seventeen and had experimented with recreational drugs and alcohol since age twelve. So, after Dean had finally finished the lecture, Sam had insisted he hadn't smoked anything, ever, and it must have been Alex. At that point, she'd felt too embarrassed to own up to it, and in cowardice hadn't done anything but shrug and shake her head no, lying. Dean hadn't even questioned it, and launched into another verbal beat down on Sam for lying. It was something Alex still regretted. When Sam had asked her about it later, she had written down:
**Maybe it was Dad?** Sam had looked at her and shaken his head, rolled his eyes. He knew, and she knew that he knew. But he never said anything about it again.

Alex blew another stream of smoke out, lazily watching it rise. Dean would kill her if he could see this. Well, he probably wanted to kill her *period* right now. She had done some crazy stuff throughout the years, but had never run away or disappeared before—she estimated she would be facing all new levels of Dean's fury when she returned. She felt bad, too, running off on him especially. He would worry his head off over her, like he always did. But she was tired of all of it. And the breathing room was keeping her sane right now.

After so many years of avoiding the cops, the FBI, not to mention monsters, hiding from her brothers had been easy. She knew the tricks—SIM card out of the phone, cash only instead of credit cards, switching the plates on the stolen motorcycle... she'd done it all by second nature and knew that even if her brothers had tried to find her, there was no way. She'd left no trace after Kansas City, where she'd gotten enough cash out of an ATM to last her for a few weeks.

Even though it had been easy to disappear, it was hard for her to be totally alone like she was, and after a few days, her initial anger had faded into sadness and depression. She'd been away from her brothers and out of contact for a little more than a week now, and it was, in one word, weird. She felt everything from guilty to lonely to empowered to still not even sure what she was doing or why she'd left—after all, Dean had just gotten back from the dead. And what had she done? Run off. That thought alone was enough to guilt-trip her into the next century. It was unbelievably strange to live this way—not hunting anything, not constantly in a fight with one or both of her brothers, not in mortal peril. Most people would have been positively thrilled to be away from those very situations, but Alex realized that she missed it.

Instead of the normal monster hunting and mortal danger, she'd been living off of peanut butter crackers, apples, beef jerky, and plenty of alcohol all while drifting around idly. She had taken to studying the book of Revelation the past couple days on the hunt for answers on angels or the apocalypse. And she'd been thinking—a lot. She'd thought things through until she was wide awake and exhausted mentally. As a result, she had some words for both of her brothers, and some apologies to make, too. She blinked heavily and put her cigarette out on the floor, halfway smoked. She felt sleepy, and a little drunk. She sat up a little awkwardly and listened to the sound of silence.

She hadn't spoken out loud in days, since there was no one around... so she hummed lowly, the tune of *Crazy Train*, just to make sure her voice was still there. She thought about how much she dreaded going back. Not the part about being back in the life she was used to, but the part where she'd have to face the wrath of Dean and the passive aggressive guilt-tripping of Sam. But, the longer she waited, the worse both would be.

Alex wandered outside aimlessly to the worn out porch, bible and whiskey in tow. The stars would be out soon.

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Castiel watched in silence as Alex Winchester sat on the porch of the abandoned cabin she had been living in the past few days. He remained invisible to her and stood a few steps away. She was leaned against the splintered stair railing and staring up at the stars in the dark night sky. Open in her lap and currently forgotten was the bible, turned to the book of Revelation. He had seen her studying it for the past couple days, trying to decode some of the prophecies, he estimated. Her tenacity was admirable, if not in vain. Not even Castiel understood all of the things contained in Revelation. Alex had currently given up on the reading, her attention was turned to the sky, her expression was open and thoughtful, maybe a little conflicted. Her wide eyes and simple, open face made her look haunted, somehow. Hers was one of the most familiar human faces to him, but
every time he was near her, he studied it closely, looking for things he hadn't noticed, taking in the intricacy of her expressions and features. What a marvel the human face was. Especially hers. He'd always thought so, even since the first day he'd beheld her.

In Alex's hand, a pen went back and forth, tap, tap, tapping against the open book that was balanced on her knees. She wore the same shoes he had always seen her wear—a scuffed pair of lace up boots in faded black. Her hair tumbled around her shoulders and down her back in untamed waves. A faded green cargo jacket was over a t-shirt that had a skull and crossbones with wings and a huge red proclamation of METALLICA on the front. Castiel wasn't sure what a metallica was supposed to be, but he assumed, judging from the shirt design, that it was a mythical beast humans had imagined by combining death and angelic fables. Interesting, but not accurate.

The shirt was not the greatest point of interest. Perhaps his favorite thing was the new silver chain she wore. Dangling from the end of it was a small, long, thin silver shape. It was a lock pick. Her outward response to his actions inspired a strange reaction in him—he wasn't sure, but it might have been amusement. He remembered the look of pure shock on her face when he had clicked the handcuffs down over her wrist—it wasn't that he had wanted to restrain her using the handcuffs. But the vengeful spirit of Nancy had been so bent on destruction and Alex's life had been on the line. He hadn't been able to stay by her side that day, as the war waged in heavenly planes that day had required all angels available. Lilith's war was troublingly successful so far. So, the handcuffs had been a creative solution to keep the youngest Winchester safe. He had a feeling she was still angry about it, though he didn't understand why. Didn't she understand that he had saved her life?

Every few days Castiel came close to Alex's physical presence, remaining invisible. Here he could assess her fate. Fates were tricky and always changing, but it was possible for a guardian angel to see into the future of their charge for a few linear days and into the events that surrounded a specific human. He was more in tune with her fate, as he had been given the task of watching over her. The orders to protect Alex Winchester had been in place since she had been born, but Castiel had only been assigned recently.

Before Castiel, up until about a year ago in earth time, the angel Nandriel had watched over Alex. But Nandriel had fallen away and been punished by Heaven for allowing herself to be corrupted by the world. Angels did not require human vessels, but Nandriel had petitioned Heaven to allow it, saying that in order to best protect her human charge, she needed a physical manifestation. But when Alex was about to turn twenty-four, it was discovered that Nandriel had increasingly neglected her duties in favor of pursuing her own gains and free will. Her punishment had been most severe, and she was locked in the celestial prison for the rest of eternity.

Castiel had watched Alex from transcendental heights at first and now from his vessel, all in all for nearly a year now. He had seen her grief when Dean died. He had seen and felt her pain when Sam left. Even though he had only spoken to her a few times, he knew her more than she could ever guess. He watched her now, wondered what she was reflecting on internally. She seemed to be searching for something out in the stars, her eyes darting back and forth across the starry expanse. Castiel turned and looked, too, but he saw nothing. Just many, many stars. Castiel looked harder, trying to fathom why she stared endlessly into the sky. Whenever he watched humans he felt a keen sense of disconnection. He didn't intuitively understand them like they understood each other. But sometimes, he thought he'd like to.

He looked at Alex again, who remained blissfully unaware of his presence. It was much easier this way. She and her brother Dean both became very riled and angry when he appeared to them, for reasons Castiel did not understand. All he knew was if he were to make himself visible to her, she would immediately become guarded and mistrustful, and even a little afraid. He didn't like to inspire that sensation in her, and he didn't understand why she would feel that way. It was much
simpler to remain unseen.

Castiel could hear his brethren beckoning to him, the host of Heaven proclaiming tidings, calling angels to order. Many things were happening. He turned his attention to the voices, listened longer, hearing a message meant for him specifically. He was to meet with Uriel, and immediately. He frowned slightly. If Uriel were involved, that could only mean something drastic. Castiel was troubled at his very strong reaction of reluctance at this summoning. He didn't think it was appropriate for him to feel aversion to a call from above, or hesitancy to seeing one of his brothers. Being an angel whose standard was obedience, he pushed the thoughts aside and took himself from where Alex was and to Uriel.

Alex Winchester remained where she was, never even knowing she hadn't actually been alone.

"And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place."

To her, it sounded spookily like Castiel's appearance to her and Dean, and that made her uneasy. She wasn't sure whether she should be happy that she finally found something that made sense, or terrified. The rest of Revelation was filled with violence, destruction, and wrath as seals were broken—was that really what the future held? She didn't want to believe it. She blinked, sleepy from all the reading, and leaned against the railing tiredly, again glancing at the stars. She remembered what Sam had said to her one time when they were young and spending a night alone in a motel room, wondering where Dean and Dad were. Her twin had put his arm around her and guided her to the window. "Mouse," he said, using his favorite nickname for her, "if you're ever scared and wondering where Dad or Dean is, just look up at the stars. We all see the same sky. And the stars are looking down on all of us, no matter where we are. So, we're together still, in a way, you know? Look. I bet they're looking, too." Oh Sam. Alex felt a ripple of sadness. She'd give anything to go back to the way they used to be. She shivered again, blinking her heavy eyes with less and less luck. So... tired...

Alex was suddenly aware that she was standing up, out in front of the cabin, in almost blindingly bright moonlight, and Castiel stood in front of her. "Alex." He said her name gruffly.

A little disconcerted, Alex looked around, trying to figure out how she had been sitting on a dim staircase one minute, then standing out in front of the cabin in almost blinding moonlight the next. Then, she noticed that the trees didn't move even though she felt breeze, and there were no sounds. Even though it looked real, it was lacking something. Even Castiel looked slightly wrong. His face was lit too well, like day, but it was night. He looked more handsome than she remembered, and it irked her.

"W-what are you doing here?" She asked, sounding dazed, backing up slightly. She then remembered Dean telling her about his Castiel dream and she frowned deeply. "Is this... a dream?"

"Yes, but this conversation is real," he said, coming closer.

"Okay..." Alex said, eyeing him suspiciously. She cracked a sloppy grin, trying to be disarming. "I'm not sure if I'm comfortable with you being... inside my head, Cas," she said, trying out his nickname for herself.

" Appearing to you in dreams is safer. Less eyes and ears," Castiel said, leaving Alex perplexed. He was now incredibly close and Alex almost had to lean back. He apparently didn't understand personal space, and she was surprised to find that she was a little intimidated—he was bigger than she remembered. He was oblivious to her discomfort, looking down at her unyieldingly.
"Something is about to happen to your brothers in Salt Lake City," he said in grave seriousness. "You need to get there, and quickly."

Her heart flip-flopped unpleasantly. "Something—what something? Are they all right? And can you back up a little? You're too close."

"Too close to what?" He asked, confused, those stern eyebrows gathering themselves closer together in a deep frown.

"To me," Alex told him, and his frown deepened even more. He seemed to understand she wanted him to step back, because he did, but he didn't look so sure of why the proximity had bothered her.

"My apologies," he said stiltedly. "Leave immediately and travel fast—Uriel must not know of this conversation we just had."

"Who's Uriel?" Alex asked, getting more confounded by the second. But Castiel was already gone.

She woke up then, leaned awkwardly against the rough wooden railing of the porch stairs, her body stiff and her throat sore. The light was dim, and there was thick morning fog. The dampness of dawn's chill seemed to have permeated all of her, and she shivered. Dammit. She'd fallen asleep on the porch. Classy. She stood up and groaned. Her head was pounding—another hangover, yay—but she had no time to think about it. Castiel's appearance had been so vivid, and had awakened a sense of urgency in her. She was racing down the road not even three minutes later.

Three Hours Later

Alex swung into a gas station, her head officially killing her. Her throat had gone from sore to total misery, and she was having trouble breathing out of her nose. She guessed a cold was what she got for falling asleep outside, but it didn't lessen the fact that it sucked. She glanced around as she swung off the motorcycle, always wary of police. She wasn't a criminal, not really. Yes, she stole things, committed identity theft and fraud… but the things she did do for society seemed to make up the balance between right and wrong. At least, that's what she told herself.

She grabbed some Tylenol from the shelf inside the convenience store and stood in line to pay for it, shuffling some cash out of her pocket. The line was a few people long, and the gas station employee didn't seem in a rush. The wall behind the employee was mirrored, and Alex caught a glimpse of herself in it, as well as the girl standing in line in front of her. The girl was a blonde in a pretty floral printed dress, with immaculate makeup and bright eyes. She reminded Alex of a cover of one of the glossy women's magazines that always lined gas station checkouts.

Alex, in contrast, had windblown, raggedy hair that had been thoughtlessly put in a ponytail... a rumpled outfit that hadn't been washed in two days, and a plain, tired looking face with eyes that looked hollow to her. She looked away from the mirror, downcast and feeling self-conscious as she rubbed the back of her neck and glanced around, wondering if anyone was looking at her and noticing how crappy she looked.

She guessed it was just another reminder that where she was headed was the right place. Here in the real world, she was a sad excuse for a person. She knew how to kill a ghost, but had never decorated a real Christmas tree. She had faced shape shifters and vampires, but had never lived in one place for more than a couple weeks. She knew how to send a demon back to hell, but had only one kiss to her name—and that was with a ten year old boy who had been dared to do it by friends.

She had woken up every day of her life not knowing where she would be twenty-four hours from
then. She'd never owned a purse and hadn't graduated high school and wasn't entirely sure how to work an oven. She could pick just about any lock, hot wire a car, count cards, throw a knife with fatal accuracy—but she had no real life skills to speak of, no lasting relationships besides Dean and Sam and Bobby. And Dad. But he was gone, like most other people Alex had ever loved.

"Hey, you gonna pay for that?"

Alex started, looking up and realizing the line in front of her was gone and the gas station employee was looking at her like impatiently.

"Uh, yeah. Keep the change." She slammed a five dollar bill onto the counter, avoiding looking into the mirror again.

Five Hours Later
Salt Lake City

Feeling just as sick as before, Alex set to work tracking down her brothers. Thanks to the public library's free internet services, she logged onto the cell phone provider website that Dean used and then activated the GPS feature to see where Dean's phone had been in the past 24 hours. From there, she used Google maps, which showed her one of the locations had been the Moonlight Motel. Bingo.

She got to the motel and saw no Impala in the lot—they must be out right now. Popping the SIM card back into her phone, she called the front desk of the motel and complained that she was staying in room 200 and there was a horrible leak in the bathroom. She watched as the guy at the front desk hurried upstairs, and using the quick window of time, she quickly accessed the main computer, reading through the guest registry, looking for any classic rock star or obscure fandom names—ah ha… Bret Michaels was staying in room 126. She smiled, shaking her head at how predictable her brother was.

She made for the room, taking a credit card out of her wallet and jimmying the door open, while glancing around, trying to do it fast without being noticed. Hopefully her brothers would be back soon from wherever they were. Sure, she could have called them, but she didn't like being cussed out over the phone. In person was much better. She shut the door behind her and looked up only to promptly gasp and freeze. The room was not empty like she had thought it was.

"Hello, Alex," said Castiel. He stood up from where he had been sitting on the bed.

She didn't even have to act surprised—she was. She glanced at the other man, who stood casually off at the other end of the room, looking at her in a way she didn't like. He was an imposing bald man with dark skin and a certain hawkish look. "Ah, the littlest Winchester," said the man. He sounded decidedly unfriendly. Maybe that was the Uriel guy Castiel had mentioned.

"And... who are you?" she asked cautiously. She remained by the door.

"This is Uriel," Castiel said, confirming Alex's suspicions, and the look on his face intrigued her. Was he trying to give her a meaningful stare? Silently tell her, again, not to give away what he'd told her in the dream to Uriel? She thought so, and she was a little impressed.

"Okay... and what are you two doing here in my brothers' room, exactly?"
"Waiting for them," Castiel said, earning a baleful, if slightly amused, from Alex.

_Thank you, Captain Obvious._ She had guessed as much, but she was decidedly uneasy about the entire thing, and crossed her arms, coming to stand by one of the beds. "For what? What do you guys want with them?"

"It's none of your concern," Uriel replied in dismissal, coming closer and staring her down, his eyes unfriendly, almost hostile.

"Oh, I think it is," Alex said, matching his icy, confident tone. She looked at Castiel, whose face told her nothing. An awkward silence hung and Alex swore all that was needed was a cricket chirping. She pulled a wan face. "Okay… how about I come back later?" She arched a brow and made to leave, chuckling darkly. "I'll leave you two your... privacy." Neither of the angels seemed to get her entendre.

"You're not going anywhere," Uriel said, his deep voice foreboding. He had come closer still, probably attempting to make her back up or cower.

And even though Alex was kind of freaked, she stood her ground and didn't let it show. "Oh really," she replied evenly, staring him dead in the eyes, refusing to be intimidated. "And you're gonna stop me?"

He came closer still, his eyes glacial. "Sit down," Uriel commanded.

Alex yelped, her legs going out from under her as she plopped down onto the bed, eyes wide. "Hey!"

Castiel stepped forward, his brows knitted together as his voice raised. "Uriel, you shouldn't force her to—"

"I will do what is necessary to keep this sad sack of cells in check," Uriel said, then pointed at Alex. "Learn some respect, child."

She glared back at him, unable to move her legs. "You first, jackass," she muttered. What the hell was this guy's problem? "And Dean said you were a dick," she said bitterly to Castiel while looking at Uriel.

_Release her, Uriel,"_ Castiel said lowly, and Uriel did, but reluctantly. So, Castiel seemed to be in charge, at least right now. That was a plus. Maybe. Uriel went and stood by the window, hands clasped behind his back, proceeding to ignore Alex, who stood up cautiously. Castiel was looking at her, decidedly uncomfortable and apologetic. "Uriel is very particular. He can come across as rude."

"Wow, you don't say." Alex retorted. That was a very mild way of putting it.

Castiel's head tilted to the side slightly. He looked like he was trying to figure something out. "Why does your voice sound strange?"

"I have a cold," she explained. He didn't seem to immediately know what she meant by that and Alex tilted her head to the side, too. Did he really not know what that was? "You know... like, a virus? I'm sick?" Oddly enough, she was a little amused suddenly by his squinty expression. "It happens when you fall asleep outside and then ride a motorcycle across the country in cold, wet weather."

"I see. I'll heal you," Castiel said, and moved forward, hand outstretching toward her.
"No. No more unnecessary healings, Castiel," Uriel said forcefully, without turning around.

Castiel halted, as if caught. Alex looked at Uriel, disliking his implications. "I was drowning in my own lungs last time—it wasn't unnecessary."

"I wasn't speaking of that time," Uriel said brusquely, turning and fixing Castiel with a sharp look, and Castiel looked away, as if ashamed.

Who did Uriel mean? Maybe Cas was an angel who went around healing humans all the time? Alex looked back at Castiel, whose eyes were downcast. "I'm fine, dude," Alex told him, thinking it was kind of nice that he wanted to make her feel better. "Don't worry about it. I've had colds a bunch of times." He didn't look too comforted, and Alex looked at Uriel again, whose back faced her. Her tone took on a sharper edge. "Why would healing someone, if they needed it, be bad? I thought—"

"No one is interested to hear your puny thoughts, mud monkey," Uriel said, his voice taking over the room. Alex made a face at his comments. "Orders for healings should be received by revelation, not simply decided by the soldiers. Compassion is weakness. Making decisions is not our place. God's will must always be observed. We are not to do as we please."

It was as if he were lecturing Castiel, not answering Alex. Castiel looked chastised, his eyes downcast and jaw gritted tightly. Damn. Alex actually felt a bad for the guy. If Castiel had been the opposite of what she expected angels to be like, Uriel was even worse. Alex felt like her dreams of angels had officially been trampled with Uriel's comments and attitude.

Uriel had returned to staring out the window in silence, and Alex, feeling frustrated and sour, sat down on the bed, resigning herself to wait for her brothers. Her eyes darted to Castiel, who stood by the door. He was still looking at Uriel, almost like there were a bad taste in his mouth. After a few moments, Castiel surprised Alex by coming and sitting next to her rigidly.

She realized she could hear him breathing softly, evenly. Somehow, that surprised her, because breathing was so ordinary and human. She snuck a glance at his profile. He turned his head slightly, meeting her questioning gaze, and then his eyes dropped to stare blatantly at her chest. Caught off guard, Alex's eyebrows shot up. "What are you—" she fumbled.

He looked at her in the eyes again, looking troubled. "I've been meaning to ask you something. What is a metallica?"

Alex looked down at her shirt, confused—then she realized she was still wearing one of Dean's old Metallica shirts from when he was younger and three sizes smaller. Alex then looked back at Castiel, an incredulous expression on her face. He was awaiting her answer, looking incredibly serious. She laughed out loud, struck by the hilarity of the situation and the question. At her bright peal of sudden laughter, Cas's expression softened into something like surprise. "Uh... Metallica is a band," she managed after a minute. He blinked, frowned again, not understanding the word. Alex tried again. "A music group?"

He nodded, getting even more serious. "I see." But he was clearly still perplexed.

The momentary lightness faded as Alex refocused herself. She had things to ask this angel, her supposed protector. She cleared her throat, attempting to find her serious face again. "Okay, listen, I need to get this out of the way: if you ever handcuff me again, I'm gonna kill you."

He turned his head to look at her. "It is nearly impossible to kill an angel."

"Well, dammit, I'll find a way," she said grumpily. He seemed almost amused by that, his eyes
softening, his dry lips curving up almost imperceptibly... and then it was over just as soon as it had begun, his expression dropping as if he had thought better of his show of emotion. He looked away again, stern once more. Alex, perplexed but not discouraged, moved on to her next question. "You two are here about the seals, aren't you?"

Castiel sighed tiredly. "Yes. Another is about to be broken if we don't act quickly."

"And me and my brothers can stop it?" She asked, her best guess.

There was a long pause. "I don't know."

Alex was getting frustrated. Castiel didn't like to give much information out. She tried again, with one of the most pressing questions she had. "So look, how long exactly have you been, uh, watching over me?"

He didn't look at her, still stared straight ahead. "About a year. Before that, Nandriel was your protector."

"Nandriel?"

"She watched over you since birth."

Alex's eyebrows shot up. "Since birth? No way." Forget the fact that she supposedly had a guardian angel right now—she'd always had one?

At the slang 'no way' Cas seemed unsure of how to respond. "Uh—yes, way, since birth."

Alex pressed an amused smile away at his attempt to use slang then took a couple seconds to try and process that, then looked at Cas intently. "Okay. Well, why the sudden shift in management last year?"

"Nandriel failed. She wanted to become a human and was punished by Heaven."

Alex was stunned. "Geez. You guys don't play around, huh?" She thought offhandedly of the chilling imagery in Revelation, of judgement and war. She shook her head, frowning. This disturbed her to the deepest parts. "I don't understand... why would God choose to protect me?" She paused, not sure if she believed it. "I'm no one. I'm just a random girl."

Cas's eyes squinted up just slightly as he stared into middle distance in front of himself. "The reason is unknown."

"That is extremely..." she searched for the right word, "creepy."

Castiel looked at her intensely, and underneath his gaze, she felt small. "Something about you is special to my Father. You are meant to complete some task, or have some impact simply by being alive. Your life is worth something." Alex scoffed at that, almost offended by the statement—he sounded like a damn self-help book. Her life was worth something? Yeah great, thanks Ghandi. What, she was supposed to do something that would alter fate? What a crock of shit. They must have had the wrong girl. Castiel's almost seemed taken aback at her reaction. "Why don't you believe me?" he asked.

Alex looked at him sidelong. His question left her feeling disconcerted and laid bare. She avoided it altogether. "That's a really personal thing to ask."

He took a moment to analyze her words, then nodded once and looked away. "I apologize."
Uriel snorted and muttered something about an angel apologizing to a fool ape. Alex clenched her jaw, forcing herself to stay seated. "Okay—what's his problem? Why does he hate humans?"

A muscle jerked in Castiel's cheek and he looked down, brows moving together slightly. "He doesn't hate humans. He's sworn to protect and serve them."

Alex looked at Uriel from underneath her lashes. "Could've fooled me," she muttered.
Alex and Castiel remained sitting on the bed in silence for all of three minutes, when Alex heard the familiar sound of the Impala, vaguely, outside. She suddenly felt a little sick, dreading what kind of state Dean would be in when he saw that she had crawled back. Beside her, Castiel looked at her appraisingly as she stood and faced the door, with her arms straight at her sides. She didn't have any more time to think about how she would react as the sound of the key sliding into the lock sounded. *Geez, you'd think a bloodthirsty werewolf was coming in... it's just your freaking brothers.* She swallowed as the door opened to reveal the familiar hulking form of Sam, whose face registered shock as he saw her. "Alex! Oh my god!" He came forward as if to embrace her, then noticed the other two men in the room and he reached for his gun at the hip, assuming the worst. His voice turned from relieved to demanding, he moved toward his sister protectively. "Who are these guys?"

Castiel had risen and was now coming toward Sam. "No, it's okay, it's okay," Alex said and shook her head, and motioned for Sam to leave the gun out of it. Behind Sam, the door darkened as Dean came in. His expression went from surprised to pissed in one second fast. Alex decided ignoring Dean would be best for now, and didn't look at him, instead motioned toward the angel who Sam was staring at questioningly. "Sam, this is Castiel—the angel." Sam's mouth dropped open slightly, and he suddenly seemed very flustered.

"Hello Sam," Castiel greeted.

"Oh my god!" Sam exclaimed, then his eyes went wide in embarrassment. "Er—uh—I didn't mean to—sorry. It's an honor, really, I—I've heard a lot about you." Sam held his hand out for a handshake, completely starstruck.

Castiel stared unmovingly at the outstretched hand in what Alex could only guess was confusion, and then he looked at Alex, as if for explanation. She stared back at him, bemused, before she spoke up. "Shake it. Shake his hand." She was trying really hard not to laugh at him at this point... it was sort of cute. "It's a greeting," she explained. Had he really never seen a handshake? *Surely* he had.

As if to illustrate the point, Sam shook his hand up and down in the air. Castiel seemed to understand, and put his hand into Sam's. "It is an honor to meet you, Sam Winchester," Castiel said. "The boy with the demon blood." Sam's face fell slightly and Alex looked at Cas sideways—*awkward.* "Glad to see you've ceased your extracurricular activities," Cas told him, and Sam gave Alex a glancing weird look, she shrugged slightly.

"Let's keep it that way," Uriel commented passively, still facing out of the window with his back turned to them.

Dean, who still hung back a little, an unhappy expression on his face, looked at Uriel, then at Castiel and Alex for an explanation. "And he is...?"

"Heaven's biggest douchebag," Alex answered before Castiel could.

Dean met her gaze, scowling. "Yeah okay, and by the way, wanna tell me where you've been this
past week?"

She shook her head in dismissal, nodding her head slightly toward Castiel and Uriel. Not with them here. "I'll tell you later."

"Yeah you will," he shot back peevishly.

Castiel was approaching Dean, oblivious to the siblings' conversation, seeming focused on something else. "The raising of Samhain, have you stopped it?"

_Samhain. Why did that sound familiar?_ Dean looked from his sister to the angel testily. "Why?"

"Dean, have you located the witch?" Castiel asked, his patience clearly short.

"Yes, we've located the witch," Dean said. Alex particularly disliked witches and she wasn't thrilled to hear that's what her brothers were after right now.

"And is the witch dead?"

"No, but—" Sam started.

"We know who it is," Dean interrupted.

Castiel nodded slightly, and walked over to the bedside table, where a small hex bag sat. _Crap!_ Alex hadn't even noticed that. "Apparently the witch knows who you are, too." He picked it up and held it high. "This was inside the wall of your room. If we hadn't found it, surely one or even all of you would be dead." Alex and her brothers stared at the hex bag with distaste—being on a witch's bad side was one of the worst things, ever, period. "Do you know where the witch is now?" Castiel asked.

Sam and Dean exchanged a look, which Alex recognized with a twisting stomach. They weren't quite there yet. Dean confirmed her suspicions with his next comment. "We're, uh, working on it."

Castiel's jaw tightened. "That's unfortunate."

"What's it to you, anyway?" Dean asked.

"The raising of Samhain is one of the sixty-six seals."

"So this is about your buddy Lucifer."

"Lucifer is no friend of ours," Uriel again commented from his place near the window.

Dean looked his direction irritably. "It's just an expression."

"Lucifer cannot rise, the breaking of the seal must be prevented at all costs," Castiel said, which they all knew.

"Why don't you kill the witch then? You're super-powered angels, right?" Alex asked, pointing out what everyone else was thinking. Something here just didn't feel right.

"We cannot kill this witch," Castiel said with no further explanation.

"Okay, great," Dean said with no enthusiasm, "then why don't you tell us where the witch is, we'll gank her and everybody goes home."
"We're not omniscient," Castiel replied. "This witch is very powerful, she's cloaked even to our methods."

Alex felt a prick of interest there—there was a way to hide from angels? She was going to find out about that. Sam, ever the peacekeeper, spoke up. "Okay, well we already know who she is, so if we work together—"

Uriel cut him off. "Enough of this."

At this point, Dean lost patience and wheeled, staring Uriel down hostiley. "Okay, who are you and why should I care?"

Uriel simply turned and looked at Dean in silence, leaving Castiel to explain.

"This is Uriel, he's what you might call a… specialist."

Uriel finally approached them, his hands behind his back, the hints of a smug smile on his face.

"What kind of specialist?" Dean asked suspiciously. There was a long pause, and Dean's voice softened in suspicion. "What are you gonna do?"

Castiel's mouth was in a somber, thin line. "All three of you, you need to leave this town immediately."

Alex looked at him in surprise. "Why would we leave? Don't we need to stop this Samhain guy?"

After all, the angel had just told her, early that morning, to come to this town and quickly. She glanced at Uriel, then Castiel, remembering his mysterious warning not to tell Uriel about that.

Cas met her gaze dead on, and narrowed his eyes just slightly. "You have to leave because we're about to destroy this town," he said.

"What?" Sam exclaimed.

"You're gonna smite the whole friggin' town?" Dean asked, his disbelief palatable.

"Yes," was Castiel's emotionless answer.

Alex stared at the angel, completely disillusioned, any short-lived fondness she'd had for him suddenly evaporating into thin air. "You failed to mention that little detail, Castiel!" She exploded accusingly, to which he looked at her without any trace of uncertainty or remorse. Only grim certainty.

"We're simply out of time. This witch has to die. The seal must be saved."

"There are a thousand people here!" Sam protested.

"One thousand two hundred fourteen," Uriel corrected.

"And you're willing to kill them all?" Sam asked, his voice awash in disbelief.

"This isn't the first time I've… purified a city." Uriel almost smiled at his own comment. He seemed proud.

"Look, I understand this is regrettable," Castiel said, to all three of the Winchesters' dismay.

"Regrettable?" Dean repeated, totally disgusted.
"It's detestable!" Alex almost shouted. "What kind of game are you angels playing? You're out of your damn minds!"

"We have to hold the line; too many seals have broken already," Castiel said, and even he sounded like he was getting riled.

"But come on, these are people! Aren't you supposed to protect people? All people? Families? Kids?" Alex asked, growing more and more desperate to get even just a drop of empathy from either of the angels.

"You screw the pooch on some seals and this town—these people—have to pay the price?" Dean added angrily.

Castiel met Dean's gaze steadily. "It's the lives of one thousand against the lives of six billion, there's a bigger picture here." Castiel stepped closer, almost getting in Dean's face. "Lucifer cannot rise—he does and Hell rises with him. Is that something that you're willing to risk?"

"There has to be another way," Alex insisted.

Sam was right behind her. "We'll stop this witch before she summons anyone," he said. "Your seal won't be broken and no one has to die. We just have to find her. Just give us that chance, please!"

"We're wasting time with these mud monkeys," Uriel muttered to Castiel, as if the Winchester three weren't in the room.

Alex glared at Cas and jabbed an angry pointing finger Uriel's direction. "Cas, I have about had it with that dude."

"I'm sorry," Castiel said without feeling, turning away from the Winchesters, "but we have our orders."

"No, you can't do this, you're angels!" Sam protested, to which Uriel chuckled airily. Sam tried again. "I mean aren't you supposed to—you're supposed to show mercy!"

"Says who?" Uriel asked. He seemed amused. Sam looked like someone had killed his dog.

"We have no choice," Castiel repeated, to which Dean scoffed.

"Of course you have a choice, I mean, come on!" Dean glared at both of the angels in turn. "You've never questioned a crap order, huh? What are you both just a couple of hammers?"

Castiel sounded on edge when he replied. "Look, even if you can't understand it, have faith, the plan is just."

"Are you kidding me right now?" Alex asked. She was shaking at this point. Castiel looked back at her sharply as she continued. "Does it sound just? Killing a bunch of innocent clueless people because of the... the sin of one? How is that okay to you in any way?"

Castiel looked grudging. "It may not make sense to you, but it is what must happen. Because it comes from heaven, that makes it just."

"Oh, it must be nice, to be so sure of yourselves," Dean said sarcastically.

Castiel looked at Dean seriously. "Tell me something Dean, when your father gave you an order, didn't you obey?"
Dean's expression chilled. "Don't go there with me," he said lowly, then pressed his lips into a thin line. "Know what? You two halos might want to leave now. Plans have changed."

"You think you can stop us?" Uriel asked.

Dean began slowly walking toward Uriel, his face a mask. "Maybe not, but if you're gonna smite this whole town, then you're gonna have to smite us with it, because we're not leaving. See, you went to the trouble of busting me out of hell, I figure I'm worth something to the man upstairs. So you wanna waste me, go ahead, see how he digs that. Oh, and remember my baby sis over here? God wants her protected. That means undead. So destroying a city with her in it, not the best idea!"

"I will drag you both out of here myself," Uriel said lowly.

Alex, who had walked up to stand just behind Dean's shoulder, looked at him, unfazed. "I'd like to see you try, asshole."

"With pleasure," he replied, and made to move toward her. Dean and Castiel stepped in at the same time, blocking Uriel's intended path.

"Do not touch the girl," Castiel warned. That got an immediately pleased smile from Alex, directed to Uriel's general direction.

Dean pushed past Castiel, getting in Uriel's face. "Over my dead body you'll lay one finger on her. And if you want to drag me out of here, you'll have to kill me first." He turned and looked at Castiel. "We can do this, we will find that witch and we will stop the summoning. Just call off your attack dog."

Uriel apparently had reached the end of his patience. "Castiel! I will not let these peop-

"Enough!" Castiel commanded loudly, holding up a hand for silence. The room fell into quiet, and Castiel stared at Dean, then glanced at Alex, and then Sam. Alex felt her heart hammering. If Castiel said no, what next? She knew she couldn't stand by and let a whole town go up in smoke, but these were freaking angels... could she and her brothers really stand up to them if they were forced to? She wouldn't find out. It didn't come to that. Castiel relented, and with utmost grimness he looked at Dean. "I suggest you move quickly," he said.

"Yeah great. And I suggest you two get lost," Dean said bluntly. The angels looked at each other, and with the sound of wind against fabric, they disappeared from the room.

Sam appeared shellshocked, and looked at Alex in disappointed confusion. She could see that angels had not made the best first impression on her twin. She was totally blindsided and horrified about the plans to destroy the town and the angels seeming apathy toward human life. Dean, who had remained silently staring at the spot where Castiel had been, breathed in a deep, steadying breath then turned on his sister, his expression quite unpleasant. "Okay, that's out of the way. So. Explain yourself. Now."

Here we go. "Relax, Dean. Listen—"

"No, you listen. You think you can just up and run away in the middle of the freaking apocalypse? That you can just leave without a word to me? I never figured you for a deserter, Alex!" He was pacing in front of her, talking with his hands angrily. "Did you even think about how worried we'd be? My money's on no! What the hell were you thinking?" He was in her face now. "You could have gotten hurt! You might not have been able to find us again! You didn't even think about what this would do to the family!"
"Dean—" Alex tried, looking away from him in discomfort. It was about to get bad here.

"Oh, I'm not done," Dean said, cutting her off. "Of all the stupid crap you've pulled—"

Alex's voice rose as she cut her brother off. "Dean! Did you ever stop to think that maybe this is why I left?" She was trying hard to stay calm, to keep this from turning into another fight, but struggling. "You act like you run this family and the people in it!" He pursed his mouth, disliking her implications. Alex wet her lips, trying to word herself carefully, to speak more evenly. All of the speeches she had rehearsed in her mind were gone, and she found herself stumbling over words. "I just needed some—some room to breathe. Some quiet to work through my thoughts."

"What thoughts?" Dean scoffed. "We have one little fight over Sam's demon crap and you abandon ship?"

"No!" Alex protested, beginning to feel like she was losing. "It's not even that, it's… I just, I didn't know if I could stay and do this anymore. Not with our family in the worst shape I can ever remember it being in, you know? Every time I turn around, one of us is fighting the other about something."

"And?" Dean demanded, not impressed.

"And I can't take it!" Alex shot back.

"Tough crap, Sally Sue. This is our life and it's not all roses and throw pillows."

Alex crossed her arms sullenly. "Okay, now you're just being a dick because you're mad at me."

"You're friggin' right I'm mad!" Dean barked.

At that point Sam, who had quietly watched, piped up. "Dean, come on, take it easy on her."

Dean whirled on his brother. "Shut up Sam! This conversation doesn't involve you."

"Like hell it doesn't," Sam countered, physically approaching his older brother. "Do you honestly think Alex will stay if you talk to her like this?"

"I'll talk to either of you whatever way I like!" Dean retorted.

"Yeah, and look where that's gotten you," Sam said, drawing some serious attitude from Dean in return.

"Look, it's not my problem that you two girls can't handle someone being real with you," Dean said.

Alex sighed in frustration. "This is the problem, Dean. This is supposed to be a family, not a dictatorship. You don't run us."

"Oh, so now it's my fault!" Dean said, crossing his arms defensively. "Where the hell is this coming from? Both of you are free to leave, anytime! I'm not forcing you to stay and I sure as hell don't want you here if you're not committed."

"Dean, come on, man…" Sam was saying, trying to appeal to Dean. But it fell on deaf ears.

"No, she wants to be treated like an adult, Sammy! And adults have tough crap for life." Dean turned and left, slamming the door behind him.
Alex sank down onto the bed, putting her face in her hands and growling in frustration. Her head was killing her again, and her throat felt on fire. After a minute, she felt the bed sink a little lower as Sam sat beside her. His arm came around her and his hand squeezed her shoulder gently. "Hey," he said simply.

She looked up at him, and his sympathetic expression and offer of peace bridged the gap somewhere deep inside for her. "Hey," she replied softly, and they shared a small, hesitant smile. A truce. Sam pulled her a little closer to himself, and she put her head against his shoulder, squeezed him back—and just like that, all the months of being too angry to even speak to each other seemed to evaporate. "He just drives me crazy, Sam!" Alex complained.

"I know, me too." Sam said. "He'll cool off in a couple minutes. He's just been worried sick about you. We, uh, both have."

Alex drew back, looking her twin in the eyes. She felt guilt clenching her stomach again, and she couldn't remember, momentarily, what had possessed her to leave. "I shouldn't have left. I feel really stupid."

"Well, it happened, so, you know, we can get past it," Sam said, his voice full of comforting empathy that she didn't feel she deserved at all. He then laughed softly. "I mean, I kind of understand wanting to leave." He became serious once again. "I've run away before, too, you know." He looked at her remorsefully, just as she squinted and wrinkled her nose—she sneezed loudly, and sniffled.

"Hey, you don't sound too good," Sam said as she grabbed a tissue off of the bedside table.

"It's just a cold. I'll be fine," she mumbled. She blew her nose with noisy gusto, receiving a slightly grossed out look from her twin. She tossed the tissue and stared at her knees. It was time to face what was eating at her. The witch and the mission could wait for a few minutes. "I, uh, owe you an apology, Sammy."

He shook his head. "No, I'm the one who needs to apologize." He paused. "Ever since you left, I've been thinking about it. A lot, and I need to go first." He leaned forward a little, elbows on his knees. "I should have done a lot of things differently. Not lied to you and Dean for starters." He glanced at her briefly, his expression pained. "And not left you alone after Dean died. I was so angry and messed up. And I had myself convinced that you didn't want me there."

Alex shook her head, her eyes softening with regretful, self-loathing tears. "Well, I am the one who said I wished you were dead instead of Dean." She shook her head ruefully. "I wasted so much time blaming you, but... but I pushed you away and I'm really sorry." She looked at him morosely, and he nodded, taking it in stride.

"It's okay," he said tensely. "We both said things we didn't mean that night and I always knew that." He wet his lips, barreling on with more. "You know, I never got the guts to tell you but, ever since you got your voice back... I, I dunno, it was a big change for me. I was always your big brother who you needed, you know? I wasn't used to you being, I dunno, like so independent." He laughed softly, maybe a little embarrassed. "All I knew was for the first time in my life, you yelled at me. You ripped me a new one and... I guess it just really shook me. Mostly because I agreed with what you said about me. I did abandon the family." He looked troubled as he said that.

"I wish I could take it all back. All of it," Alex said softly, remembering her angry, hurtful rant with shame. "It's been hard, you know?" She sniffled a little, and not from her cold. "There's no time to think. I just... say things, before I even know what I'm doing." Sam had again put a reassuring arm around her shoulder and she looked at him through watery eyes. "Telling you that I wished you
were dead instead of Dean was the most screwed up thing I could have said," she said, voice cracking. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it, not for a second."

Sam's face showed compassion and relief. "I know that. And you need to know—I did not leave the family when I was eighteen because of you, or Dean. I just wanted a normal life at that time. You know, college degree, white picket fence, wife and family... to get away from underneath Dad's thumb..." He trailed off and looked down. "But no matter what I've wanted, I always end up back here. Cuz it's where I belong, I guess." He sounded subdued, not entirely convinced. Alex looked at him sadly. She knew he was always going to long for those things, deep down, and probably never be able to have them.

"I'm just really glad you're here, Sam," she told him honestly. Dimly, she thought how kind of sappy and ridiculous this moment was, but also how glad she was that they'd talked about it.

He cracked a grin at her, his dimples cutting into his cheeks. "Me too," he said. Alex hugged her arms around him, finally feeling okay for the first time in a long time. Even if it were only for a couple seconds.

Dean burst back in just then, looking only a little calmer than when he had left. Seeing them sitting on the bed and embracing he gave them an annoyed look. "Ladies, this is so touching. My heart can't take it. But we have a witch to find and not much time to do it in." He waited expectantly, jerking his thumb toward where he'd come from.

"Yup," Sam said, standing up.

"Also, some jerkwad egged my friggin' car," Dean said, looking supremely aggravated. He looked at Alex and cleared his throat, his expression softening a little, but still remaining gruff. "Sorry about chewing your head off back there. You know how I get."

Alex stood, grabbing the hotel notepad and pen off the side table and coming to him. "Yeah, I do." Dean sighed heavily and held out his hand. "Truce?"

She shook it with her free hand and nodded. "Truce." And that was how Dean apologized.

"Glad you're back, Al," Dean told her, but in no uncertain terms fixed her with a warning look. "But if you leave like that again, I'll friggin' kill you."

"Yeah, yeah," she said, already heading out the door, scribbling on the notepad as she walked. This motorcycle was stolen and belongs to the man at the following address. She wrote down the address of the house where she had stolen the bike from—she'd committed it to memory before whizzing away—and tucked the note into a tight space near the speedometer. She'd call the hotel front desk again in a bit and alert them to the note. She patted the bike sadly. "Nice knowing you," she said before turning to look at Dean, who was laughing at her on the sidewalk.

"Such a do-gooder," he said, but even though he was poking fun at her, she could hear the hint of pride in his voice.

The three Winchesters got into the Impala (which was splattered in eggs, just like Dean had said), and Alex sank into the familiar back seat, breathed in the scent of old leather and familiarity. Up front, Dean was looking at Sam, who had fallen silent since exiting the hotel. "What's wrong, Sammy?"

"Nothing," he said, then sighed, relenting. "I just thought they'd be different."
"Angels?" Alex guessed.

"I just… I mean, I thought they'd be righteous."

"Well, they are righteous, I mean, that's kinda the problem," Dean said, turning on the windshield wipers. "Of course there's nothing more dangerous than some a-hole who thinks he's on a holy mission."

"But, I mean, this is God? And Heaven? This is what I've been praying to?"

"Sucks, doesn't it?" Alex asked, thinking back to all of her strange interactions with Castiel, and now Uriel.

"Yeah," Sam said.

"Look man, I know you're into the whole God thing, you know, Jesus on a tortilla and stuff like that," Dean said. "But just because there's a couple of bad apples doesn't mean the whole barrel's rotten. I mean, for all we know, God hates these jerks. Don't give up on this stuff is all I'm saying. Babe Ruth was a dick but baseball's still a beautiful game."

Sam still looked disappointed at Dean's analogy, but began going through the hex bag, picking out the contents. He pulled out a small, blackened shape that looked suspiciously like a bone. Dean chuckled as he cut off the windshield wipers. "Well, are you gonna figure out a way to find this witch, Sam, or are you just gonna sit there fingering your bone?"

"You think you're so funny," Alex snickered.

"You're laughing," he replied, looking pleased with himself. Alex rolled her eyes.

Sam missed the joke, intently staring at the bone. "You know how much heat it would take to char a bone like this guys?"

"A lot?" Alex asked glibly, getting an eye roll from Sam.

"No kidding, Sherlock," Sam replied. "But more than a regular fire or some kitchen oven."

"Okay Betty Crocker, what's that mean?" Dean asked.

"It means we make a stop," Sam said. "Back to the school."

Alex leaned forward in the seat as Dean started the car. "While we're on the way, can you guys please tell me what exactly the job is?"

"Not it," Dean said quickly.

Sam sighed. "Okay, so basically this witch is trying to raise Samhain, the demon who started the tradition of Halloween. Apparently, today is the day where the veil between the living and the dead is the thinnest."

"Oh. Awesome," Alex commented wryly.

"Yeah. If he rises, he can raise other things from Hell."

"But you guys know who the witch is?"

"Yup. It's this high schooler named Tracy. But we haven't been able to find her."
"Damn." Alex looked at the dashboard clock. It was getting close to six. "We don't have a whole lot of day left, guys."

"Which is why we gotta find her, and soon."

Castiel and Uriel were at the edge of a park, watching the humans who were playing, running, and enjoying the crisp fall weather. "I don't like this," Uriel was saying. He sat on a park bench, his expression terse.

"The decision's been made," Castiel replied from where he stood a few steps off.

Uriel laughed humorlessly. "By a mud monkey."

He received a sidelong glance from Castiel. "You shouldn't call them that."

Uriel chuckled. "Ah, it's what they are, savages, just plumbing on two legs."

Castiel looked at him sharply. "You're close to blasphemy."

Uriel just sighed at him, and Castiel tried to reason with his brother. "There's a reason we were sent to save him. He has potential, he may succeed here." Uriel said nothing, and Castiel sat down on the bench beside him. "And any rate, it's out of our hands."

"It doesn't have to be," Uriel said ambiguously.

Castiel looked at his brother sharply. "And what would you suggest?"

"That we drag Dean and Alex Winchester out of here and then we blow this insignificant pinprick off the map."

Castiel fixed his brother with a stern gaze. "You know our true orders. Are you prepared to disobey?"

Uriel smirked, looking out at the park. "Are you?" He looked back at Castiel, the smile almost mocking.

Castiel didn't understand. "What are you implying?"

"There is concern among our brethren that your judgement has become... impaired. I saw it myself. The way you spoke with those little flecks. Like they were your equals. As if you didn't have command or authority over them." Uriel sounded pious.

"Uriel, you know our duty to our father and his children," Castiel replied. "I'm only carrying out the tasks I've been given."

"No. We both know it has gone far past that. The way you treat them—especially the girl—" Uriel shook his head in judgement, trailing off. "Be careful, brother. Do not confuse humans for angels. And do not let this... fascination be your undoing."

Uriel stood and walked a few feet away, leaving Castiel to himself. And although Castiel did not move or change his expression, he felt a strange sensation somewhere in his stomach. Uneasiness.

After stopping by the high school and visiting the art department, Sam found a drawer where more human bones were stored. That, paired with the brother's realization that the hex bag had showed
up in their motel room after they had spoken with the art teacher, helped them make quick work of accessing the school's teacher files and getting the address for a Don Harding. He was the art teacher and apparently had led Sam and Dean on a wild goose chase, tricking them into believing that a student named Tracy was the witch.

It was dark when they got out of the school and drove to Don's house, which was quiet and empty from the outside. But in the basement, they found the art teacher in the middle of sacrificing a small, blonde girl—Tracy. Sam, thinking he was saving the day, shot the man on the spot. When they helped the girl out of the ropes that had tied her up, she revealed herself as the witch and with only a word, sent all three Winchesters crashing to the floor, paralyzed with pain. She set to work completing the spell as the siblings writhed on the floor, helpless. Her chanting grew louder and louder, and the room began to shake with dark power as Samhain's spirit fell upon the room. While Tracy wasn't looking, Sam smeared blood from Don's gun wound onto his face, then Dean's and Alex's, whispering "trust me!"

Then they laid still, pretending to be dead—possibly the stupidest and craziest thing they had ever done—as they listened to Samhain, who now inhabited Don's body, kill Tracy. He then left without even a second glance at the Winchesters, much to their relief. They were quick to get up and try to follow, but Samhain had already disappeared. Sam suggested he would go to the cemetery, where he could raise spirits most easily, and with that as their only lead, the Winchesters found the town graveyard and grabbed their weapons bag.

The Winchesters heard the screams of many voices coming from the crypt in the center of the headstones as soon as they arrived at the graveyard. The three of them raced down the stairs to see that a bunch of teenagers, all in costumes, were locked inside the mausoleum behind a metal gate. Behind them, gravestones were cracking and crumbling. Not good.

"Where's Samhain?" Dean asked, frantically looking around for the demon.

Sam looked down a side tunnel, and then pointed to Dean and Alex. "He must've gone that way. You guys help them!"

"Dude, you're not going off alone!" Dean said, but Sam was already taking off down the hall, the demon blade in hand.

"Just do it!" Sam shouted over his shoulder.

"Dammit," Alex cursed to herself, even as Dean yelled at the teens to stand back, and shot the lock in half. "Go on, come on, get out, move!"

Even as the screaming teens streamed out, a door of a grave in the mausoleum room crashed to the ground, shattering. A once-human, now-zombie crawled out of it, and stood awkwardly even as another grave door crashed to the ground. Another mangled zombie began to crawl out.

"Stake, please," Alex said in a high-pitched, stressed out voice, holding an urgent open hand out to Dean.

He was already rummaging in his rucksack, and tossed her one then pulled out another, his sights set on zombie number one. "Bring it on, stinky!" He charged forward and plunged the stake into the zombie's chest even as Alex dropped the zombie that had only partially crawled out of the grave. Another door of another grave crashed down, then another and another.

"Dean, there's like twenty graves in here!" Alex shouted, lunging at the newest zombie to arrive.
The knife sunk into the rotting flesh with a sickening squelch and she kicked the zombie back, off the blade, her face twisted. Gross. Alex turned, startled, to see a pale woman standing beside her. Alex attempted to attack her with the silver blade, but the woman flickered out and she disappeared, only to reappear behind her. Crap, a ghost too?! Both of the Winchesters went crashing against one of the stone walls.

"Ouch," Alex groaned.

"Zombie ghost orgy huh?" Dean said, and Alex grimaced and made a complaining noise as she pushed herself up to her feet.

She looked at her brother hopefully. "You thinking what I'm thinking?" she asked.

"Yup. We're torching this whole place."

A couple minutes later, Dean and Alex were running down the hall the way Sam had gone, leaving a blazing inferno behind in the mausoleum.

They rounded a corner and froze at what they saw. Sam was standing at the end of the hallway, Samhain facing him. Sam's hand was extended, his face was screwed up in concentration and pain. He was doing exactly what Dean had begged him not to. "Oh my god," Alex breathed, and she looked at Dean in horror. "What do we do Dean?"

Dean's expression was shocked. "I—I don't..." he managed, and then nothing else. Alex turned back, unable to move. Blood was running down from Sam's nose, and he was moaning in pain. They could see black smoke coming out of Samhain as the demon stumbled forward, trying to reach Sam. But the the man fell over, as Sam's exorcism succeeded. Sam shuddered, looking like he might collapse. Breathing heavily, he looked up at his brother and sister, shamefaced. Alex couldn't just stand there—she darted forward and went to his side, trying to help him stand, asking if he was all right, wiping the blood from his face, shaking from adrenaline and shock and even a little fear. Sam was crying, maybe from shame, maybe from pain. It was hard to tell. Either way, he had saved them. But at what cost?

Dean was approaching slowly, his expression sad, and even a little afraid.

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The Next Day

Sam and Alex were alone in the motel room, packing up. It had been kind of a quiet morning. Dean had been pensive and troubled, Sam apologetic and conflicted, Alex just ready for it all to be over. She could accept that Sam's abilities had saved them, and that they might not have succeeded without them at all, actually. Yeah, it was eating at her. She didn't know if she should be afraid of Sam. It wasn't exactly a human ability to be able to exorcise demons with the mind alone. She wanted to go back to a time before the abilities, before all of the confusion and gray areas. For now, she decided to try and treat Sam normally. He felt like a freak, and she didn't want him to feel like that. She knew it was a horrible way to feel. She'd been much too harsh on him before.

She stooped to pick something off the floor and looked across the bed at her twin. "Don't forget your dirty socks," she said, and mischievously threw them at his face. He caught them with fractions of an inch to spare and threw them back at her, chuckling. "Hey!" she laughed, then suddenly, her expression fell as she stared at the newcomer on the couch behind Sam.

"Tomorrow," said a deep voice.
Sam whirled around to see Uriel, who was continuing without missing a beat. "November the second, it's an anniversary for you," the angel continued.

"What are you doing here?" Sam demanded, and Alex's eyes darted around.

"Where's Castiel?" she asked mistrustfully.

Uriel stood. "It's the day Azazel killed your mother. The day your voice was taken away," he glanced at Alex briefly before looking back at Sam. "And twenty-two years later your girlfriend's life taken too, Sam. It must be difficult to bear, yet you so brazenly use the power he gave you, Sam. His profane blood pumping through your veins."

Sam's eyebrows raised faintly. "Excuse me?"

"You were told not to use your abilities," Uriel said flatly.

"And what was I supposed to do? That demon would have killed me, and my brother and sister, and everyone."

"You were told not to."

"But if Samhain had gotten loose in this town—"

"You've been warned, twice now," Uriel said, not breaking eye contact with Sam.

Alex came to stand beside her brother defensively. "Sam did what he had to. While you and Cas screwed around and did, hmm, oh yeah… nothing."

"You test my patience, Sam," Uriel said, and finally looked at Alex. "And so do you, little speck."

"Hey," Sam growled, his tone taking on a decisively aggressive tone. "Watch the way you speak to my sister." He shook his head, with a short humorless smile. "You know? My brother was right about you, you are dicks."

Uriel ignored the insult. "The only reason you're still alive, Sam Winchester, is because you've been useful." His presence was threatening, and his gaze deadly. "But the moment that ceases to be true, the second you become more trouble than you're worth, one word. One, and I will turn you to dust."

Alex stepped into Uriel's space, her expression and voice deadly. "You need to back up. Right now." Uriel stared back at her unyieldingly. "You don't come in here and threaten my brother after he saves a whole town from certain death."

Uriel smiled softly, dark amusement playing on his voice. "I do as I like, child. Don't think just because Castiel guards your life that makes you safe." Alex stared, a bit thrown. Uriel finally stepped back a bit. "As for your brother Dean, tell him that maybe he should climb off that high horse of his."

"You know, I've had just about enough of your self-righteous advice," Sam said angrily.

"You should be grateful that I even grace you with my presence," Uriel hissed. He paused and looked at Alex, then Sam again. "Ask Dean what he remembers from Hell." Then, he was gone just as suddenly as he had come. Left behind were two shaken up siblings.

Alex's jaw was clenched. "Angels, man. They think they can just pop in and out whenever!" She
was troubled. "What did he mean? About Dean?" She turned to her brother, who looked similarly perplexed and troubled.

"I asked Dean about it, remember? And he said he didn't remember anything from Hell." They looked at each other a long moment, uneasy. Because if Uriel was implying Dean remembered Hell... neither of them had picked up on it.

"I mean, he's seems... okay, right? Maybe a little easier to piss off than normal?" Alex asked slowly. "We would know. Wouldn't we? If something were wrong. We would be able to tell, right?"

Sam looked oddly conflicted. "Maybe not." Alex got quiet. Sam, however, was running a hand through his hair, huffing in agitation. "And what the hell did Uriel mean about you not being safe?" He folded his arms decisively, his jaw set angrily. "I don't like this."

Alex jogged across the street to the park where Dean sat on a bench alone, his back to her. She was fired up and ready to tell him about Uriel and ask him about Hell, but when she got to where he was, she could see that something was wrong from the look on her face. She sat beside him and looked at him intently, forgetting her original objective. "Hey. You okay?"

"Yeah," he said, looking down at the ground between his feet. "Cas just popped in for a quick chat."

Alex's frown deepened. So, he got a visit from an angel, too. "What did he want?"

Dean laughed a short, huffing laugh. "Would you believe he told me that his orders weren't to destroy the town? His orders were to go along with what I said."

Alex couldn't hide her surprise. "What? After that big 'but we have no other choice' speech?"

Dean spread his hands in a shrug. He wasn't angry. He seemed disturbed, which was worse. "But why?" Alex asked, confounded.

"He said it was a test."

"A test? Like, from God?"

Dean shrugged, preoccupied. "I guess."

"Okay... so did you pass?"

A muscle jerked in Dean's cheek. "Cas didn't know." Dean's shook his head, seemingly at a loss. "I mean, look at this. These people, this town. It could all be gone if I wasn't the stubborn asshole that I am." He breathed out heavily, watching a mother push her toddler, laughing, on a swing. "I could've sentenced these people to death without even knowing it. Why is this all on me? I really don't get it. And these so-called angels. Especially Cas." He paused. "I don't know what to make of the guy." The quiet way he said it, the anxious look on his face, the way he was absentely wringing his hands together... Alex was worried. She trusted Dean's judgement, but she felt the same about Castiel: she didn't know. And she was worried about what God wanted with Dean. And for that matter, with her.

She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, matching her brother's stance. "I was beginning to think he was an okay guy until he started talking about wiping out a town of people. But I mean, maybe he can't help it," she supposed with a sad shrug. "Angels don't have free will according to most
mythology."

"Maybe not," Dean replied darkly. "I'm not convinced yet."

Alex looked at her brother hard and long. "What makes you say that?"

Dean wet his lips. "Just a feeling."

She thought momentarily about telling him that Castiel was the one who told her to hustle back to Dean and Sam... but then decided against it, for now. She wasn't sure why Castiel had done it, and she wanted to know that first. Especially since it had been kept a secret from Uriel. "Can we trust this guy?" She asked quietly.

There was a long pause. "Not sure yet."

She nodded solemnly. "You know, especially after yesterday, I'm not even convinced that angels are the good guys."

"Yeah. I definitely get that," Dean said, and managed a thin smile. "Life was a lot simpler when it was just demons, huh?"

"Well, whether or not Cas is trustworthy or a good guy or what... he gave me back my brother who I thought was gone forever." She looked at Dean openly, remembering just how glad she was to have him back. "And for that... I can't hate the guy." Dean looked at her from the corner of his eye. Alex continued. "Uriel, however, can go screw himself."

At that, he finally chuckled. "I'm with you on that one."

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, until Alex decided to make a long overdue confession. "So, Dean, you remember that time Sammy smoked in the Impala?"

"Huh?" He asked. It had, after all, been years ago. "...Yeah, actually," he said, sounding distantly surprised. "I remember. Why?"

"Well, uh... cuz that wasn't Sam who smoked in there." Alex looked at him sheepishly with a please don't kill me expression. "It was me."

Dean looked at her incredulously, his eyebrows raising up high. "That was you?" A disbelieving smile came over his face and he shoved her shoulder playfully. "You little twerp." He thought a minute more then chuckled. "Whooa, I guess I owe Sam a big time apology, huh."

"Yeah, me too. Shouldn't have let him take the fall."

"Ah, he'd do anything for you, you know that. You're too cute to say no to." Alex wrinkled her nose at him and he pinched her cheek, making protest with a groan as she batted him away. He chuckled and then he slapped both of his hands down on his knees. "All right. Enough of all this Doctor Phil stuff. I want a corn dog."

Castiel watched, hidden from human sight, as Alex and Dean made their way back to the motel together. They had the same kind of confident, loping stride and they walked closely. They had clearly made amends, and he heard the rare sound of Alex laughing out loud as the two got further away. He liked that sound.

The little smile on his face faded as his thoughts turned. He was troubled. Telling Alex to come to
this city had been his own idea. After he had learned about the plan to present Dean and Sam with
the destruction of the city, and after being made aware that Uriel would be the one who
accompanied him, Castiel had felt an inexplicable urge to take matters into his own hands and
ensure the right outcome. He had known that all of the Winchesters would be against the idea of a
whole town being wiped out. They were a family who had fought to save strangers for their entire
lives, after all.

But Castiel, knowing Uriel's persuasions, had reasoned that Alex's presence would give Uriel less
room to act since she was under angelic protection. And it had worked. Dean had used Alex and
himself to derail Uriel, who had very much wanted to destroy the town. Castiel, who was against it
from the beginning, had feared Uriel would somehow succeed, somehow destroy this town of
humble, helpless humanity. Castiel watched people pass. Families, children, students. All unaware
of how close they had all brushed with death.

He now wondered if he had gone too far. Had he manipulated the situation? Had he involved
himself where he shouldn't have? How could he know if what he'd done was a violation of God's
will or not? Just a few moments ago, he had confided in Dean something he had told no one else—
ever. That he had doubts. That he didn't know wrong from right anymore. And he absolutely didn't.

The most unsettling part to Castiel was that no matter where he turned, he felt a disconnect. His
angel brothers and sisters were scattered across heaven. The humans that Castiel knew couldn't
even begin to understand him, and they certainly didn't trust him. Who could he go to for a glimpse
into truth? Where could he find the answers he so desperately needed? He feared that Uriel was
right, and that his relationships and with Dean and Alex—his growing fondness and concern for
them—had clouded his judgement. There were times when he watched over Alex, in particular,
where he became distracted, wondering what she was thinking and watching the things she did with
utter fascination. Losing track of time and space as he did so.

He stood there a long time, watching humanity pass by, deeply troubled.
Tilt-A-Whirled

"He is walking in dreams, not knowing reality's name."
- Wuthering Heights

Alex found herself standing in the middle of a place she didn't recognize at first. Once-colorful now-dingy rides and booths were scattered across a flat pavement lot on a foggy day. The Tilt-A-Whirl, merry-go-round, ferris wheel, and rows of cheesy, cheap prizes surrounded her and a wave of reminiscence overcame her. *I've been here before.* She looked around a minute, trying to remember where she'd been before she was here, but she couldn't recall. This place was silent. No people. No movements of any kind. No smell of the animals at the petting zoo or grease from the funnel cake stand. The fog was thick and cool, and the way that it obscured the near distance made the setting feel a little surreal. This was a dream, she realized. A good dream. She relaxed.

To her right was the bottle toss booth, and Alex wandered over, drawn to it. Rows of old Coke bottles were crowded onto shelves and giant stuffed animal prizes lined the two walls on either side. Alex smiled slightly at the oversized green bear—that had been the one she wanted. At the front of the booth, bowls of beat up rings waited to be thrown onto the bottle necks. She reached for one, smiling, then stopped, suddenly aware of a change. The smile fell. She felt the distinct sensation of a presence behind her. She turned to see an increasingly familiar sight—a man with wild hair, a somber expression, and a beige trench coat. Immediately, she was on guard. Why was *he* here?

"Hello Alex," he said evenly.

"Cas..." she replied, cautious and mistrustful, watching him closely. "What're you doing here?" She paused, thinking hard, putting two and two together. Castiel had just waltzed into an actual dream of hers, a personal memory—without being invited. That seemed a little bold. She crossed her arms, not thrilled with him invading her private headspace like this.

He was looking around in an oblivious fashion, ignoring her question, seeming especially perplexed by the assortment of carnival rides around. "Where is this?" he asked. His question and his deep gravelly voice made her clench her jaw.

For a minute she thought she wouldn't tell him. Then for whatever reason, she did. "It's a memory. From when I was little." She was curt in her response.

He was looking around at everything with that familiar, stern frown. "This is a place for amusement?"

"What are you doing here?" Alex repeated her question, which was now a demand. He turned his gaze back to her, and inclined his head just slightly, his eyes boring into hers intensely.

The startling crisp blue made her pinched expression falter. "I know you're wondering why I asked you to return to your brothers when I did."

He said nothing else and Alex found her voice and answered very slowly. "Yeah, I am..." She felt dubious. What was the catch?

Castiel breathed in deeply, as if hesitant, and his eyes flickered away from hers. "Truthfully, I did it for selfish reasons." He seemed almost contrite.
"Meaning what?" she asked, equal parts curious and unsettled. She still didn't understand why he was here or telling her this for.

He was still looking down, his expression grim. "I wanted to influence the outcome of the situation. I wanted to make sure that the city would not be destroyed." It almost seemed like he was confessing sins, but weren't those good things he had done? He looked Alex in the eye again. "Your presence created even more reason for Uriel to be unable to destroy it."

Alex's eyes were narrowed as she studied Cas mistrustfully. "Okay... Wasn't Dean being there enough to stop Uriel from being a dick?"

"I... wasn't sure. Uriel can be very persuasive."

Alex tilted her head to the side. "Aren't you Uriel's boss?"

"Technically, yes."

"Then what was the problem?" Alex looked at Castiel long and hard, trying to figure out his angle in telling her all this. She felt her eyebrows raise slightly as realization hit her. "You don't trust Uriel."

"I didn't say that," he said, a little sharply. And to her, his reaction was all the proof she needed.

"You didn't have to," Alex countered, cool as breeze.

He seemed convicted by what she'd said, frowning deeply and looking down. "As I said, Uriel can be persuasive," Castiel said. "And unpredictable. He has a problem with my methods."

Alex grew uncomfortable. "He's not the only one," she muttered, thinking back to Pamela's eyes being burned out, Dean's deep cuts and scrapes from the shattered glass Castiel had rained down on him, the handcuffing, the dream-jacking, the time travel, the town-smiting. Straight up, she didn't think Castiel was trustworthy, let alone Uriel—but like she'd said to Dean... Castiel had brought her brother back from the grave. So, she couldn't exactly hate him. But right now, she wasn't sure why she should trust him. Life had taught her that almost everyone was plotting to screw you over in the end, and she wasn't sure if Castiel were here to help or harm her. She tried to take a deep breath and get a straight answer from him. "Since when do you care what mud monkeys think about or know?"

Alex asked, now deliberately attempting to draw out Castiel's true character.

He looked affronted at her question. "Those are Uriel's words, not mine," he said with deadly seriousness. "I would never call a human that."

"Uh huh." Alex nodded patronizingly, eyes narrowed watchfully. "You'd just level a whole town full of them if two little humans didn't stand in your way?"

Castiel's face was bordering on frustrated. "I carry out the commands of God, whatever they are."

Alex looked at him oddly, unsure how he could say that or be so blindly trusting. He must know God pretty well to have so much faith. "Whatever they are? But what if they're wrong?"

Castiel looked as if she had suggested that the earth revolved around the moon. "That's not possible. There is no fault in God. He is the definition of justice." He paused darkly. "And apart from that, it's not my place to decide right from wrong."

Alex looked at him a long moment, then scoffed and looked away. "Yeah, okay."
"What's wrong?" Castiel asked.

She snorted at his question. "What *isn't* wrong?" She laughed derisively. "I mean, forget about the whole *God* thing for a second and I still can't find one thing that's going right." She turned around and grabbed a handful of the rings and began tossing them with angry flair at the Coke bottles.

"You don't know why you're protecting me—" *clunk* "—you don't know what seals are going to be broken—" *clunk* "—you don't know if Dean passed the test—" *clunk* "—you show up and turn my whole friggin' life upside down with your—" *clunk* "—apocalypse crap, your guardian angel crap —" *clunk* "—and to top it all off, you're clueless." She looked at him sternly, forgetting the stupid bottle toss rings and approaching Castiel in a confrontational manner. "You have no idea what's going on. I take one look at you and all I see is confusion and ignorance. You'd kill a whole town of people without missing a beat, without even *thinking*, if you thought God said to do it. Castiel. That's *detestable*.

Castiel's expression had gone cold. His jaw was set firmly, his voice was lower than before, and his gaze bore into hers unfaltering. "I hold the power of Heaven in my right hand, and *Hell itself* could not hold a soul in my grip," he growled, stepping closer and invading her space, effectively staring down at her. "My knowledge is vast and unending. I am a soldier of the Lord, a warrior. I am your protector and guardian. I'm the one who brought your brother back from the gates of death itself. You should *respect* me."

Alex met his gaze challengingly and didn't back down, matched his tone with some fire of her own. "*Please*. If you think you're going to tell me what to do, you have another thing coming." She took the last ring she had and flicked it against his chest just to be an ass. His jaw tightened at her retort. Alex, however, wasn't done. "And if you have such unending knowledge, why don't you tell me *why* you're protecting me, or what work God has for Dean, or gee, *I donno*, how to *stop the friggin' apocalypse!*" Her voice had raised to a shout, but Castiel remained unblinkingly rigid in front of her.

"Some things are not meant for you to know," was his even-toned reply.

"Says who?" Alex demanded.

Castiel set his mouth and his eyes went down momentarily, as if he were gathering his thoughts or attempting patience. "Alex—have faith. God is in control."

Alex folded her arms, almost laughing. "*Is he?*"

He couldn't, or wouldn't, look at her when he replied. "*Yes.*"

Alex had an incredulous grimace on her face. "*You* don't even believe that!" She accused.

His eyes came to her sharply, and he was once again defensive. "You don't know what I believe or don't believe."

Alex raised a challenging eyebrow. "So why can't you look me in the eye and say God is in control?" She unfolded her arms and raised them in a baffled, shrugging gesture. "You claim you're an all-powerful, wise angel but all I see is a confused guy with daddy issues in an ugly trench coat."

He looked down at himself, then back at her, unblinkingly. "I like this coat."

Taken aback, Alex felt a small, surprised smile on her face at the absurdity of him and his sudden comment. She didn't know how to respond. One moment, he was trying to convince her that he was a superhuman being worthy of honor and renown, the next he was affronted that she had
insulted his outfit. She expected him to disappear now, but he just stood there, his arms hanging at his sides. He was studying her back, perhaps waiting for her to say something. His face was at the moment free of his constant frown, and it made him look younger, attractive. She heard herself think that single, dangerous thought and mentally slapped herself. No. Just no.

"Uh, so, we're good here, right?" She said, her voice sounding a little stilted. "You can leave anytime." She turned away and went back to the bottle toss booth, hoping he would leave her in peace.

She leaned against the surface of the tall tabletop there and stared at the bottles lining the wall across from her. She heard soft footsteps behind her and she huffed slowly in exasperation. She looked up and sideways, where he stood beside her, staring straight ahead with a face of stone. "Why are you still here?" she asked, momentarily out of back talk, and now just tired and wanting to be left alone.

He looked her way sidelong, his expression grim once again. "When you wake up, it will be November second," he said, and Alex's stomach turned, a million negative feelings going through her all at once as Castiel continued, "The day that—"

"I know what November second is, Castiel!" She cut him off loudly, angrily, standing at her full height. "How would I forget that? The date of my mom's death haunts my life and follows me everywhere. The fire, Sam's demon blood, my voice... I think I know what tomorrow is." She stopped, and breathed, unclenched her teeth, trying to regulate herself. He just stared at her. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Sorry. It's not my favorite subject. First Uriel comes and rubs it in my face, now you."

Castiel's frown deepened. "What?"

"Yeah. He didn't tell you? You didn't know he came and paid me a visit?" She let out a disappointed puff of air. "Of course not," she muttered. "Well, no big deal. He just came and threatened Sam's life and told me I shouldn't feel safe just because I was under your protection."

Castiel's expression darkened, especially at the last part, but he said nothing.

Alex, however, was turning back to lean her elbows on the booth's tabletop edge, her hands clasped as she let out a slow, heavy breath, trying to collect herself and gather her thoughts. November second stirred great pain inside of her. After a moment, she looked up, shaking her head mournfully. "You know, I never understood how God, or whoever, could let that happen to my mom. To my family."

Castiel was quiet for a moment. "Bad things happen so that good can come out of it."

Alex chuckled bitterly. "Is that what you tell yourself so that you can sleep at night?"

"Angels do not require sleep," he replied matter-of-factly. "Alex half rolled her eyes. It's just a saying, Cas."

"Right. That's why you dudes love to crash human's dreams," Alex muttered.

At this point, he mimicked her posture, leaning his elbows onto the bar. She looked at him strangely, quieted. What was he doing that for? He looked reflective almost, thoughtful, and she couldn't look away from him. She glimpsed something there that she hadn't expected to see and didn't know how to name. "I do sometimes wonder what it would be like to dream," he said. There was a stark, honest sadness there in his quiet statement. For a moment, she was caught off guard.
Then, he turned his head slightly to look at her—his expression surprisingly unguarded and open—she looked away almost immediately, flustered.

She cleared her throat, attempting to be businesslike, attempted to regain control over herself. She didn't like how he did that to her sometimes. Made her uncomfortable and unsure of how to conduct herself. She grabbed a ring and tossed it, missed completely. Damnit. She glanced sidelong at Cas, who was throwing her groove off. He looked at the rings, very perplexed, then up at her from underneath his dark lashes. She edged away a little, gripping the counter tightly. "So, uh, listen," she said, cleared her throat again, trying to stay focused. "I-I gotta know. Was I supposed to have demon blood, too?"

Cas's eyes narrowed just slightly in thought and he straightened a little. "More than likely yes. Nandriel's presence and your mother's interruption prevented it,” he said. Alex's mouth opened slightly in surprise—she tried for a moment to imagine what could have changed if she had received demon blood like Sam had. Cas watched her face work for a moment.

Alex, brows knit together, wet her lips uncertainly. "Why my voice? Why did Azazel do that to me?"

Castiel's eyes narrowed with introspection, and he looked at some distant point in front of them. "My best guess is that when your mother interrupted his actions to Sam, Azazel took your voice as a cruelty. A reminder to you and your family that he had taken more than just your mother." He met her questioning gaze grimly. "An attempt to... break you, since he could not have you for his own." Alex looked at Cas in both dismay and surprise. She didn't miss the fact that Castiel had, in a surprising act of empathy, used the word break, instead of ruin. Because Alex felt like Azazel had taken her voice as a way to ruin her. To mentally break her down, to alienate her from her family and the world around her. And it had almost worked.

Alex felt predictable pain in her chest, but refused to let herself cry. Instead, she shook her head, at a loss. All her anger was used up, and she felt sad and lost. "But I don't understand," she managed softly. "Why did I have to live most of my life on mute? Didn't Nandriel or whoever see how hard it was? How much I had to say and couldn't? The struggles I went through? Why didn't anyone do anything for all those years?" She sounded so lost and unsure, and hated it.

Castiel said nothing for a long moment. He seemed disturbed by the question. "I'm not sure."

Alex's eyes stung with confused, hurt tears that she couldn't hold at bay. "I lived in so much pain, and no one cared. No one did anything."

"That's untrue," Castiel countered, almost defensively. "You were healed."

"Yeah..." Alex was disturbed by the reminder that she still had no idea what creature, spell, demon, or whatever had randomly decided to give her voice back. She was muttering to herself. "But by who, by what, you know? And why? It makes no sense." She looked at Cas glancingly, but something about Castiel's expression startled Alex and her mouth went slack. "Do you know?" she asked, and he looked guilty, or caught. He did know. "You do," Alex breathed, and she stared at him as her heart began to race. "You know who did it!" Castiel's eyes slid sidelong her way, his jaw tight. "Who, Castiel? Who? Please. Tell me. I have to know!"

He moved away and walked a few paces off, his back to her. She followed by a step and a half, breathless, confounded. She couldn't see his face—if she could have, she would have seen shut eyes, an oddly pained, vulnerable, conflicted expression. And then he turned around to face her and he said what she least expected to hear. He almost seemed embarrassed. "It was me."
Three words that made her go still and quiet. Surely he didn't mean what she thought he did. "What was you?" She heard herself ask faintly.

He swallowed, his eyes meeting hers faltering. "I am the one who restored what had been taken from you, Alex."

Utter silence. Alex stared agape at him, her heart stammering in her shocked chest. "What?" She managed softly. Was he serious? Normally, she would have never taken someone who she knew as little as she knew Cas at face value but... for some reason, she believed him immediately, and it seemed to sock all the air out of her windpipes completely. "You?" But why? She struggled for words and understanding even as her adrenaline turned to jello in her veins and her own heartbeat deafened her. "What, God commanded it, or something?"

Castiel's expression showed a strange mixture of what looked like guilt and distress and possibly even shame. His jaw tightened and he looked down. "No. It was not commanded."

Alex blinked rapidly, rendered dumb and wordless for a minute as her mind flew a million miles an hour, trying to understand why he would do that. Why on earth he would do that. She drifted just a little closer, trying to catch his downcast gaze. "Then... why?" His eyes darted back up to hers, but he remained silent. Alex swallowed, oddly vulnerable and depending on him to give her answers to the question that burned her alive. "Please, Cas. Tell me why." She was practically begging, pride gone out the window.

His eyes fell away from hers once again and scanned the ground between their feet. For a minute, Alex thought he wouldn't answer. And then he did. "I... watched you for a long time." His features worked strangely, as if not even he understood what he was saying. "I... felt your pain." He looked to her as if he wanted help understanding what he was saying, and it floored Alex. A muscle jerked in his cheek and he seemed totally unsure of himself, as though what he was telling her was something bad and wrong that he'd done. "I felt compassion for you. I... wanted... you to be able to speak. And that is why I healed you."

The world was heavy, breathing was impossible, and she felt like she'd been slammed with a brick wall epiphany. Suddenly, Uriel's lecture about unnecessary healings made sense, and at the same time, Alex remembered every insult and disrespect she had thrown Castiel's way. Mortified and shellshocked and afraid for some reason, she struggled how to even put her thoughts into words. She owed this strange angel everything and he'd given her a new chance at life because of the goodness of his own heart...? Her eyes glazed over even as she fumbled to understand, to thank him, to try and make up for how shitty she'd treated him thus far. "I... you... I don't know what to... I... Castiel... thank you." Her mouth worked oddly as she tried to keep her composure. He watched her with a grave studiousness and his gaze passed over the tears shining in her eyes. His eyebrows grew a little closer together. "Thank you," Alex repeated tightly. "I, I can never repay you." She wet her lips, trying to understand even as she fought to keep her face from crumpling. She suddenly felt like she owed everything to this angel. How he could have skipped telling her this until now. "Wh-why didn't you tell me this before?" She asked, waiting with baited breath.

Her question made him reluctant, and his body language was closed off, guarded. "I faced discipline. It was not ordained by God. I thought it best to not tell you."

What he told her struck her as terrifying, intense, utterly confounding. The grim look on his face and the rueful way his eyes dodged hers spoke silently of a huge, horrible truth. He'd been punished for helping her? She could read between the lines and heard what he said behind the carefully crafted words. And she wondered why all over again. Why would he have risked so much for a human who had so far trashed him and rolled her eyes at him and believed the worst of him.
It seemed too awful to believe, especially that Heaven would punish an act of compassion. "They... they hurt you for helping me?" She chanced softly, not wanting it to be true.

The tone of her voice seemed to puzzle him, intrigue him, and it was almost like he didn't even hear her question.

"You—you gave me back what was mine," Alex said, trying to tell him that he was a hero, not a sinner. "Nothing about that is wrong."

Did he believe her? His expression was unreadable, but open in a way that wasn't normal for him.

Alex was overcome as she thought about what he had done for her and she stumbled on words, trying to tell him everything, all at once. "I... you gave me what I always needed, and wanted..." she trailed off, chickening out of saying all her feelings and gratefulness. It was too much. Too personal. So she stopped. He held her gaze hesitantly, maybe uncomfortable with her attempts at thankfulness, maybe still unsure if he had done the right thing. Maybe something else. Alex didn't know, but she wanted him to know how much it meant that he'd done that for her.

She wished she could take back some of her more asshole behavior toward him. "Look. I'm sorry. If I had known—" Alex impulsively touched him, grasping him gently at the forearm to show her earnestness. He tensed at her touch, and frowned, looked at her hand oddly. Alex faltered, then realized he must not like to be touched. She let go, embarrassed at the fumble. She wasn't even sure why she'd done that. She attempted to finish speaking, even though she felt hot all over from the beginnings of mortification. "If I had known you were the one who did that for me..." she stopped, shaking her head and looking away for a moment, before looking back. "Thank you. Just, thank you." She felt incredibly repetitive and awkward, and suddenly didn't know what to do.

Castiel's eyes went down, slid over, then looked at the Tilt-A-Whirl, and then the bumper kart corral. "People ride these things?" He asked, effectively switching subjects, however unsubtle.

Alex studied him silently for a second, wondering why he was so eager to drop it. But she went along with it, even though she was thrown off.

She followed his gaze. "Uh, yeah," Alex answered eloquently. "People ride these things." She looked at him curiously for a moment, mystified all over again. "Haven't you been around since, uh, the dawn of time?"

"And before then, too," he answered, still looking around at the scenery in what might be called stern fascination. His previous more unassuming demeanor was gone, and he was the gruff angel she was more familiar with.

She felt herself smiling a little though, because if he'd been around that long, what had he been doing? Twiddling his thumbs as the world went on outside his window? "Okay, so why don't you know about, I don't know, handshakes and personal space and carnival rides?" Alex asked—and unlike her earlier questions to him, she wasn't being sarcastic or rude. She honestly wanted to know.

Cas smirked at that briefly, somehow finding humor in her question, and there were little smile lines crinkling the corners of his eyes. That was the first time she had seen him smile for real, lips turned upward, the expression reaching his eyes. It surprised her. And she liked it. "I suppose you could say..." he thought a moment, "I've missed a few of the details." He looked at her again and she felt small and easy to see through. "Until I obtained my vessel, I saw the world and humanity through a glass darkly."

Interesting. "And when you got your vessel...?" Alex prompted.
His expression softened, and his eyes seemed to see someplace far away as he reflected. "Every day has held uncountable wonders. It's so complex, the human mind. Creation. People. Life." He seemed genuine and truly reverent, and it made her feel similar things somehow.

For a moment, she envied Cas. "Must be nice," she said bleakly, then let a humorless little smile come over her lips. "To me it's all one damn crapfest after another."

Castiel looked at her closely. "I suppose that's understandable," he said, his voice low. "All your life, you've been fighting."

"Yeah," she agreed kind of heavily. "Doesn't look like that's set to end anytime soon." She paused. "Well. Unless we can stop the apocalypse." No big deal, right? It was just the end of the freaking world. She rubbed her forehead with the tips of her fingers tiredly, shook her head, glanced at Cas as she crossed her arms and shifted her weight. "Do you think we actually have a shot?"

Castiel took in a heavy breath and let it out, looking at her with grimness. "Times are dark. The future is very uncertain. Much will be lost."

Well _that_ was optimistic. Alex swallowed and her crossed arms fell, loosened. Would her worst fears would become a reality? Something in the pit of her stomach was filled with such profound foreboding and dread, and in her mind's eye, she saw two young men who she clung to, loved, and needed in her life. "Castiel," she almost pleaded, "I can't lose my brothers. I've watched Sam die. I've watched Dean die. I can't do it again."

He seemed almost empathetic, his expression soft as he approached her. He didn't speak for a long moment. "You need to prepare yourself for that possibility."

Her stomach twisted at his words and she shook her head in denial. "They're all I've got left," she said, as if that would change something.

"I know," he replied softly. Castiel came closer still, and reached out to her. She didn't shrink back, just watched him apprehensively. "It's time for you to wake up, Alex," he said, and two of his fingers came to softly touch her forehead.

Alex was abruptly waking up laying awkwardly in the back of the Impala. But she could somehow feel the warm buzz under her skin where Castiel's fingers had grazed. The dream and Castiel's words, face, presence all disoriented her and remained with her as she lay there for a long moment, trying to process everything that had just happened. She was filled with a deep sadness that seemed to transcend sleepiness or grogginess.

She realized that the car wasn't running. It was silent, and neither Sam or Dean were inside. She could see that the sky outside was still dim, like the sun hadn't come up yet. She sat up slowly, casting glances around until she saw the familiar figures of her brothers—Sam's tall, broad-shouldered one, Dean's shorter, more compact—they were standing about twenty feet off from the car at the edge of a huge, open field. Alex scooted out of the car and went to her brothers, shivering a little. It was cold and damp, a morning where fog laid low, like a blanket, across the land. The sun would be up soon—the sky was a pale violet color, and frost crunched under her boots.

Her brothers acknowledged her arrival with a glance (Dean), and a tight smile (Sam). "November second," Sam said softly, eyes fixed on the horizon.

"November second," Alex echoed quietly.

There was a long, heavy silence, all three of the Winchesters lost in their own thoughts and grief.
Alex wanted so badly to tell them about the dream... about Castiel... about the feeling she couldn't shake that something horrible was going to happen. But she remained silent. Sam, finally spoke up softly. "You know, when I think about everything we've lost... all the complete crap we've been through... all because of him." They knew who Sam was talking about. Azazel.

"Wish I could've stopped it," Dean said softly. "I tried. I tried like hell. I could've prevented you from being pumped full of demon blood, Sam. I could've saved you from spending your life mute, Alex. Mom could've even lived, maybe. Dad would still be here..." his voice was full of a pain and guilt he didn't deserve to carry, and Alex looked at him. It was hard to see very well in the dark, but he looked miserable.

"Hey." Alex demanded his gaze. "Dean. What Yellow Eyes did wasn't your fault, and it never will be. You took care of him—he got what was coming." She paused, reflecting somberly, staring down at the ground, her hands in her jacket pockets. "And this family, what's left of it, is stronger than what he threw at us. He tried to silence me, he tried to use Sam. He tried to rip us apart." She looked up at the brightening horizon. "Well. It didn't work."

"I'll drink to that," Dean said. He looked distracted, but gave her a half-smile. Sam put his arm around Alex, squeezing her shoulder tightly.

For another long moment, silence spanned the group. In the distance, a raven called. Sam wet his lips and then spoke to the air in front of him. "Mom. Wherever you are... I just hope we make you proud."

Alex stared out at the horizon, stone-faced. Castiel's words haunted her. *Times are dark. The future is very uncertain. Much will be lost.*

They drove the rest of that day, mostly in silence and reflection. Alex went back and forth mentally, trying to figure out how to bring up Cas's dream-visit to her brothers. She wasn't sure how exactly to explain it... "oh yeah, by the way, Cas came to me in another secret dream and told me he's the one who gave me my voice back"—would that suffice? She let it go awhile and just spaced out, staring at the ceiling as she picked apart the dream piece by piece in her mind. Wondered about Mom. Hoped Castiel was wrong about the apocalypse. And in the deepest places of her mind, she couldn't stop thinking of the way his face had looked when he'd told her he was the one who had healed her. Her guardian angel had decided all on his own to fix what was broken. It made her heart swell and emotions rise when she thought about it too much. He hadn't needed to, and no one had made him. He'd just done it for her because he'd seen her pain. Wow. What was she supposed to do with that information?

Finally, Dean declared that it was time to stop and eat. Dean picked a local bar and grill—the outside was decorated with a ridiculous dancing pineapple mascot. They were seated inside, where Dean hungrily scanned the menu, and Alex sat there silently, feeling queasy. She exchanged a glance with Sam, who she knew wanted to ask Dean about Hell. He hadn't found an opportunity yet, and neither had she.

A scrawny pale guy in a bright vest covered in shiny, multicolored pins arrived to their table, an order pad in hand. He had the most ridiculous smile on his face, and Alex was immediately annoyed. "Alllllright folks, how we doing? Great!" the waiter said, without giving them a chance to reply. "Start you guys off with a chili dog dipper to share? Or a delicious MexiNacho fiesta?"

"No, we—" Sam started, but the waiter didn't hear him. "Get you guys a nice cheddar roaster burger, huh? Or our jalapeño Frito pie—it's great on days like this!" Days where your mom died? Days where you are about to confront your brother on what Hell was like? Days where an angel basically implied you would lose both of your brothers in the coming days?
"I'll have the chef salad," Sam said, and handed his menu over cautiously, as if the waiter might be contagious.

Dean snapped his menu shut. "Burger. With bacon. And cheese. All the toppings, extra onions. Do not burn it. Fries on the side. And bring me some three wise men shots." Dean's favorite... a blend of several kinds of whiskey.

"Sure thing! How many, man?"

"I dunno, let's start with eight," Dean said nonchalantly, to which the waiter's eyes went a little wide for a minute. He peered at Dean over to top of his notepad, trying to figure out if Dean were serious. Even Sam and Alex looked at Dean a little oddly.

"Uh, okie doke!" the waiter said, resuming his inhumanly wide smile. He turned to Alex. "And what for the lovely lady?"

"Nothing, thanks," she said with dismissal apathy.

But the waiter's face went all sensitive, like she had just broken sad news to him. "Oh, come on now... how about our new smoky and sweet chicken-delishen sandwich? Super yummy!"

"No, I—"

"Or our in-house specialty, the firegrilled pineapple enchiladas? Yum-o!"

Alex gave him her best death glare. "I said nothing."

His smile faltered, then was back with a vengeance. "Okay, well just let me know if you change your—"

"Just go away man!" Alex said peevishly, not looking at him anymore.

"Uh yeah, right on," the waiter said, still managing to sound upbeat. He scurried away.

"Meow," Dean commented with a chuckle. He got a bitchy expression from his sister in response.

"You really should eat something, Alex," Sam said, his tone worried. "You've lost weight."

Alex ignored his comment, and cut to the chase, fiddling with her silverware nervously. "Castiel is the one who gave me my voice back."

"What?" both brothers chorused, staring in disbelief.

"Yup. He showed up again in a dream of mine last night and... it was him." She clanged her fork down onto the table and looked at both of them in turn. There was a shocked silence.

"Did he say why?" Sam asked, incredulously.

"Yeah," she said, shrugging, studying her fork closely. She didn't go into detail, because it felt sort of personal. "The goodness of his own heart."

Both of her brothers immediately looked very suspicious. "It wasn't a, you know, God thing?" Dean asked pointedly.

"Apparently not. He said he got in trouble for it."
"So he did it... on his own?" Dean surmised. He didn't look like he loved that sound of that at all.

"The plot thickens," Sam muttered, and Dean's face was working overtime, his expression confounded and then pissed and then doubtful.

For the next few minutes, they theorized back and forth halfheartedly, and Dean ended it with an exasperated "Freakin' angels. Who knows!"

The food arrived in a few minutes, and Alex waited as long as humanly possible to bring up the next subject to her oldest brother. After maybe his fifth huge bite of his burger, and a couple of his shots, she charged forward. "So, listen Dean. Uriel paid us a visit yesterday." Sam stopped mid-bite, glancing at Alex before looking at Dean intently.

"How nice," Dean said flatly, and downed his third shot of the night.

Alex leaned forward over her folded arms, trying to get his attention. "Which part? The one where he threatened to turn Sam to dust when he uses his powers again, or the part where he told us to ask you what you remember from Hell?"

Dean almost choked on his shot. "Come again?"

"You heard me."

Dean looked between his siblings, and then seemed to draw the conclusion that they were ambushing him. He shook his head and jabbed a finger in each of their directions. "Okay, first of all, I don't remember Hell, at all. And second, when were you gonna tell me a damn angel threatened your life, Sam?"

"Forget the threat, Dean. That's neither here nor there. Why would Uriel tell me you remembered Hell if you didn't?"

"Maybe because he's a dick," Dean retorted gruffly. "Might have something to do with it."

"What, he told us that just to screw with our heads? That makes sense." Alex retorted.

"Yeah, I dunno! I mean this is the angel who was ready to level an entire town. Look, I don't know what—"

"Radical!" The cheerful waiter from hell was back, and unaware of the argument he was interrupting. "What else can I get you guys?"

"Uh, I think we're fine," Sam said, trying to politely get rid of the waiter. It didn't work.

"Yeah? You guys don't wanna try a couple of fryer bombs? Or a chipotle chili changa?"

"Uh, no, thanks, we're good," Sam said, while Alex just gave the server an evil eye. This dude was too much, especially right now.

The waiter looked over at Alex, his smile faltering a little. "Okay, awesome!" He then said, and left.

Dean glanced at Alex. "Look, honestly, I have no idea why Uriel told you what he did, okay?" He smiled a very sarcastic, acrimonious smile and attempted to down another shot. Alex's hand darted out and grabbed the shot glass right out of his hand just before he had it at his lips. "Hey!" Dean exclaimed. She had leaned back in her chair, holding the shot out of his reach.
"You're lying." She accused.

"I am not! Give me my damn shot," Dean said, and swiped angrily at the shot glass. She did not comply, just stared at him, unamused.

"Okay, fine," Sam said, attempting to reason with Dean. "If you're not lying, you can look me in the eye and tell me you don't remember a thing from your time down under."

Sam waited expectantly, and Dean, rolling his eyes and sending an evil eye at Alex, looked Sam in the eye impatiently. "I don't remember a thing from my time down under. I don't remember, Sam!" Dean was agitated, and a couple people at a nearby table looked over curiously at the outburst.

"Look, Dean, we just wanna help," Sam said, trying to play the compassion card.

Dean shot him down. "You know everything I do. Okay? That's all there is!"

"Outstanding!" Said the cheerful waiter, who seemed to reappear out of thin air. At the sight of him, Alex took the shot she'd kidnapped and downed it, much to Dean's dismay. "Dessert time? Huh? Am I right?"

"Dude," Dean said, losing patience, with the waiter and with his siblings both.

"We don't want any," Alex said, her tone decidedly menacing.

Still, the waiter's plastered smile didn't waver and he launched into another attempt at upselling. He leaned down over the table as if sharing some great secret with them. "You have got to try our ice cream extreme. It's extreme."

Alex crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. "Yeah, bring me some. I'll shove it right up—"

"Whoa, whoa. Just the check, man," Sam said, attempting a lighthearted chuckle to cover up his siblings rudeness.

"All right! Awesome!" The waiter whipped their bill out from behind his pin-studded vest and slapped it on the table before walking off, a ridiculous smile still on his face.

"Geez, Al, what's with bitch mode?" Dean asked, giving her a dirty look.

She returned the dirty look. "Give me another one of those." Before he could react, she had snatched another one of his shots.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, then "dammit, Alex," when she drank it.

Sam just sighed, flustered and a little embarrassed. People were staring. Dean, protectively guarding the last couple shots he had, looked to Sam. "All right, so, where do we go from here?"

"I'm not sure," Sam said, "Uh, looks like it's been pretty quiet lately. No signs of demon activity, no omens or portents I can see."

"That's good news for once," Dean said, and reached for his glass of beer.

Alex made a sound like "pssh" and when he looked at her sullenly, she gave him a pointed look. "It's too quiet. Remember the whole apocalypse thing?"

Dean's expression soured slightly. "Trying not to."
Sam, who had pulled his laptop out, handed it over to Dean. "Here, check this out. Uh... up in Concrete, Washington, eyewitness reports of a ghost that's been haunting the showers of a women's health facility," Dean choked on his beer. "The victim claims that the ghost threw her down a flight of stairs." Dean threw his napkin onto his plate and cramned a couple last french fries into his mouth. Sam chuckled. "I can see you're very interested."

Dean was slapping down cash onto the table, suddenly in a huge hurry. "Women, showers. We have got to save these people."

Even though she was pissed with him, Alex chuckled a little at typical Dean. "Oooof course we do," she said, to which he winked as he stood, already pushing the chair in and headed for the door.

"Why do we let him stay in charge, again?" Alex asked Sam, who just shrugged helplessly, laughing a little. He got a little more serious, and pulled her back for a second as Dean walked ahead.

"It'll come out, Alex" Sam told her quietly. "He'll tell us eventually. I know he will."

"Yeah..." Alex replied, but she wasn't sure. Dean had enough issues to fill the grand canyon, but almost always refused to face them. He was constantly on emotional lockdown... even to his family. Did he really remember the horrors of Hell? Why wouldn't he tell either her or Sam? Deeply troubled, Alex trailed her brothers out of the restaurant.

"Have a nice day! Come back and see us!" The waiter yelled after her, waving and smiling like he was saying goodbye to an old friend. It took all she had not to turn around and salute him with her middle finger.
Alex paced the front porch of Bobby's house with increasing agitation, trying to reconcile everything that had happened the past few days. She hadn't slept, showered, or eaten any real food for a couple days now, and currently couldn't find an end to the things that were pissing her off. The very fact that Ruby was here, at Bobby's house, was enough to send Alex through the roof, but oh no, there was more... earlier that week Sam came clean about his questionable relationship with the demon—with all the shocking, R-rated details—and it left Alex completely mystified and, to be frank, grossed out. Demons were the enemy, period. Sam should not have involved himself with Ruby, especially not that way—it made Alex's skin crawl to think about it. Ruby's smug smiles and superior attitude were the icing on the damn cake, and Alex was all but ready to knife the bitch... too bad the demon blade had been stolen the other day. Sam had been brainwashed, Alex was sure of it—and blamed Ruby entirely for it. She huffed loudly as she turned on her heel, pacing the length of the porch again in the bitter cold of night. Alex wanted to punch something, but just clenched her fists and muttered obscenities aimed at life in general under her breath.

Ruby's presence wasn't the only thing wrong in the world right now. There was also Anna, a girl who could hear angels. They'd picked her up a couple days ago (at Ruby's insistence), and her presence was causing major problems. Demons were after her, and so were angels... and they had already had confrontations with both sides. The demons had attacked them in a church, and the angels had found them at the hunting cabin. Wherever they went, angels appeared. Alex sighed tiredly, trying to remember a time in her life before the trouble that angels brought. Anna herself was a fallen angel, as they had found out earlier the same day. She'd discarded her "Grace"—the thing that made her an angel, in order to become human. It made little sense to Alex. But when Castiel and Uriel had showed up, insisting Anna needed to die, things had really gotten bad. In short, these angels were really starting to fuck shit up.

Alex she didn't understand Castiel's role in it all. She had thought, for a little while, that maybe he wasn't so bad. Especially when he said he gave her the ability to speak again—that had turned her world upside down. But after their last encounter, she wasn't sure who Castiel was. Cas seemed to be two different angels: the intriguing, curious one she glimpsed in small, private moments when it was the two of them, and the rude, fierce one who was frightening and robotic—she saw this one much more frequently.

"Cas, please—" Sam had said, trying to appeal to Castiel's sensibility. He was standing between Castiel and the door to the bathroom, where Anna hid. But without hesitation, Castiel touched a finger to Sam's head, and Sam crumpled to the ground, unconscious. Alex darted over to stand between between Cas and the door. She felt very small under his fierce gaze. He looked murderous, like he meant business. Not like the Cas who had come to her in a dream and been so gentle and reflective.

"Get out of the way, Alex," Castiel had said lowly, and stepped forward, but made no move to
Alex had stared at him; confused, afraid, defiant. Was he really going to knock her out, too? "Or what?" she challenged, hedging her bets and taking her chances. He never had a chance to reply. The angels had both disappeared in an abrupt and blinding flash of light and a sound like mighty winds. A few minutes later, they learned that Anna did that, blew the angels away to the four corners of the earth—a warding trick that she'd remembered from her angel days.

The memory of that bothered her. Alex had actually begun to like Castiel and even trust him a little (just a little) after he admitted that he'd risked so much and done so much for her. Why would he be so kind to her and then be so merciless and careless towards others? Was he a mindless machine—a hammer, as Dean had put it, or not? Alex wouldn't admit it to anyone, but she'd found herself kind of hoping he was more than met the eye. But now she thought maybe he wasn't. It was frustrating and disheartening and it was taking up way too much brainpower and time.

Alex gave up on pacing and went inside to check and see what Sam had found—their current plan was to get Anna's Grace back. Once they could find it, she could have her powers back and be capable of protecting herself and them.

In Bobby's study the light was dim and Sam was at the desk, hunched over a bunch of books and his laptop. Ruby was hanging back a little, and eyed Alex with no enthusiasm as she entered. Ugh. Alex ignored her purposefully and leaned over the desk, peering down at the screen over her twin's massive shoulder. "Find anything?"

"Maybe..." Sam said, acknowledging her with a glance. "In March of eighty-five, a meteorite vanished in the night sky over northwestern Ohio. It was sighted nine months before Anna was born, and she was born in that part of Ohio."

"You're pretty buff for a nerd," Ruby commented, not hiding her flirty tone. Alex glanced her way, testily, and Ruby raised a single, insolent eyebrow.

Sam seemed to miss the exchange, pointing to another part of the map. "Look, I think it was Anna and here, same time—another meteor over Kentucky."

Alex looked away from Ruby, trying to focus on what Sam was saying. "So that could be her Grace...?" She guessed.

"Could be," Sam confirmed.

"All right. That just narrows it down to an entire state." Ruby said sarcastically, earning another dark glance.

"Look, it's a start," Sam said.

Ruby sighed softly, suddenly seeming to be introspective. "Guys, I'm sorry."

Alex looked her way suspiciously, coming out from behind the desk and crossing her arms. "For what?" Sam asked.

Ruby's face was apologetic, which Alex didn't buy for a second. "For bringing you this mess with Anna. If I had known, I would have kept my trap shut."

"Not all you should have kept shut," Alex muttered.

Ruby didn't miss the comment. Her eyes glittered darkly, and she folded her arms, gazing at Alex
challengingly. "I screwed your brother and he liked it," she purred. "What're you gonna do about it?"

In a second, Alex had darted across the space separating them and shoved Ruby up against the wall with surprisingly violent force. "Shut your fucking mouth, bitch!" she snarled.

"Hey, get off her!" Sam had jumped up, attempting to pry Alex away, but Alex smacked him away brusquely, giving him a death glare, and he backed off, maybe stunned.

Alex had a fistful of Ruby's shirt in her hand as she pushed the demon against the wall. Ruby was just smiling, as if she were pleased with Alex's reaction. Alex stared her down unflinchingly, getting in her face. "Do you remember who you're talking to, Ruby? Unlike my brother here, I could care less if you live or die—and you need to remember, just because you've been useful, and just because the demon blade is missing, doesn't mean I won't exorcise your ass right here and now." Ruby's smile faded, as if she had forgotten what exactly Alex was capable of. "So watch your damn mouth with me," Alex finished, and she let Ruby go with a strong shove, stepping back and not taking her eyes off the demon for a second. Sam was gaping at Alex, a little horrified, and even Ruby seemed momentarily stunned.

"Hey, come on," Sam said, gathering himself and trying to play peacemaker. "T-there's more important stuff going on right now besides our personal lives. We have a crisis to get through."

Ruby looked at Sam and narrowed her eyes. "Uh, no. This is not something we just get through. You do not want to get between these two armies. Angels and demons, it's like Godzilla and Mothra. If one side doesn't get us, the other one will."

"What's the matter, sweetie pie—scared of the halos?" Alex said sarcastically.

Ruby rolled her eyes. "Forget the angels. It's Alastair I'm scared of."

"And who the hell is Alastair?" Alex demanded. She'd never heard the name before.

"You met him in the church?" Ruby prompted. "Practically the grand inquisitor downstairs. Picasso with a razor."

"And...?" Sam asked.

"And if you know what's good for you, you'd throw him back in the pit." Ruby looked at Sam meaningfully, as if she were trying to tell him something, and Sam immediately reacted by looking away from her, as if guilty.

Alex looked between the pair suspiciously. "Am I missing something?"

"No." Ruby glanced at Alex darkly. "You just better pray that Anna gets her groove back, or we're all dead."

Alex folded her arms again and pursed her lips. "We don't pray. We make things happen."

"Yeah, whatever," Ruby muttered with an eye roll, and walked out of the room with one backward glance at Sam. The outside door slammed behind her as she left the house.

Alex turned on her brother as soon as the demon was out of earshot. "Okay, remind me why we're keeping her around? You know how I feel about that fucking black-eyed bitch, Sam."

He looked less than amused. "Yeah, you don't exactly try hard to hide your feelings about her, do
"You," he muttered.

"She's a demon," Alex said vehemently, and Sam almost rolled his eyes in protest. "Who has helped us countless times," he reminded her earnestly. "Saved our lives. She's different, Alex."

Alex stared at her twin in disgust. How he could actually believe that was beyond her. "Sam, she's not different. You're kidding yourself. I don't know what her game is in all of this, but she's not trustworthy." Sam opened his mouth to protest, but Alex held up a warning finger. "You would have a different opinion of her than me, Sam. After all, you screwed her." Sam's expression went all hurt and angry, and Alex regretted her choice of words. She wet her lips. "Sorry, I shouldn't have..." she let the sentence hang and huffed, a little embarrassed. "Look. End of story, I don't trust her. Never have, and never will."

Sam huffed in frustration, and his mouth worked oddly. He searched her eyes, his expression becoming pained. "Then trust me."

Alex looked at him silently for a long moment, wishing she could. Her eyes fell away. "After all the decisions you've made here lately?" Alex let out a heavy breath. "Sam. I don't know if I can do that."

The Next Day
Union, Kentucky

Alex stalked over to where Dean was pacing the length of the abandoned barn they were currently squatting in. After finding where Anna's Grace had touched down a couple hours ago, they had quickly realized it was gone. Taken. With only the angel hex bags Ruby had made shielding them from Castiel and Uriel's eyes, it felt too exposed and dangerous. The long drive (twelve long, long hours) to Union had been one of the worst Alex could remember. She'd been stuck in between Ruby and Anna in the backseat of the Impala, in uncomfortable silence or recipient of catty remarks back and forth. Not her favorite road trip ever.

"Okay, so what's the plan?" Alex demanded irritably of Dean, who stared back at her grouchily. They were all short on sleep, but she and Dean most of all. She hadn't slept in about three days now, and god she needed to. Part of the reason she couldn't do it was an odd paranoia that Castiel would plague her dreams again. Maybe that was stupid, but she really didn't want to have to look at him right now... or talk to him... or think about him. Especially if he was going to be an asshole instead of the nice Cas who had wondered what a Tilt-A-Whirl was.

"We still got the hex bags. I say we head back to the panic room," Dean was saying, and Ruby rolled her eyes.

"What, forever?" she asked, as if he were the dumbest person alive.

"I'm just thinking out loud!" Dean retorted.

"Oh, you call that thinking?" Ruby asked sarcastically.

"Will you shut up," Alex said, glaring at the demon sidelong. All day and night long, Ruby had been making sarcastic little comments and jabs, and each one wore away a little bit more of Alex's already-thin patience. She was ready to kill someone—anyone—and Ruby kept tempting her to follow through on the urge.
"You," Dean said accusingly as he pointed at Alex, "need to can the freakin' attitude."

"My attitude? What the fu—" Alex started, offended.

"Hey! Hey, hey, hey. Stop it. All of you." Sam said as he came into the barn. He and Anna were the only ones who hadn't blown a fuse in the past twenty four hours, but he seemed to be coming close after the constant bickering.

Ruby turned on Sam, her voice a little higher than normal, as if in fear. "Anna's Grace is gone. You understand? She can't angel up, she can't protect us. We can't fight Heaven and Hell. One side maybe, but not both—"

"Um... guys?" Anna said, interrupting. She was staring into space oddly. "The angels are talking again." She immediately had everyone's attention.

"What are they saying?" Sam asked intently.

"It's weird... like a recording... a loop," Anna said, frowning. "It says, 'Dean Winchester gives us Anna by midnight, or…'" she trailed off, her expression gone still.

"Or what?" Dean asked. Alex didn't miss the note of fear in his voice.

Anna looked at him squarely in the eye. "...or we hurl him back to damnation." Dean's face was shocked, and he looked at Alex, then Sam, speechless.

"Son of a bitch," Alex exclaimed softly, then looked at Anna. "They're bluffing. Right?" Anna was silent a long moment. "They're bluffing, aren't they?" Alex demanded louder, needing an answer now.

Anna looked at Alex grimly. "I doubt it." she said. Alex felt her blood go cold, and her head felt strange, light. She looked at Dean, who was staring at the floor, clearly alarmed and thinking quickly. No. Dean could not go back—not now, and not ever.

"Anna, do you know of any weapon that works on an angel?" Sam was asking Anna.

Surprised, Anna stared back at him. "To what? To kill them? Nothing we could get to... not right now."

Dean was shaking his head, trying to derail Sammy from the desperate idea. "Okay, wait, wait. I say we call Bobby. We get him back from hedonism."

Alex looked back at Dean sharply. "Dean he knows less than we do about angels! What the hell is Bobby going to do?"

"I don't know, but we gotta think of something!" Dean exclaimed, getting more riled.

"Yeah, like, do what the angels say and hand her over." Alex said, thinking this one was pretty obvious. They didn't have any part in this angel family drama, so why not just hand this girl over and be done with it?

Dean looked at her darkly. "No." He seemed mad at her. "Neither side is getting her, okay?"

It was the lack of sleep, the despair, and her inability to keep her mouth shut that inspired the next outburst: "Well then just kill her, and neither side gets her!" Alex snapped. Everyone in the room, even Ruby, looked at her in shock. Anna appeared crestfallen and hurt, maybe even embarrassed.
Alex set her face and tried to play it off.

"Whoa, whoa, no—Alex, hell no." Dean said, recovering from his momentary shock and becoming angry once again. "That is not an option. Why would you even suggest that?"

"Dean, I am not watching you die again because of some... some demon-angel drama we have nothing to do with!" She threw her arms out wide, exasperated.

"You don't get to decide that," Dean said, speaking with a rough finality that Alex didn't like. He shook his head, suddenly aghast, as if he couldn't believe what she had said. He was approaching her now. "We are not going to kill someone, Alex!"

"Fine, but why are we responsible?" Alex asked emphatically. "She got herself into this mess. Ripped out her Grace, fell from Heaven. Her choice! She had to know the angels would catch up to her eventually. So why are we on the hook to save her? We don't even know her!" She felt heartless saying it, because saving people was what they did—but she also meant what she said. This was a super-powered being, Anna shouldn't be involving humans like this.

"Guys—" Sam interjected.

Dean held a hand up in Sam's face, cutting him off as he stared his sister down, disappointed. "Really, Alex? Just let this girl face Heaven and Hell all by herself?"

Alex felt everyone's judging eyes on her, and she began to doubt her position. It reflected in her weakening voice. "Well the hell else are we supposed to do?"

"I don't know!" Dean shouted angrily, clearly at a loss and unhappy about it. He was now in her face. "But not hand her over, not kill her!"

"Then you'll die! Again!" Alex practically shouted, waiting for him to rethink, to remember, to come to his senses.

But he stepped back and shrugged. "Hey, it's just a risk we have to take."

His nonchalance about living or dying was like betrayal and Alex felt heartbroken. Didn't Dean know how much she needed him to stay alive and be her big brother? He seemed apathetic and Alex was incensed and hurt by it. "Come on, Dean! You cannot be serious!" She was shaking now. He was really willing to die again over this? Go back to Hell? She hated him in this moment for doing this to her.

Dean just looked at her darkly, shaking his head in what looked like disgusted annoyance. "Alex, you're really starting to piss me off," he muttered, and turned his back on her.

Alex stared at him in disbelief and hurt, then glanced at Sam for support, but he looked away, silently saying that he wanted no part of it. Anna nearby was looking down with a hard to read expression on her face. Alex's jaw clenched, and she realized she was all alone in this fight. She looked at Dean's back, angry. So, her concern for his life was starting to piss him off? She sneered in his direction, trying to hurt him like he hurt her. "Well the feeling's mutual, asshole."

And she stormed out.

Alex stalked out into where the woods began, a good twenty yards away from the barn, and there she promptly sank down into an awkward crouch, hugging her knees, burying her face there, and gritting her teeth tightly. She sobbed loudly, trying to cover up the sound, unable to control herself.
at all and hating herself for it. Dean didn't know. How bad it had hurt when he died. How bad it hurt that he didn't get how she couldn't go through it again. He was a jackass for not realizing how important it was to her that he stay alive. Because honestly, him dying had almost killed her, too...

"What are we supposed to do without you, Dean?" Sam had asked tearfully.

Dean had grown quiet, his emotions buried deep, but surfacing in his soft shaky voice. "Fight. Take care of my wheels. Remember what Dad taught you. Remember what I taught you. You two take care of each other, no matter what. I..." the clock striking midnight had cut him short. They had all known what the striking of the hour meant. Dean was a dead man.

The tear tracks on her cheeks were cold in the night air and Alex stood up and shoved her hands into her jacket pockets savagely, staring and seeing nothing but memories of that horrible night. Her worst nightmare, her most terrifying memory. It replayed in staccato scenes and sounds over her mind's eye, and she squeezed her eyes shut, tried to think about something else. But she couldn't think of anything except the horrors of May the second.

She remembered it all so clearly...

Dean's eyes, slowly traveling to his right as he heard the hound who had come to take him. Their frantic attempts to shut themselves into a dining room, to hold off the hellhound. Lilith revealing herself in Ruby's body and pinning Alex and Sam to the wall gleefully. The low throttling growl of the beast outside, waiting. Just waiting. Alex had been glued helplessly to the wall and she screamed as the doors flung open, and the invisible hound rushed in, like a gale of wind. Unable to do anything, Alex's ears were filled with her brother's screams of agony—the sound of his flesh being torn apart, the sight of his chest being ripped to shreds. How horrible, how utterly wretched, that she had been stuck and not able to help when he'd needed her the most.

She tried not to remember, but it all replayed over and over. Hot tears ran down her cheeks anew as the memories she had so carefully avoided for so long resurfaced. Lilith had tried to kill Sam as Dean lay dying, but somehow, it hadn't worked. Sam had almost killed the demon then and there, but she fled, a coward, just before he brought the blade down. Alex had dropped from where she had been pinned, free of the demon's grip. And then, the terrible silence.

There Dean laid, lifeless. Sam rushed to his brother immediately, the demon blade clattering uselessly to the floor, forgotten. But Alex just stood there, frozen, breathing oddly, something like gasps or sobs at the sight of Dean in a pool of his own blood—she almost fell backwards. Her muscles seemed to have lost all their strength, her blood felt like it was draining out of her, she wanted to be sick and she almost felt like she would die, too. She heard herself begging no no no as she fumbled forward and then collapsed to all fours, barely able to keep conscious against the dizzying grief and horror. The knees of her jeans were wet with Dean's still-warm blood as it pooled out onto the floor. Sam held Dean in his lap, as one might hold a child, tears running down his face as he cried high, terrified weeping sobs. Dean's eyes staring at nothing, his body was still, silent, lifeless. He was gone. Forever.

Alex remembered that at that point, her vision had gone half out, her muscles had turned to water, her stomach had twisted into a thousand sickened, putrid knots, and she couldn't stop shaking as she wept in every sense of the word. Mind, body, and soul, crying out in sorrow and horror and denial.

Alex huddled near Sam, clutching Dean's stiffening leg and sobbing out unintelligibly, her heart beat choking her. She just wanted to know that this wasn't real. That Dean would be okay. But it was real, and Dean was dead.
She remembered digging Dean's grave alongside Sam and Bobby in an empty lot of land, where there would be no marker to speak of. Just a shallow, nameless grave in the woods. They had done it in absolute silence. Alex remembered how heavy the dirt had felt; how hard it had been to dig the grave... but how much harder to put the dirt back after they had laid Dean down inside the grave. She'd almost collapsed several times from sorrow, burying her brother in the blazing, cruel sunlight.

They had taken his amulet off before they put him in the ground, and the ring he wore (Mom's wedding band). Alex had held them in the palm of her hand, and her heart had wanted to break in two. Surely this wasn't all that was left of him. After everything he'd done, the life he'd lived... why hadn't there been more?

Bobby said things about Dean after that. Things like 'good man' and 'irreplaceable' but Alex hadn't been listening. She'd been asking herself, why, why, why. That was Dean. Her Dean. The invincible big brother who was never supposed to have died. And yet there he was. In a pine box, buried six feet under. Gone forever.

...The sound of footsteps crunching the leaves on the ground behind her alerted Alex to a new presence, and she hurriedly dashed her hands across her cheeks, trying to wipe away the evidence of her tears. "Hey," Dean's gruff voice said beside her. "Wanna tell me what the hell is wrong with you?" He sounded pissed. Alex looked at him after a long moment, pained, her mind on memories of him, dead, shredded, six feet under. His hard expression softened and he sighed. He'd never been able to stand the sight of her crying. "What's wrong?" He asked. Gentler this time.

She shook her head, laughed softly, looking away, trying not to show him too much of her feelings. "Angels just threatened to send you back to... to Hell." She wiped her cheek one last time with her palm as Dean watched. "That's what's wrong."

"Hey, I get it," he said, trying to sound lighthearted. "You don't want me dead. It's nice, really."

Alex couldn't laugh at his attempt at playfulness. Her mind was in too dark a place. She shook her head vehemently and looked at him squarely. "I can't lose you again, Dean."

"You're not gonna," Dean said, his voice full of assurance.

"But you don't know that, not for sure," she protested. "We have no idea what the angels are gonna do, let alone the friggin' demons!"

He seemed to consider what she said, but shook his head. "Well, we have a plan," he said. "And if you'd stayed instead of storming out here like a three year old, maybe you would've heard it."

Alex pressed her mouth into a thin line and ignored the comment about her acting childish. "We've had plans before. And they don't always work, do they?"

"Yeah. Well." He put an arm around her, squeezing her arm reassuringly. A gesture of caring and concern. It was enough to set Alex in tears again. She looked down and away, taking a moment to control herself, hiding herself behind her hair.

"Dean... you didn't see me after you... after you were gone," she said in a moment, softly, not looking at him. "I tried to get by. I tried to live life like everything was okay. But it wasn't. You died, Sam left. Suddenly I'm all alone. I mean, yeah, Bobby was there. But I was still completely alone." She chanced a glance up at him. He was looking at her intently, and he looked upset. "I couldn't deal with the pain, Dean. I got so wasted, so many nights. Hunting was the only thing that kept me going. And the killing? I... I liked it, in a way I never had before." She was somber,
remembering how the violence had soothed her. How the killing had comforted her. "I don't know who that was. It was me but... I dunno."

"Damn." Dean's expression was mournful, as if he hadn't truly thought of what kind of impact his absence would have made in her life, and that he was guilty for what he said next. "I thought you were okay." He cleared his throat loudly, covering up the sound of his voice breaking. When he spoke again, it was in the low, gruff voice he usually used. "You know, a lot of times I wish you didn't have to grow up in this damn stupid life. Hunting."

Alex looked at him sharply. "Why? It's what I do. It's what I was born to do."

He looked uncomfortable and unconvinced. "Is it?"

"Yeah, it is," she said, and she meant it. Alex knew Dean was yet again feeling guilty and responsible for her. But there was nothing for him to regret. She had chosen this life a long time ago. "I've never been normal, Dean." She smiled in chagrin briefly at that. Neither had he. "What the hell would I do with a normal life?" It's an absurd thought, honestly. They weren't raised or made for anything commonplace.

Dean looked down a little, shrugged his eyebrows up. "Yeah, I know. Still. Guess I always wanted you to get out of this whole thing, deep down." He sighed heavily. "I was always afraid you'd get hurt, or miss out on life." His arm that had been around her came away, and his hands went into his pockets. He was stone faced. Maybe he was realizing how deeply this life had affected her—formed her into someone willing to kill a fallen angel, or at least hand her over to protect their own asses.

Alex was quiet for a minute, the heaviness of his words sinking in. "I'm not missing out on life." She shrugged shallowly, thinking over the memories of the road and all the pain, struggles, hardships over the years. It had all been bearable for one reason. Her brothers. That was the truest, hardest thing to say to him, to let him know how badly his death ripped her apart. "But without you in my life... I didn't wanna live it to be honest." Dean's jaw clenched hard as he struggled to process those words. It was obvious he was really disturbed to hear that. Alex shook her head. "It's not your fault. It's not. Our life is constant dysfunction. I don't expect different." They shared a brief exchange of mournful glances. That dysfunction, like it or not, was home for them. "I just don't want—I can't—do all this without you here. Tried it. Hated it. Wouldn't recommend." She was trying for dark humor, but the wounds were still too raw to joke about it effectively.

Dean appeared torn between empathy and his previously held convictions. "I get it, Al. I do. As much as I can for not having been in that position. But end of the day... we protect people. Right? That's our job."

Alex gave him a look—she knew where he was going with that. "Yes, some people. But Anna's not a regular person. She's an angel. And come on Dean, the person who needs protection right now is you." He looked at her from the corner of his eye, sullenly. "If I have to protect you from your own dumb ass, Dean, I will."

He chuckled dryly, but seemed to have withdrawn a bit into his own thoughts. "Yeah, you're a real hardass, aren't you," he said, his tone somewhere between sarcastic and joking.

She pressed her lips into a thin line, then looked at Dean in all seriousness. "I'll kill her if it means you stay alive. I don't want to. But I will. So find a damn solution. Or I'll do what I have to." The deadly, soft seriousness in her voice must have thrown him off.

Instead of a sarcastic retort, Dean just looked at her, his expression unreadable. "Yeah," he said,
and without anything else, he softly touched her on the shoulder then left without another word. Alex watched him leave, wondering if he were mad, proud, or disappointed in her. She didn't care, or really, she couldn't care. Regardless of what he felt, Alex would kill Anna before letting Dean die. Still... she hoped he wasn't judging her too bad. Surely he'd feel the same if their roles were reversed? 

A few moments passed, and Alex searched the stars in solemn silence. It was cold outside, but right now Alex liked it. She wanted to feel numb. She blinked sleepily. She really needed to get some rest, and soon, before she keeled over from exhaustion.

A sudden voice to her left caused her to jump. "Hello, Alex." Standing there in calm and quiet composure was Anna, her red hair shining in the moonlight. Great.

"Anna," Alex greeted with no great enthusiasm. These damn angels and their penchants for sneaking up on people.

"Are you all right?" Anna asked, her tone sounding concerned. So, she wanted to try and earn a sympathy card from Alex. Well, that wasn't going to work. 

Alex crossed her arms, determined not to like this girl. "Fine, thanks, how are you?" She answered sarcastically, and pointedly looked away, trying to send the message leave me alone.

Instead, Anna only came closer, and laid a soft, comforting hand on Alex's shoulder. "You're in so much pain."

Alex jerked away from the touch and glared at Anna. "You know what? I don't need you to come out here and try to make me like you. It's not going to happen."

Oddly enough, Anna smiled softly at that, as if what Alex said had pleased her. "This is why I love humanity. Such loyalty." She looked at Alex as if she could see through her every thought and motive. "Dean is lucky to have a sister who loves him so much." Anna's expression flickered, and she looked away. "This is actually a prime example of why I wanted to become a human."

Alex's forehead crinkled up in confusion at the wistful tone in Anna's voice. Why would she ever envy us? Why would she want to be a human? Humans were... a mess. No superhuman strength or telepathic powers. Just crap, pain, drama, and loss. And death. Always death. Alex looked away somberly. She thought of everything she had lived through and lost. "Being human sucks."

"Perhaps," Anna conceded, then looked at Alex directly. "But being an angel sucked more."

"How?" Alex asked, keeping her voice hard, even though she was curious.

Anna looked sad, as if remembering the pain of an old wound. She thought for a long moment, and then spoke as if thinking out loud. "So many reasons, but maybe the biggest one was that I constantly longed, deep inside, secretly... for more. I knew something was missing."

Alex felt herself becoming interested, despite herself. She tried to sound disinterested though. "Oh yeah? And did you find it here?"

Anna looked at Alex again. "Yes. I think so." She smiled, and it reached her eyes. Her expression softened, and again she touched Alex's shoulder. This time, Alex did not jerk away. "Alex. I know why you feel you should kill me, if it comes to that. I want you to know I understand. You love Dean very much. Of course you'd choose him over me."

Alex's eyebrows rose—was Anna for real? She cleared her throat, looked away, let out a heavy,
conceding breath and met Anna's gaze sidelong. "Look," she said unhappily, because she was basically admitting that she wasn't as hardass as she was trying to act. "I hope we can find a solution, Anna. Really. I do. Ideally everyone walks away from this alive and well, okay?" But the fact still remained that Alex was going to kill her if she had to, to protect the family—and Anna probably knew that. Still, the ex-angel smiled softly and said nothing more. Alex shook her head tiredly and jerked her thumb in the direction of the barn, overwhelmed with reality. "Listen, I'm gonna head in. Need some sleep."

Anna nodded, graciously, her parting comment making the youngest Winchester feel even shittier. "Rest well, Alex."

Alex left the tree line and headed for the dark shape of the barn, trying very hard not to like Anna or feel bad about what she might have to do. Alex thought it would make everything a whole helluva lot easier if Anna were as horrible as Ruby. Alex rubbed her forehead tiredly, thinking to herself that she needed to find Sam before she collapsed. He'd be able to fill her in on whatever hare-brained plan they'd cooked up. Hopefully, whatever it was, wasn't too ornate, because her ability to focus was currently very threadbare. Alex was at the point where she was so sleepy that holding her eyelids felt like one hundred pound weights—she needed sleep more than anything right now, but dreaded what her dreams might bring. Hex bags couldn't protect your dreams, and Castiel seemed to think he could breeze in and out of her subconscious as he liked.

Alex looked up, suddenly aware of herself, and saw that she was standing in a grove of pine trees, in unnaturally bright moonlight. She knew it was a dream immediately. She whirled in anger, letting loose a, "Dammit, Castiel!" even before she saw him. And sure enough, there he was, standing there and staring at her. He set her on edge immediately. "You have got to stop hijacking my dreams!" Alex groaned. "I can't get a decent night of shut eye without you showing up!"

Maybe she was being overly dramatic, but it sure felt that way to her.

Castiel didn't look the same as he had in her last dream. He seemed tense and wooden, hollow. "There are more important things for you to think about at this time," he replied blankly. "I've come to ask you to make your brother Anna to us."

"Make him?" Alex gave him an incredulous look and approached him. "You don't think I tried that, Cas? Dean's the king of stubborn. He's made up his mind that he doesn't wanna be responsible for killing an innocent girl."

"And you? What is your stance on all of this?" Castiel asked. His mood was more direct, more businesslike than in her other dreams, and she suddenly felt leery. He felt untrustworthy to her.

"What's it to you?" she asked, eyes narrowed.

He seemed to be uncomfortable at that point, and looked away. "Alex, I do not want to kill Dean. In fact, I would very much dislike it. But if he will not relinquish Anna to us—" he looked at her with a mask of rigid earnestly, "—things will get ugly." He paused. "Do you take my meaning?"

Alex set her mouth in a thin line. "Yes, I take your meaning," she retorted sarcastically. She shook her head, in disgust, in disappointment, but mostly in increasing anger. "You know, Cas, I don't know why you keep doing this to me. Making me think you're an okay guy, then proving me wrong." On impulse, she angrily grabbed him with both of her hands by his coat lapels and shook him, earning an almost surprised frown from him. "This is my brother you're talking about sending back to Hell! He doesn't deserve that, and you know it!" She shouted, getting worked up because it made no sense that he could say he healed her out of kindness then be such a dick about everything else. "Why would you bring him out only to send him back, anyway? What is wrong with you?!!"
She demanded, shaking him accusingly, freaking out about life in general. "If you ever cared about me, you would care about him, too!"

He stared at her unblinkingly, his clear blue eyes boring into hers. "Let go of me, Alex."

She stared at him, jaw squared. His lack of reaction gave her pause. And then with a shove, she let go. He barely flinched. She took a deep, unhappy breath in through her nostrils. "You know what, Castiel? I appreciate what you did for me. I really do." She gritted her teeth, tried the less angry approach. She couldn't believe she was about to plead with this guy for mercy. She couldn't even look him in the eye when she did it. "And if... if there is any of the same compassion in you, that you felt for me once... please." She made herself look him in the eye, for Dean's sake. Saying the words was like pulling teeth. "I am begging you." Her inner sadness betrayed herself on her face. "Don't let anything happen to my brother." She hated it, but she forced herself to ask again: "Please." She thought all of her inner turmoil was on display for him to see and for once, she didn't try to hide it. For a minute, she tried appealing to him that way, by letting him see how scared she was to lose Dean. If he had responded to her pain before, supposedly, maybe he would do so again.

Castiel stared at her as if he'd been stung and he took a step back from her, as if he were repulsed. "Compassion," he spat, as if the word left a sour taste in his mouth, "is something I have no more of, for any of you." He stared at her a second longer, his expression unreadable, and then he was gone, leaving Alex in completely shocked silence. What the hell? When she woke up, she felt disillusioned and tricked. Betrayed somehow.

It was early in the morning and Ruby was gone to carry out her part of the plan. Sam was pacing the length of the barn, Anna was nervously standing around, and Dean, of course, was drinking. They were about to run the riskiest move of their life, so of course Dean needed some liquor. It didn't actually sound like the worst idea, Alex thought offhandedly. Tricking angels and demons into coming here was a long shot, but it was the only chance they had, she guessed. But, just in case it didn't work, she had one of Bobby's hunting knives holstered and hidden underneath the leg of her jeans. They had destroyed the angel hex bags a few minutes ago, and now were resigned to wait for the angels to arrive.

"Little early for that, isn't it?" Anna asked, watching Dean down the contents of his flask.

"It's never too early if your name is Dean Winchester," Alex said. Dean raised the flask to her, as if she had given him a great compliment. She contemplated asking for some too.

At that moment, the barn doors suddenly burst in, as if with a mighty blast of wind. Everyone leapt to their feet as Uriel and Castiel marched in, their presences blistering and powerful. Sam and Dean stood protectively in front of Anna, and Alex stood beside and behind Sam, his arm half-hiding her.

"Hello, Anna. It's good to see you," Castiel said. An odd greeting to give someone you were about to murder.

Sam was acting shocked. "How? How did you find us?" He paused and looked at his brother, as if at a loss. "Dean?"

"I'm sorry," Dean apologized, and sounded every bit the part. Alex was kind of impressed. She was trying to look confused, but wasn't sure if it was convincing or not.

"Why?" Sam asked, whisper soft.
"Because they gave him a choice," Anna said. "They either kill me... or kill you. I know how their minds work." Anna turned to Dean, and they kissed softly. Huh? Alex didn't have to act surprised at that... was that a part of the plan they had left out telling her last night? She looked at Cas and Uriel—Uriel looked smug, but Cas actually seemed surprised, too. Anna pulled back from Dean and spoke to him softly. "You did the best you could. I forgive you." She looked at the angels. "Okay. No more tricks. No more running. I'm ready."

Alex looked at Dean—where the hell was Ruby? Could they stall any longer?

"I'm sorry," Castiel said to Anna, his voice wooden. He didn't sound sorry.

"No. You're not. Not really. You don't know the feeling," Anna said. Alex glanced at her briefly, wishing Anna was wrong about that.

"Still, we have a history," Castiel said, as if he understood he was expected to care, but couldn't bring himself to. "It's just—"

"Orders are orders," Anna finished for him. "I know. Just make it quick."

Sam and Dean were looking at each other sidelong, and Alex could could tell they were getting ready to attack the angels. That probably wouldn't go too well. But it didn't get to that point.

"Don't you touch a hair on that poor girl's head!" Came a new voice behind them. They whirled to see Alastair, two demon henchmen, and with them, a bleeding, crippled Ruby. Alastair tossed her to the side and stared the angels down.

The Winchesters and Anna quickly moved aside, as Uriel advanced on the demon. "How dare you come in this room... you pussing sore..."

"Name-calling," Alastair tutted. "That hurt my feelings... you sanctimonious, fanatical prick."

"Turn around and walk away now," Castiel said, skipping the insults, his strong, deep voice filled with warning.

"Sure. Just give us the girl," Alastair said, smiling slyly. "We'll make sure she gets punished good and proper."

"You know who we are and what we will do." Castiel stepped forward, deadly intent in his steps and expression. He was terrifying in that moment. "I won't say it again. Leave now... or we lay you to waste."

"Think I'll take my chances," Alastair lisped, but there was no missing the hostile tone he had taken on. Alex grabbed Sam's arm. They were about to fight, just as predicted. It had sounded so good in theory, but now, Alex's stomach felt tight, and she looked at Castiel without a second thought, suddenly worried. What if—

She didn't have a chance to finish the thought. Uriel leapt forward and attacked one of Alastair's henchmen, and Castiel unleashed a series of unexpectedly quick and powerful uppercuts onto Alastair, stunning the demon momentarily. He placed his hand on Alastair's forehead, clearly about to exorcise him—but then, nothing happened. Confusion came across the angel's face, even as Alastair grinned.

"Sorry, kiddo. Why don't you go run to Daddy?" And Alastair knocked Castiel onto his back. The angel seemed stunned, momentarily unmoving. Alastair grabbed Cas by the lapels, and began shouting Latin. "Potestas inferna, me confirmas," Alastair proclaimed, choking Castiel ruthlessly.
Oh my god—was he *exorcising* an angel? Was that even possible?! For a second, Alex remained frozen—should she do something? She looked at Dean in horror. Castiel's face was contorted in pain. "Potestas inferna, me confirma," Alastair continued, and Dean grabbed a crowbar up off the floor. "Potestas inferna, me confirma!"

Dean swung the crowbar at Alastair with power, knocking the demon off his feet momentarily. Castiel forgotten, Alastair set his sights on Dean and Sam. "Dean, Dean, Dean... I am so disappointed." He was now shouting through clenched teeth. "You had such promise!" He stretched out a hand, and the brothers both sank to the ground, writhing in pain.

In the scuffle, Alex had somehow been forgotten—she didn't have time to reflect on why, only had time to act. Without a second thought, she grabbed the dropped crowbar and swung it at Alastair with all of her strength, striking him across the face. The demon reeled, staggering back a step or two and holding a hand to his jaw and cheek. Standing feebly between the demon and her brothers and Castiel, all of whom were on the ground and useless, Alex felt like a kitten facing down a lion. She shook from both fear and anger as she stared in the face of evil. Alastair chuckled strangely and licked his lips, recovering. She gripped the crowbar like a baseball bat, waiting for him to do something. "Alex, no!" Dean managed to shout through agony.

Alastair smiled at her, a creepy effect. "Ah yes, baby Winchester, can't forget about you!" He yanked the crowbar out of her hand telepathically, where it came to his hand. He tested the weight in his hand casually, as Alex backed up slowly. The back of her foot hit something—Castiel's leg. She wavered, almost falling down from the unexpected run in. Alastair examined the crowbar with apparent great interest, swaggering toward her casually. "My, I would love to have you come visit me, stay awhile... get to know the fam... because if you're anything like your brother..." he grinned wickedly, "You would be a true joy to have around." He winked at her, and gripped the crowbar tight. With relish, he drew back, and slammed the crowbar into her stomach with superhuman strength. Pain exploded, and she felt bones breaking as a scream ripped out of her mouth.

Alex felt herself flying backwards where her shoulder ruthlessly smashed into one of the barn support beams—she heard the popping crunch of her shoulder dislocating through ears that had gone fuzzy. She was all but screaming through gritted teeth in pain, mostly oblivious to what was happening. Sam was trying to crawl over to her, even as he writhed in pain. Somehow nearby, Alastair was laughing. Alex heard Uriel shout "No!" followed by Anna's frantic rising voice. "Shut your eyes. Shut your eyes! Shut your eyes!"

*Shut my eyes?* Alex, limp and dazed, couldn't move at all, her body was in shock. She was sprawled there on her back helplessly, propped on one elbow awkwardly. She felt a large, warm hand suddenly come up over her squinted eyes—and by instinct she squeezed her eyes shut as a light brighter than she could stand blazed. She felt herself being pulled close to someone solid, Dean? No... Dean didn't smell like that—like rain, or maybe that was cotton. Even with her eyes closed, even with the hand there, she felt blinded by the light that blazed and maybe trying to hang onto the world and not blow away, she grabbed for something, anything, and got a fistful of what felt like some kind of crisp shirt as she leaned into the person shielding her. There was a sound like an explosion, and then wind gusted over them, as if a tornado had torn through the place. The hand came away from her eyes, the hold on her loosened, and she was momentarily dazed, blinking against sunspots. She squinted, trying to see who had covered her eyes, who she was holding onto. Castiel was breathing hard and laying awkwardly beside her—his face close to hers as he looked at her in trepidation. Shocked that it was him, Alex let go of his shirt immediately, heart hammering. Had he crawled over to her...?

A sharp stab of pain interrupted her thoughts and she grimaced, gasped, struggling because she was at the point where she couldn't breathe. She heard Dean, somewhere nearby, bellowing. "Well,
what are you guys waiting for? Go get Anna. Unless, of course, you're scared!"

Alex looked at Castiel again. His eyes met hers, and she heard a desperate, broken groan of pain come from deep inside of her throat. Cas looked almost alarmed at the sound. It was an expression that she had never seen on his face. He glanced at Uriel in hesitation, then back at her. She whimpered a little as she took a breath, grimacing painfully. Her ribs were killing her, and her shoulder holy shit! With abrupt decisiveness, Castiel reached out, his hand coming to rest on her rib cage, his eyes locking onto hers once again. She took in a sharp breath of air in relief or surprise or maybe both. A rush of comfort, warmth, and relief came over her, spreading out from beneath where his hand was against her. Something about the touch felt intimate and gentle, and she could only stare back at him, her heart beating faster than it had before. His face, handsome and grim, was close to her, his eyes searching hers, and she was caught there in his atmosphere, entranced. She felt confusion come over her—but then it was done, his hand was gone, and he had stood up to join Uriel, without a second glance back at her where she lay still on the floor.

"This isn't over," Uriel was saying, and Dean said something smart back. And then the angels and demons were all gone.

Sam rushed over to Alex and tried to help her up gently. "You're hurt—" he started, his expression concerned.

"No... no, I'm... fine." She held a hand against the part of her stomach and side that had hurt so badly just a moment before, in shock. "I'm... completely fine." She looked at her twin with a dumbfounded expression.

Sam swallowed, seeming to understand. "Cas?" he asked.

Alex nodded, dazed. "Yeah."

Dean shook his head tiredly, and looked at the spot where Anna had disappeared from. He seemed particularly affected by her disappearing act. But Alex was lost in her own thoughts.

Castiel's harsh words echoed in her mind. Compassion is something I have no more of, for any of you. She stared at where he'd been standing just a minute before. Then why, Cas—why do you keep fixing me, and giving me these little moments where I can't believe that?

One Hour Later

The Kentucky landscape whizzed by outside, and once again everything was as it should be. Just the three of them—no demons, no angels. They'd left Ruby behind, thankfully. Alex couldn't say the same for Anna… she felt odd remembering the angel. What had happened to her? Maybe they would never know. Right now, Alex was just looking forward to finding a diner, a motel, and a shower. And more goddamn sleep. Answers could come later. Without really thinking about it, she laid her hand over her ribs where the weight of Castiel's hand had rested earlier. Somehow she doubted she had seen the last of him. But owing him so much, and with the debt growing almost every time she met him, she felt uneasy. And she kept catching herself thinking about his hand on her, what that had felt like. It had felt so gentle and kind, so... nice. She thought of his eyes and that expression of alarm he'd gotten at her pain. How was she supposed to reconcile his kind actions with his more asshole ones? He was confusing. Or maybe he was confused. Well, she sure was confused. That much was for sure.

In the driver's seat, Dean gave a huge, tired sigh, interrupting her thoughts. "Ah, screw this, I need a beer," he said, and pulled into a gas station. About ten minutes later they were parked on a back
road, cracking open their beers. Sam sat on the hood of the Impala with his bottle, and Dean leaned up next to him. Alex handed Dean his beer and sat beside him, just above the wheel.

"To surviving yet another impossible situation," Sam said lightly while raising his bottle up.

"Can't believe we made it out of there," Dean replied with, a soft, disbelieving laugh.

"Story of our lives," Alex muttered, raising her beer bottle too. Sam and Dean clinked theirs against hers, and it was bottoms up. After taking a big swallow, Alex wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her jacket. "So do you think we'll see her again?" she asked.

"Who, Anna?" Dean asked, then shrugged. "Probably. I mean, can't seem to keep these damn angels away."

Alex chuckled sardonically. She agreed with him more than he knew. Sam looked at Alex sidelong. He had a sly little smile on his face. "So exactly how many times has Cas saved your life now?" He grinned outright… he was teasing her.

Alex rolled her eyes and wrinkled her nose in quick succession. "I'm trying not to keep count." She grew a little more serious and was suddenly interested in peeling the label off her beer, hoping they didn't ask her anything else about him. She felt oddly put on the spot. Kind of vulnerable about the subject of Cas.

They were quiet a couple minutes, then Dean cleared his throat. "I know you heard him."

"Huh?" Sam asked.

"Alastair. What he said... about how I had promise," Dean said. Alex became very interested at this point, stopping mid-guzzle.

"Yeah..." Sam replied.

"You're not curious?" Dean asked.

"Dean, I'm damn curious. But you're not talking about Hell, and I'm not pushing."

Alex, however, swallowed her beer quickly and butted in. "Well, I'll bite. What'd he mean by that?" She peered up at Dean's profile, which was dark and thoughtful. "What happened to you down there?"

Dean swallowed, staring into the distance. He didn't speak for a long moment. "It wasn't four months, you know. It was four months and change up here, but down there... I don't know. Time's different. It was more like forty years."

Sam and Alex exchanged shocked glanced. "Forty years?" Alex breathed in disbelief. "How...?" she trailed off, speechless.

"My god..." Sam whispered.

Dean swallowed. "They, uh... they sliced and carved and tore at me in ways that you..." he took a deep breath. "Until there was nothing left. And then, suddenly... I would be whole again... like magic... just so they could start in all over. And Alastair... at the end of every day... every one... he would come and he would make me an offer. To take me off the rack... if I put souls on... if I started the torturing. And every day, I told him to stick it where the sun shines. For thirty years, I told him." Dean's voice wavered now. "But then I couldn't do it anymore, guys. I couldn't. And I
got off that rack. "His voice became even more unsteady, broken and limping with deep pain. "God help me, I got right off it, and I started ripping them apart. I lost count of how many souls." A tear rolled down his cheek. "The—the things that I did to them."

He went silent, and Alex put a hand on his shoulder gingerly. "Don't think about it," Alex said, unsure what else to say.

"It's all I can think about," Dean said, choking.

"Dean... Dean, look, you held out for thirty years," Sam said gently. "That's longer than anyone would have."

Dean had a hand over his face, and his shoulders shook. "How I feel... this... inside me... I wish I couldn't feel anything. I wish I couldn't feel a damn thing." His voice broke in agony, and he didn't bother hiding his tears, his sobs.

Sam and Alex were speechless, truly speechless. Alex enveloped her big brother in a tight hug, and he crushed her in his arms, weeping openly, burying his face in her shoulder, for once letting himself be the one who got comforted. Sam hung back, his expression pained and afraid. Alex tried to make her voice sound stronger than she felt. "You're okay now. You're okay," she repeated over and over, softly, to keep from breaking down herself. When Dean cried, she wanted to also. "You're okay," she said again. But she knew he wasn't.

None of them were.
"Years have gone, I'm broken; I've left the past unspoken. Those years oh, they haunt me still."

- Alter Bridge

One Month and Two Weeks Later

"Nothing but Christmas crap on," Dean grumbled, and threw down the remote to the motel TV.

Alex walked by where he sat, her arms overloaded with their duffel bags, backpacks, and a sleeping bag. She dumped the stuff in the corner of the room as Sam entered their room with a couple plastic bags and a twelve pack of beer. He plopped the goods down on one of the twin beds and began pulling things out of the bags, naming them as he laid them down. "Beef jerky, granola bars, pop tarts, canned chicken, some cracker things, M&Ms, hot dogs with no buns, and the very last box of…" he grimaced, "Uh, sorta squished cupcakes."

Alex grabbed the box from him in excitement, examining the red-frosted, green-sprinkled cupcakes with a huge grin. Even though they had gotten a little smeared, they still looked perfect to her. Dean, however, looked heartbroken. "No pie?" he asked.

"Sorry Dean, this is pretty much all the gas station had," Sam apologized.

"I wanted pie," Dean muttered sulkily. He grabbed a beer instead with grumpy gusto, earning a sympathetic if amused smile from Sam.

"But why would you want soggy pastry filled with gooey fruit stuff when you could have these?" Alex asked, holding out the plastic container. "It's mini cakes. With frosting. And sprinkles!"

"Ehh," Dean grumbled, eyeing the cupcakes with disinterest. "It's not Christmas without pie."

"None of this stuff says Christmas, Dean," Sam replied, chuckling.

"Yeah well merry friggin' Christmas to us," Dean replied, and sat down on the bed with his beer, his expression foul. Sam and Alex exchanged a glance and simultaneous shrugs behind Dean's back. Alex set the cupcakes down, watching her oldest brother out of the corner of her eye.

Alex was pretty sure Dean was so grumpy for a few reasons… one, he was hungry. Two, he was tired. Three, he was Dean. But more than those reasons, she had a hunch that he was a little more sullen than usual because he had forgotten today was Christmas day—they all had forgotten, actually. The past month they had been hunting nonstop, too busy to even keep track of what day it was. So when they realized today was Christmas (they made the discovery while at a closed drive-thru), Dean had turned surly, probably beating himself up over it. Her oldest brother had never personally been too into stuff like holidays or birthdays but when it came to Alex and Sam, he had always tried to give them something normal, something dependable. He'd made a point to always at least remember their birthday, and he always tried to do something special for Christmas. Even Dad hadn't always managed that.

The sound of singing and shouting on TV caught Alex's attention, and she glanced at the black and white movie that was currently playing. "Look, Daddy! Teacher says, every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings!" A little girl shouted, and her father, grinning ear to ear, replied "That's right, that's right!" Alex frowned and picked up the remote from where Dean had tossed it and changed the channel. "Coming up next on Lifetime—it's Christmas Angel, the new Della Reese movie that's
"I'm so thankful for the Salvation Army, those people are angels! Just angels! If they hadn't got my kids all these great gifts—" Alex switched off the TV entirely, a little perturbed at all the angel references. Dean and Sam had begun opening up the food, and hadn't noticed. Alex glanced back at the TV. Angels. She'd been trying not to think about them. Her eyes darted toward her duffel bag, where one of the angel hex bags Ruby had given them remained. Alex had kept it without telling either of her brothers, and wasn't sure what they'd think of that if they found out. She was in the process of figuring out how to make more of them… however, some of the elements were still a mystery to her, and she needed more time to research it.

The past month there had been no sign of angels. No dream appearances, nothing. No Castiel, no Uriel, no Anna. And while Alex thought this should make her feel better, the silence felt more eerie than anything else. Mostly because she had expected to see Castiel in her dreams. So far he'd proven to enjoy the hobby of dream-crashing, and seemed keen on interrupting hers. Every time before shutting her eyes to sleep one of her last thoughts had been will he show up tonight? But he hadn't. At first she'd been relieved, but now she was beginning to feel uneasy... worried. And unhappy that she was worried. She'd caught herself wondering if maybe he were injured after his fight with Alastair... or maybe he'd become angry that she was using hex bags to hide herself and her brothers from him... or maybe he didn't care either way and she was over thinking things. Maybe he got in trouble for healing her again. She hoped not. The amount of time she had spent wondering about him was embarrassing.

"Hey, space case," Dean's voice said, cutting through her thoughts. He seemed to have recovered from his sadness over pie, and was popping M&Ms into his mouth. "Wanna play poker? Loser has to sleep on the floor," he grinned and motioned toward the sleeping bag. Alex looked at the two beds in the motel room… they looked about as comfortable as the floor was, but Dean looked excited to play cards.

"Hope you like sleeping on the ground, buddy." She pointed at him threateningly, in jest.

One Week Later

"Thanks Bobby," Sam said, and snapped his phone shut. Alex looked up from the Dad's journal in her lap. Dean, at the wheel of the Impala, looked at Sam questioningly. "Do either of you guys remember Truman High?" Sam asked, receiving blank stares from his siblings. "We went there for, I dunno, maybe a month?"

Alex tried to remember, but after being to at least thirty different schools (none of which she had liked or cared about) over the course of her life, she couldn't remember the names.

"Home of the Bombers?" Dean asked, squinting in thought.

"That's the one," Sam confirmed.

"Ah," Dean said, and sounded a little put off. "I hated that place."

Alex chuckled in the back seat. "You hated all of them."

Dean glanced at her in the rear view mirror. "What and you loved them so much?" he prodded playfully. Touché.
Sam, in information-relay mode, sounded almost excited as he explained. "Bobby said some girl there murdered a classmate pretty brutally… but she's now saying that she had no control of herself when it happened. Like someone or something made her do it."

"So, vengeful spirit?" Dean asked. "Possession?"

"Only one way to be sure," Sam said.

Dean nodded in agreement. "We go interview the girl."

And just like that, it was settled. Alex absently flipped to a new page in the journal, then hissed in pain. "Ouch!" she exclaimed, and stuck her finger in her mouth. "Paper cut," she mumbled at the questioning look she got from Sam.

"Better call Cas," Dean joked, and grinned at Sam, who was chuckling at the comment. Alex rolled her eyes, trying to play it off, but it kind of rubbed her the wrong way. It was true… the last couple times she'd been injured Castiel had made it all better, but it made her look and feel weak, deep down. She didn't like having to be protected or watched after like a kid. Dean glanced at her in the rearview and upon seeing her sour expression he grinned even bigger.

"Meow," he said, his favorite comment to make when he thought she was being dramatic. Alex reached up and slapped the back of his head. "Ow!"

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**Sioux City, Indiana**

The three Winchesters had just gotten into town, checked into a motel, and now were about to head right back out again. "All right, I'm going to the mental ward to talk to the girl," Sam said, and Dean nodded agreement.

"Yup. You go to the crazy bin, Alex and me will go see what we can dig up at the school."

Alex cleared her throat, setting down her duffel gently on one of the beds. "I'm not going," she said, not looking at either of them.

That got her quite the inquisitive look from her oldest brother. "Not going?" he echoed dumbly. "Why not?"

Sam, gentler, frowned slightly in concern. "Come on, we could use you on this one."

"You've both got this," Alex said, trying to sound like she was just disinterested and casual. "You don't need me." She faltered and pressed her mouth into a thin line for a minute at their scrutinizing gazes. "I just… really, really don't wanna go back there. To any school we used to go to." She looked at them meaningfully. "So unless it's life or death... leave me outta this one, cool?"

The brothers exchanged a glance, and from the way they looked at each other, Alex knew that they knew exactly why she was didn't want to, but Dean looked hesitant to agree.

Alex's tongue darted out to wet her lips. "I'll do laundry," she heard herself volunteer. The statement of a truly desperate woman. "For both of you. All of your dirty... disgusting laundry." She felt herself grimacing just thinking about all of the sweat-stained, musty damp clothes, the smelly socks that would be crammed up into weird little balls she'd have to unknot, and then there would be the underwear. Oh god, the underwear. She shivered in grossed-out anticipation.

Dean's face had lit up at the prospect of skipping the laundromat, and he put his arm around her,
clapped her on the shoulder. "You had me at laundry, kid."

1997

Sam and Alex stood in a place they stood very often: in front of a new class in the middle of the school year and in the middle of the class period. They both wore jeans that didn't fit great, jackets that were worn out bad, and shirts that used to be Dean's. Sam stood half a head taller than Alex, who was still short for their age: fourteen.

A sea of unfamiliar faces stared back at them as the teacher made the awkward, necessary introductions.

"So! Is there anything you'd like to tell us about yourself?" the teacher, Mr. Wyatt, was asking pleasantly.

Sam shrugged. He didn't like this part. "Not really."

The teacher turned to Alex. "What about you, Alex?"

Alex just looked down, her ears burning because yes, she had lots she'd like to say but she wasn't able. How many times would she have to live this godawful moment? Sam stepped a little closer, protectively, and addressed the teacher and the class alike, his voice stronger when he spoke about his little sister. "She's mute," he explained, and Alex's ears burnt even hotter. "She can't talk. But she can hear fine and write good, and do everything else anyone else can." Little gasps sounded throughout the room, and Alex heard snickers following shortly after. When and if she looked up, she knew she'd see a mix of kids who were either laughing at her, or unsure what/how to respond at all except to avoid her completely.

This always happened, without fail. Dad was too busy to get any paperwork transferred over to let teachers or staff know about her condition. More than half the time when she started at a new school, Sam or Dean had to literally tell her teachers about her muteness. Sometimes teachers didn't believe them at first. And they were always so horrified that she didn't know sign language, too. Another embarrassment.

"Oh," said the teacher, sounding thoroughly surprised at Sam's admission. Mr. Wyatt's tone took on a kinder, gentler quality that Alex despised. As if she were to be pitied or babied. "Do you sign, Alex?"

Ashamed again and angry too, Alex shook her head, barely able to lift her eyes from the ground. Sam would usually explain that she had never really learned it, that they'd always been too busy and moved too much—tons of excuses and stories that left Alex in a cloud of mortification and self-hatred. You'd think she'd get used to it, but it was horrible each time. "Well, there's nothing to worry about, Alex," the teacher said. "This is an environment for learning. And I can tell you're a smart girl. You'll do fine."

Yeah, for the two weeks I'm here. If that, she thought. She looked at the teacher without any real expression, just ready to find her seat, to be out from in front of everyone. "You kids go ahead and grab a seat," Mr. Wyatt said, and Sam led the way. Alex tried not to look anyone in the eye, just kept her head down and followed her twin.

Sam took a seat at one of the empty desks, and Alex found one behind and to the side of him at a desk behind a kind of bigger kid. On either side of her, she could feel the gaping stares from the other students and she sent one of them a dark scowl. Her ears were burning again, and her cheeks
felt hot too. She wished she never had to start at a new school ever again.

As the teacher began to talk, the kid in front of her began to flick the ear of the kid in front of him—a kind of small guy with dark hair and dorky glasses. Alex watched from underneath her eyelashes, feeling even more anger course through her veins. Bullies got to her faster than anything else. She hated them. Sam was giving the bully the evil eye, sidelong, across the aisle. "Leave him alone," Sam whispered, and the bully smirked back at him.

"Shh, I'm going for a record," the kid replied, flicking without stopping.

"I said, leave him alone." Sam's voice carried a certain dark quality that seemed to catch the guy's attention.

The bully thrust his chin out, a dare. "You wanna take his place, midget?"

Sam was glaring bullets. "Yeah. Sure."

Alex watched Sam switch seats with the kid who was being picked on. In about thirty seconds flat, the bully started to flick Sam's ear. Alex couldn't hear the teacher or pay attention to anything else than that. Anger boiled in her veins, and she clenched at her desk until her knuckles went white, but she forced herself to remain still. Dad had been pretty clear... no fighting in this school, period. She wasn't sure if she could stick to that though. Dad didn't get what it was like, anyway.

Still, when the bell rang and everyone got up, she had a small instance of vengeance that didn't require a sucker punch. She deftly snatched the bully's wallet out of his back pocket and smirked to herself, pocketing it and breezing out of the classroom, feeling superior for a small moment.

When she and Sam walked down the hall to the cafeteria for lunch, he looked at her with a grouchy expression. "What're you so happy about?" He asked peevishly.

She pulled the wallet out and wiggled her eyebrows at him, grinned. Sam's expression dropped and he snatched it from her. "Alex! Why do you always have to do that stuff?!" He asked, clearly disappointed with her.

Hurt at his reaction, Alex threw her hands out. What? She thought he would have shared in her glee. All she did was get back at a jerk who'd been picking on her brother and another helpless kid—what was with the evil eye? Sam shoved the wallet back at her roughly, making it smack into her chest. He stalked off ahead, leaving her to follow with dejected footsteps. He was such a prude sometimes. She hated it when he made her feel bad for doing what she was good at.

In the cafeteria Sam made a point of separating himself from her and all alone, not in the mood to get told off again, Alex got her lunch and looked around for Dean, felt her heart sinking when she didn't see him anywhere. Sam was sitting over with some kids from English and gave her a look that said don't sit with us.

Pissed, she rolled her eyes to cover up her hurt feelings and found an empty corner table and sat there, poked at the slice of pizza on her plate then rolled the whole apple around her plate and watched it thump around unevenly. She didn't feel hungry.

"Hey mute button!" Came a jeering voice. Alex looked up to see the bully from class earlier grinning at her. "Where's your big hero brother?" He taunted, then reached across the table, about to take her pizza off the plate. From behind Alex, a hand suddenly shot and caught the kid by the wrist.

"You mean me?" Dean's familiar voice asked, and the bully looked up, wide-eyed, to see a big
seventeen year old holding his wrist in place. "I'm her big brother. You need something?"

"Uh... no. No. Sorry," the kid said, then yanked his wrist back and scurried off, throwing a backwards glance at them. Alex gave Dean a look. I had that handled! She said with her expression.

Dean was looking after the kid with an annoyed look on his face. "Punk." He pulled a chair up, his unaffected attitude returning. "Your first day as crappy as mine?" He asked, cracking a grin at her. Alex gave him a look that said yeah—tell me about it. Dean chuckled cynically. "Where's Sammy?"

Alex nodded over toward where their brother was. Dean followed her gaze and got a thoughtful, if somewhat pensive look on his face. He glanced at his sister and brightened for her benefit. "Hey you know what? I found a side exit where we can go sit outside and eat on the bleachers away from all these losers. You wanna?"

She nodded yes, excited by the idea of adventure, of being away from all these people she didn't know. They went outside and ate pizza slices and apples together. After, Alex used her lighter to melt the bully's school ID card and his library card. According to those, his name was Dirk. She hated Dirk.

Present Day

At the West Palm motel Alex eyed the pile of dirty laundry heaped up on one of the beds. The pile was a lot bigger than she had thought it'd be. Either way, the laundromat could wait. First, she was going to try to figure out the rest of the hex bag contents. She wanted to be able to make more of them, if she needed to. She heaved her duffel onto the bed, noticing the zipper was half open. Alex rifled through her duffel, looking for the hex bag... but couldn't seem to find it. Growing anxious, she dug through it again, and began tossing shirts aside. Shit. Shit! "Where the hell are you?" she demanded out loud in a mutter.

Castiel had become aware that he could sense Alex's location again perhaps ten minutes ago, and relieved to be able to carry out his protection duties once again, he went to where she was. He kept himself invisible to her—after all, he was only there to check on her and lay eyes on her. He looked around, seeing that she was in another unremarkable, run down motel room. She was leaned over one of the twin beds and somewhat frantically rummaging through a bag, grabbing articles of clothing and tossing them out carelessly, then lifting the bag up and shaking it, as if waiting for something to fall out. "Dammit," she swore, and then looked around the room frantically. She knelt and looked under the beds, then knocked a pile of dirty clothes over, rummaging through it, then stepped back, turned in a circle. She seemed to be looking for something and not finding it. She let a huge woosh of air out from her mouth, rolled her eyes, put her hands on her hips, and closed her eyes. She shook her head and muttered something about "paranoid" and "stupid" and began picking the clothes back up, tossing them into a bigger pile on the other bed.

Castiel watched her closely, wondering why she'd been hidden from himself and the heavenly host for more than a whole month now. It prevented him from attending to his calling to protect her, which mystified him. He didn't understand why, but she seemed to be distrustful of him overall, even though he'd helped her so many times. He'd thought of using a dream again and asking her why she was hiding, as well as commanding her to end it—but doing so seemed risky. After the ordeal with Anna, Castiel had been called to answer to Raphael, who had reprimanded Castiel for his increasingly close relationship to both Alex and Dean Winchester. He had been told not to contact them on his own unless under divine direction. Uriel and Raphael had not known of his
visits to the two Winchesters in dreams, but if he were to chance it and be caught… it would more than likely be considered disobedience. Even the thought of the word disobedience set an uneasy feeling in the pit of the stomach of his vessel. To an angel, unquestioning, automatic obedience was of the highest value. Anything less was a sin.

Alex finished piling up the laundry with her back turned to Castiel. Without any warning whatsoever, she yanked her dark green tank top off and over her head, leaving herself completely naked from the waist up. Stunned into stillness, Castiel gaped at the sight of her bare back: the light olive skin, the strong shoulders and the dark tumbling hair scattered across them, the shallow dip of her spine running down the center, the distinctly womanly shape made by the gentle curve of her hips as they met the solid dark line of her jeans...

Alex threw the discarded shirt toward the pile of laundry, and turned to the side, reaching for a clean shirt. In a fumbling alarm he had never felt before, Castiel left before he could see more, the sense that he should not be there making him react faster than he had in a long time. He gave no thought to where he was going, only away.

The feet of his vessel met a new ground… stone… but he was too busy listening to the blood thunder in his ears to pay attention to where he was. His vessel felt very strange—the mouth felt dry, the heart rate was elevated, the breathing was faster than normal, and there was a completely alien sensation somewhere below the stomach. It wasn't unpleasant or painful, but not having felt it before left him slightly alarmed. He shook himself mentally. He had seen human nudity before, of course he had—he'd existed for thousands and thousands of years—but seeing it through the eyes of his vessel for the first time had left him feeling shaken up. It had only been a glance at a woman's back! Why was his vessel reacting so strangely? Perhaps the vessel was faulty. He was distracted by the nearby sound of a child shrieking with laughter.

He looked around, and saw he was standing in the middle of a tall stone path that was about twenty feet off the ground and bordered by stone walls. He looked to his left, and then his right, seeing that this wall continued into the distance both ways, past where he could even see. A group of people with strange little bags they wore around their waists passed by, one of the women chasing after a laughing toddler. The father, presumably, put a camera to his face and snapped a picture, then grinned at his family. "What do you think, kids?! Huh? The Great Wall of China! Pretty cool!"

Castiel stared in surprise. China? He felt acute embarrassment at the realization that he had lost complete control for a moment, not even knowing where he was going. That had never happened before. He hoped none of his angel brethren had witnessed his fumble.

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**A Few Hours Later**

Alex slammed the door of the dryer shut, glad to have that over with, at least mostly. In her back pocket, her phone began to ring. Sam's number. "Hey," she answered, balancing the phone against her shoulder as she counted the quarters she had left in her hands.

"Hey," said Sam's voice. "So, we think we have this figured out. Do you happen to remember Barry?"

Alex frowned, stopping her quarter-counting momentarily. "The kid with the glasses? The one that guy Dirk was bothering constantly?"

"That's him," Sam confirmed. "We're on our way to go salt and burn him."
Alex felt a wave of sadness at that. "Poor Barry," she murmured.

"Yeah," Sam said, sounding similarly saddened. She could hear him take a deep breath, trying to push past it. "So, we'll be back soon. Maybe a couple hours."

"Okay. See you then," Alex said, and they hung up. She stared at her phone for a few seconds, the quarters in her right hand forgotten. Barry. Not only was the kid dead, but his ghost was killing people? It was easier to do this job when you didn't know the ghosts personally.

1997
A Couple Weeks Later

"Yo! Sammy! Alex!" Dean waved at his siblings, walking by with a blonde girl who was probably a cheerleader.

"That's your brother with Amanda Heckerling?" Barry asked, sounding very impressed. "He's cool."

"Yeah. He thinks so," said Sam, and glanced at Alex. They knew better, and grinned at each other. They were getting along that day. The moment was cut short by the arrival of Dirk… the guy who had been making life miserable for all three of them the past couple of weeks. Alex's good mood dissolved immediately.

"Hey, tough guy," he said to Sam, sneering. "I been looking for you and your freak sister. Still wanna take Barry's place? Or maybe your ugly sister would?" He snickered at Alex, whose blood was beginning to boil. Any day of the week, you stupid prick.

"Get outta here, Barry," Sam said in a low, threatening tone.

Barry was growing anxious and seemed to anticipate that help was needed. "I'll go get a teacher," he said, and scurried off.

"You wanna go?" Dirk asked, grinning sadistically at Sam. Alex was practically foaming at the mouth to 'go' as Dirk so eloquently put it.

"I'm not gonna fight you, Dirk," Sam said, which only made Dirk laugh.

"Why not? You chicken? Come on!"

"No." Sam said, and without a warning Dirk reeled back and punched Sam hard enough to knock him over.

The second she'd seen Dirk drawing his fist back, Alex had dropped her backpack and lunged forward, putting all of her strength into backhanding Dirk across the face. Stunned, he stumbled backwards and Alex followed through, slamming into him and tackling him to the ground. On top of him, she began pummeling his face with her fists, even as he screamed protests of "Get off, get off!" — but Alex was seeing red, remembering the cruel insults he had lobbed at her, the tripping in the hallways, the dropped school lunches, the way he had tried to make Sam look weak and stupid. She grabbed his hair and hit his head against the ground, thinking of all the ways she would cuss him out if she could.

"Stop that!" A teacher was suddenly yelling, and she was being pulled off Dirk even while kicking and punching the air. Another teacher was kneeling by Dirk, who was curled onto his side, moaning or crying, maybe both. Alex, breathing heavily, her face flushed, looked around, expecting
to see amazed faces. Instead, she saw shock, fear, and disdain. All the kids were looking at her as if she were the freak. And then she saw Sam, who was still on the ground, looking at her as if he'd been betrayed.

"He needs his weirdo sister to fight for him?" She heard someone say. Her heart sank even as she was being steered away by the teacher.

"Young lady, come with me. You're going to see the principle," Mr. Wyatt said, sounding very flustered. The kids stepped aside as he steered her along, and Alex heard whispers and mutters about "crazy," "like a serial killer," "probably on drugs." She had to chew the inside of her mouth to bite back the tears. She wouldn't let them see her cry. Not now, not ever. So instead she made threatening faces at them and lunged a couple times, throwing the middle finger out to anyone she made eye contact with. If you don't like me, you can fear me. It always seemed to go like this.

"Young lady, this behavior is very worrisome. I'm going to call your parents right now," the principle was saying. Alex, slouched in the sticky pleather seat, just looked at him insolently. Good luck with that, she thought churlishly.

Dean burst into the principle's office without so much as knocking at that second. The principle stood, caught off guard by the sudden entrance. "And who, sir, are you?" he asked.

"That's my little sister you got there," Dean said, in regular form—foul-tempered and fired up.

The principle narrowed his eyes, taking in Dean warily. "I see. Well, she started a fight in the hall, and refuses to talk to me about why."

Dean's expression dropped momentarily, before becoming infuriated. "She's mute—she can't speak! What is wrong with you people?! How do you even—" he cut himself short, jaw clenched shut, eyes shut, maybe thinking better of what he was about to say.

"I wasn't made aware of—" the principle began, trying to maintain a neutral tone and professional posture.

"Well you're aware now!" Dean fired back, and gruffly grasped Alex's arm, pulling her to her feet. "Let's go, Al."

"You can't just leave!" The principle exclaimed, his voice raising an octave.

"Watch me!" Dean retorted, not even looking back, already halfway out the door with Alex in front of him. He marched her down the hall wordlessly, and Alex was suddenly worried that Dean was angry with her. That would just be the finishing touch on this bullshit day. Dean stopped eventually in the empty hallway and took Alex by both of her shoulders, forcing her to look at him. She did so reluctantly.

"Listen, Al. I heard what happened." At her baleful expression, he almost chuckled. "Word travels fast in high school—didn't I tell you? That's beside the point. Don't feel bad. I can tell you feel bad. Defending Sammy was the right thing to do, okay? Don't listen to these fucking dumbasses."

Alex grabbed the mini notepad and pen she always had jammed in her back pocket, and scribbled as Dean waited. Sam's mad me.

He looked at the words and then at her, frowning. "What the hell for? For sticking up for him?" She shrugged, as if to say 'I guess.' The bell rang, and classes began to change. Kids flooded out all
around them, and Dean sighed. "Well, you know what? We won't be at this hellhole for much longer."

Alex nodded, and Dean let go, put his hands in his pockets, and held her gaze. He always did that when she was upset. Looked at her a long time, trying to gauge if she were better or not. Sometimes she liked it, and sometimes she hated it. Today, it just made her feel worse.

A boy from her English class walked by, and laughed. "Freak!" he said as he walked by, and held up his fists, imitating her.

Dean turned sharply, stepping toward the kid, physically blocking his path. "Did I hear you right, punk?"

The kid, who was quite a bit smaller than Dean, gaped, and he was suddenly Mr. There's-No-Problem-Here. "Whoa dude, chill. This isn't your problem."

"Like hell it isn't, you little asshole," Dean said, towering over the kid and staring down at him menacingly. The kid's face had quickly become twisted in fear, and he had backed up against a locker. Dean leaned in. "Mess with my little sister and I'm coming after you. No ifs, ands, or buts. Got it?"

"Uh yeah, yeah!" the kid said, his voice squeaking awkwardly. He backed up a few steps, glanced at Alex, and turned and hurried away.

"Come on, I'm walking you to class," Dean said, and motioned for her to come with him. Alex looked back at the kid who had called her a freak, and catching him looking at her over his shoulder, she threw up her middle finger at him before continuing on her way. Yeah, she made more enemies than friends these days, but at least there was one thing she could count on. Falling into stride with Dean and looking up at him as the walked, Alex felt momentarily safer. She wished she could tell him, right now, how kickass he was, and how much she wanted to be like him when she grew up.

Present The Next Day

Dean and Alex sat in the Impala, parked outside of the school. Sam was inside the school visiting an old teacher, and Alex was in Sam's usual seat. "I'm kind of glad it wasn't Barry," Alex was saying. "Sad that it was Dirk. Kind of makes sense though. Kid was an ass."

"Yeah," Dean said. "Sucks that we got it wrong at first, though."

Alex grimaced, hoping that somehow Barry's relatives wouldn't learn about the dug up grave, the burned bones… oops. She and Dean traded wan expressions, then Dean turned up the music a little—Aerosmith, Train Kept A Rollin'.

"Can you pop the trunk?" Alex asked after a minute. She hadn't thought of it until now, but that's probably where the hex bag had fallen out of her duffel. She hopped out and pulled the trunk up after Dean popped it. It was packed pretty tightly back in there—weapons, supplies, ammo, duffels, backpacks, a couple extra pairs of shoes, a cooler, some dry goods… Alex pawed through it all slowly, trying not to mess up the carefully crammed contents.

"Looking for this?" Dean asked, and Alex started. He was standing beside her, holding up the hex bag with a grim expression on his face.

She looked from it to him, caught. "Uh... maybe," she said feebly.
"Found it in the trunk when we took care of Barry," Dean said.

"Oh." Alex said.

"Yeah. Oh." He didn't look too happy. "Wanna tell me why didn't you tell me we still had this?"

Alex squirmed a little. "Don't get pissed… I just... I dunno. I thought maybe you would take it apart." He raised his eyebrows as if to say 'and?' Alex tried to explain herself, fumbling a little. "I just wanna know more about angels before we let them come around all the time, you know? This hex bag is the only thing we know of to keep angels away from us."

Dean smiled briefly, an expression laced with irony. "And I thought I was the paranoid one."

"Extra caution quite often saves our asses," Alex pointed out. "I don't like it, Dean. Maybe angels are okay dudes deep down, but whoever's giving orders… well, so far the orders have been a bunch of crap. Do we want to be running around in plain sight? We don't even know what we're up against."

"Maybe not, but that wasn't your call to make," Dean said tersely, then sighed heavily. "I'm not as ready to decide angels are the bag guys as you are. Not yet." He shook a few contents out of the hex bag, leaving some still inside. "Let's roll the dice and see where we land." He handed her the half-empty hex bag. "You keep this stuff, I'll keep the rest. If we need it, we'll use it. But not any sooner."

Alex wasn't exactly happy, but she accepted the bag. "I never said I thought angels were the bad guys," she said sullenly.

Dean just gave her a superior look.

Sam left Mr. Wyatt's classroom, glad he'd taken the time to visit his old teacher. The halls were deserted, and his footsteps echoed in the empty space. He rounded the corner, going back out the way he had come in. He looked up and did a double take, then stopped short. A tall, dark haired woman waited there, leaned up against the lockers just by the glass door he'd come in.

"Ruby! How the hell… what are you doing here?"

"Doesn't matter," she said, and folded her arms, coming to meet him. "Why are you avoiding me?"

Sam scoffed defensively. "I'm not avoiding you."

Ruby stepped closer, her voice lowering. "Have you thought about what I told you?"

Sam's tongue darted out between his lips nervously, and his voice lowered, too. "I'm not doing that any more."

Ruby's dark eyes held his and her lips curved upwards in a smile. "You keep telling yourself that, Sam." Her eyes went to his lips, and her expression took on a sultry quality. "I know you want to." She touched his arms gently, leaned in a little closer, her voice dropping to a whisper, her eyes capturing his. "It's all you think about, Sam. You can't wait to have another taste."

Sam pulled away, grimacing. His heart was hammering fast, from a mixture of fear, revulsion, and worst of all, desire. Ruby chuckled, as if his behavior were cute. "Stop fighting it Sam. It's not gonna go away." She again came close to him, pressing her body against his. He let her, even though he squeezed his eyes shut for a couple seconds. "When you're ready… you know where to
find me."

She walked a few steps away, then paused, turning and looking back. She looked and sounded suddenly soft, sympathetic. "It must be so hard for you to be the odd one out."

Sam narrowed his eyes at her. "What are you talking about?"

Ruby came back a couple steps. "Your brother and sister... they see you as a freak. As an outsider. The one with the demon blood." She looked at him openly, with a soft smile. "I accept you, Sam. And soon you'll see that I really mean that."

Sam's jaw twitched. "My family is none of your business."

"Sure," Ruby said, her coy smile not faltering even for a second. "I'll be seeing you, Sammy."

And she turned and walked away. Sam watched her go, then looked through the glass door where he could make out the Impala, his siblings waiting for him inside of it. He listened to the sound of Ruby's footsteps fading out, realizing how true Ruby's words had rung for him. He was beginning to feel like he didn't belong where he currently was. He felt less and less able to be himself with Dean and Alex, and more and more desperate to do something about this disease inside himself. Every day, all day, he thought about demon blood and the abilities it gave him, the rush of pleasure and confidence. The purpose. Dean and Alex didn't appreciate the way it enabled him to save people, and it made him feel like he should be ashamed of himself. So for now he was pretending he wasn't wrestling day in and day out with the affliction he'd found himself with. The power. He was just trying to be business-as-usual even though it was anything but.

On the outside, he was Sam, but on the inside, he wasn't sure who he was anymore. He was stuck in the middle, unsure of where to turn.

But the call kept coming, coaxing him to follow this path wherever it would go. No matter how sinister, or unknown, or dangerous...

Sam clenched his jaw tighter, willing his thoughts to stop so that he could focus on the moment at hand.

And with a long stride and deep breath, he went back to his waiting brother and sister.
"Am I going insane? My blood is boiling inside of my veins. An evil feeling attacks; my body's shaking, there's no turning back."
- Bullet for My Valentine

A Week Later

It was late at night and Alex was feeling particularly emotionally drained. She stared out of the window of the Impala at nothing with a hard, thoughtful face. No music played—the car was silent except for the hum of the engines. The mood in the car was somber, as it should be. They had just been to Pamela Barnes' funeral. The psychic had died a couple days ago helping them save a seal from being broken, but it seemed so trivial. It seemed so pointless and stupid. The task of stopping these so-called seals was too big for them, and deep down, Alex was afraid they would fail before they even began. She tried not to think about the alarmingly fast rate that friends and fellow hunters were dying. These were dark, dark days.

Dean pulled into a motel, muttering something about needing some friggin' sleep and Sam silently went to go check them in. Dean and Alex said nothing as they waited, both lost in their own thoughts. Sam came back with their room key, and like usual, they all grabbed their stuff and went to find their room.

"Ah, home crappy home," Dean muttered, breaking the silence as they entered the dark room. Sam flipped on the lights, Alex close behind him. That was when they saw that they were not alone. The three of them stopped short at the sight of Castiel and Uriel in their motel room. Oh no, is all Alex could think.

"Ah. We've been waiting for you," Uriel said, stepping forward toward them. Alex looked from him to Castiel, who hung back. He was staring blankly ahead, unseeingly. He didn't meet her gaze, and immediately she felt that something was off. It had been a couple months, hadn't it, since she'd laid eyes on either angel...? Any time they showed up, there was trouble. But last time she'd seen him, he'd saved her life and stared at her like—well, she didn't know what like. Now he seemed subdued. Chastened maybe.

"Oh come on, guys!" Dean was protesting, dismayed to find his plans of sleeping might not reach fruition.

"You are needed," Uriel said, ignoring Dean's comment.

Dean's temper was shorter than normal. "Needed? We just got back from needed!"

One of Uriel's eyebrows twitched slightly. "Now you mind your tone with me."

"No, you mind your damn tone with us," Dean fired back hotly.

"We just got back from Pamela's funeral," Sam explained, as if that would change Uriel's approach. Uriel's face remained blank, and Castiel switched from staring into space to staring at the ground, unwilling to meet anyone's gaze.

"You know, psychic Pamela?" Dean said acridly, attempting to jog the angels' memories. "Cas, you remember her, right? You burned her eyes out. Remember that? Good times." No response from Cas. "Yeah, then she died saving one of your precious seals," Dean continued angrily, his
voice growing in timbre by the second. "So maybe you can stop pushing us around like chess pieces for *five freaking minutes!*

There was a short silence, and Uriel stepped forward, his stance intended to be threatening. "We raised you out of hell for *our* purposes," he said, as if that solved everything.

"Yeah, what were those again? What, *exactly,* did you want from me?" Dean asked, his tone completely insolent. Alex looked at Cas again, who was still silent and stone-faced. He'd been looking at her from the corner of his eye, and when she caught him doing that, he quickly looked away.

Uriel stepped a little closer still, his voice lowering. Beside Alex, Sam tensed. Uriel spoke through his teeth. "Start with *gratitude.*"

"Dean, we know this is difficult to understand," Cas said, breaking his silence and stepping forward, seemingly attempting to pacify the rising conflict between Dean and Uriel.

"And we—" Uriel gave Castiel a pointed look, stopping the other angel in his tracks, "—don't *care.*" Chastised, Castiel again fell silent, not acknowledging Alex's questioning stare. Uriel continued to address Dean. "Now, seven angels have been murdered, all of them from our garrison. The last one was killed tonight."

"Angels can be killed?" Alex asked in surprise, attention piqued. "By what, by demons?"

"How are they doing it?" Dean asked, sounding similarly caught off guard.

Uriel let out a slow breath through his nostrils. "We don't know."

The Winchesters exchanged looks. "I'm sorry, but what do you want us to do about it?" Sam asked, voicing what they were all thinking. "I mean, a demon with the juice to ice angels has to be out of our league, right?"

"*We* can handle the demons, thank you very much," Uriel said icily, and drew back a bit.

"Once we find whoever it is," Castiel added.

"So what the hell is it you guys need?" Alex asked, exasperated, tired, and sick of running around in conversation circles.

"We have Alastair," Castiel said, yet again avoiding actually answering the question.

Dean smiled humorlessly. "How nice for you. He should be able to name your trigger man."

"He won't talk," Cas explained. "Alastair's will is very strong. We've arrived at an impasse." Alex still didn't see where the angels were going with this, and just shook her head in fatigue.

"Yeah, well, he's like a black belt in torture," Dean said, shrugging. "I mean, you guys are out of your league."

"That's why we've come to his student," Uriel said. "You happen to be the most qualified interrogator we've got."

"*What?*" Alex exclaimed, suddenly understanding and feeling as though they had been ambushed. Dean was slack jawed, unable to respond.

"Dean, you are our best hope," Castiel began.
Dean was shaking his head, his jaw clenched. "No. No way. You can't ask me to do this, Cas. Not this."

Uriel, who had retreated a few steps, was now walking toward Dean. "Who said anything about asking?" he asked. And without the slightest warning, Alex was suddenly standing in a dark and cold room. In alarm Alex looked to her right, where Dean thankfully stood, just as he had a second ago. But where was Sam? They both turned around, to see Castiel and Uriel standing a few feet off.

"Son of a bitch," Dean growled, and Alex shot him a look.

"I told you we should have kept that hex bag in one piece," she hissed, receiving an irritated glance from her brother.

He leveled Castiel with a glare. "Where are we?"

Alex looked up, noticing the numerous sharp hooks that hung from the ceiling. The room was cold and clammy, like a meat locker. Castiel ignored Dean's question and walked to them, then past them, to a solid metal door that had a small, hazy glass window in it. Dean followed the angel, and Alex slowly followed suit, on guard. Through the little window in the door they could see a tall, wiry man chained to a hexacle that was erected in the middle of a devil's trap. His head lolled onto his chest, and he seemed to be panting due to pain. Alastair. He was in a different vessel than the one he'd been in last time. Next to Alex, Dean's body had gone rigid.

"This devil's trap is old Enochian," Castiel said. "He's bound completely."

Dean looked through the glass, his expression unreadable, and Alex stared at him in alarm. "You're not actually thinking about doing this?" she asked in a tense whisper, which he only acknowledged with a glance.

"Fascinating, Cas," Dean commented to the angel who stood behind him. Dean grabbed Alex by the arm, steering her along with him toward the other end of the room. Castiel watched, frowning in lack of understanding.

"Where are you going?" Uriel, who had been silently observing stepped into the Winchester's path.

"You're out of your damn mind if you think we're staying here," Dean said. "Now get out of the way," Dean demanded, at which Uriel merely blinked.

"Angels are dying, boy."

"And why, exactly, do we care?" Alex asked contemptuously.

Uriel's gaze came to rest on her. He made no attempt to disguise his sneer. "Because I say it is, imp."

"You watch the way you talk to her, chuckles," Dean said acidly, letting go of Alex and stepping a little more into Uriel's space. "And I don't care if you're all-powerful. You can't make me do this. I'm not torturing anyone else. Ever." He looked back at Castiel, who still stood by the door to Alastair's torture chamber. Dean looked as if he expected the angel to back him up or be on his side, but Cas's expression was dour.

"This is too much to ask, Dean, I know." He came forward a little. "But we have to ask it."

Dean looked utterly confounded. "No—no! If you knew what it was like, you wouldn't ask me this. Any of you!"
The room went silent. Uriel was annoyed, Castiel was tense. Alex looked to him appealingly, trying to get him to listen to her. Maybe he would. "Can't you guys find someone else for this?" She asked. Castiel finally looked at her in the eye. "I mean, huge world out there, right? There has to be someone else who can do it."

Castiel was grim. "There is no one else who can do this for us," he said, leaving her to stare at him, confounded.

"Why the hell did you bring Alex along, anyway?" Dean demanded, looking at Cas first, and then Uriel. "To make her watch this twisted little show of yours? You are some sick sons of bitches, you know that?"

Uriel smiled at Dean, as if he were amused. "She's here as leverage."

Neither Winchester missed his meaning. "You said she was protected!" Dean exclaimed in dismay, and he looked at Castiel in confused agitation. Castiel looked almost mournful, but said nothing, only looked at Alex, then away.

"I received new revelation yesterday," Uriel said. "The guardianship of Alex Winchester has ended."

"How convenient," Alex commented acidly, glaring at Uriel in mistrust.

"It's most regrettable," Castiel said, and Alex looked back at him angrily. He almost did look sorry. Almost. She looked away.

Dean crossed his arms, staring at Uriel stonily. "I wanna talk to Cas. Alone."

"Fine," Uriel said, surprisingly compliant. "I'll go seek revelation. We might have some further orders."

"Well, get some donuts while you're out," Dean said, earning a chuckle from Uriel. It was a deep, rich sound.

"Ah, this one just won't quit, will he?" Uriel smirked. "I think I'm starting to see what Castiel likes about you, boy." And then he vanished, leaving Alex, Dean, and Castiel alone.

"You guys don't walk enough. You're gonna get flabby," Dean commented sarcastically to Cas, whose face only registered concentration. "You know, I'm starting to think junkless has a better sense of humor than you do," Dean said when he got no reaction.

Castiel's eyes narrowed. "Uriel's the funniest angel in the garrison. Ask anyone."

Dean and Alex exchanged a puzzled glance, as if they were both thinking should we be amused right now? Then Dean fixed Castiel with an intent gaze. "What's going on here, Cas? Since when does Uriel put a leash on you?"

"My superiors have begun to question my sympathies," he said vaguely.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Alex asked, and Castiel's expression flickered.

"I was getting too close to the humans in my charge." He looked at Dean. "You." And then at Alex, sidelong. "...and you." He seemed sheepish and looked down. "They feel I've begun to express emotions. The doorways to doubt. This can impair my judgment."
"Or... un-brainwash you?" Alex suggested. "Forget that. Cas, just get us out of here."

A muscle in his jaw jerked and he looked at her sternly. "I'm sorry. I don't have the authority or permission to release you."

"Yeah, great." Dean scoffed. "So they knock you down the ladder and put Uriel in charge?"

Cas's frown deepened slightly. "He is a proud and able instrument of God."

"The demotion... doesn't it get your loincloth in a twist?" Dean asked.

Cas looked away, as if in irritation. "It is what it is, to me." Alex looked at him intently—she thought, just for a moment, that she heard a touch of hurt in that deep, husky voice of his.

Dean took in a deep breath, letting it out heavily as he slowly went back to the door that Alastair was behind. "Well tell Uriel, or whoever..." He stared into the room for a moment. "You do not want me doing this, trust me."

"Want it, no. But I have been told we need it," Castiel said. "And if you refuse... Uriel has ordered me to... convince you."

Dean looked back at Cas with a murderous expression. "You mean... using her." Dean looked at Alex, who went slack jawed and looked at Castiel in something in the neighborhood of shocked outrage. The angel was looking at her with an unreadable expression and Alex looked at him in shocked betrayal—surely he was just bluffing...? Dean narrowed his eyes at Cas. "You wouldn't."

A muscle jerked in Castiel's cheek. "Dean, I have no desire to do this," he said, avoiding looking at Alex. "Comply and I won't be forced to hurt her." His words were stunning blows to Alex.

Dean shook his head, disgusted at Cas's response. "You son of a bitch." He turned back around, falling alarmingly quiet. There was a long, tense pause and Alex was speechless, not sure what to say or do.

"Please, Dean," Castiel said quietly, a touch of pleading to his usually apathetic voice. "Just... do as we ask." He glanced at Alex, his eyes hooded. She didn't know what to think. She wasn't sure about much, but Cas wouldn't hurt her, would he? It didn't seem possible after all the times he'd healed her and helped her, gone against orders to do so, even. But here he was, saying he would if he had to. It made no sense.

Dean's shoulders seemed slumped and heavy, and she could hear the pain in his voice when he spoke again. "Cas—if I open that door and walk through it, you will not like what walks back out."

Cas said nothing, and sensing that time and options were running out, Alex tried one last plea, her emotions high strung out of alarm. "Please, Cas. Listen to my brother. Don't make him do this. You can help us." She paused, trying a desperate, stupid appeal. "You like helping us. I know that about you!" Her voice had risen in something close to panic.

But Cas wouldn't look at her. He only stared ahead, his face like stone. He ignored her statement. "You both know what we're fighting for. What we're dying for. What Pamela died for. You know what will happen if we fail." There was a long silence, and Cas looked toward Dean. "For what it's worth, I would give anything not to have you do this."

Dean turned around, his features set like rock. "Yeah." He looked ill. "I'll do it."

"No! Dean—" Alex protested.
Dean shook his head, coming to her. "I have to."

Alex shook her head in feeble protest, Dean's horrifying words about his time in Hell resounding in her mind. "No you don't." She was consumed with fear for him, and was terrified that if he went in, he'd come back broken once and for all. "Don't go in there," she begged, her voice cracking from the onset of sudden, helpless emotion. She grabbed a hold of him, trying to hold him back, keep him safe. "Let them do whatever to me, I don't care!"

Dean's eyes were gentle and resigned—her protests were in vain, and she could tell. "Well I do care Al. And I've already made up my mind," he said softly, and gave her her best attempt at a smile. He grasped her shoulder reassuringly, then looked toward Castiel, his expression becoming intense once more. "Cas... you do not let her see what I'm going to do in there."

"Understood."

And wordlessly, Dean turned and went through the door. Alex stared after her brother, completely aghast. The door shut behind him with a resounding clang, and silence settled over the room. Alex stared at the door, a little breathless. Her heart was racing. "S-shouldn't someone be in there with him?"

"No," Cas said behind her, and she heard him coming to the spot beside her. "He must do this alone." Alex sidled away from him pointedly, angry that he was trying to act like her friend or something. A moment of silence passed, then Castiel tried to speak to her again. "Your empathy and compassion for your brother is commendable."

"It's natural," she retorted, not in the mood for bullshit. She looked at Castiel with an expression that seemed to ask how could you do this? "Do you know what Alastair put Dean through down there? And now you're doing the same thing. Forcing him to torture again, after all he's been through." She scoffed darkly. "An angel doing pretty much what that demon did. Pretty damn ironic, isn't it."

Cas looked like he was considering what she'd said, his ever-present frown momentarily replaced by an oddly pensive expression. "I understand that you're angry with me. But this must be taken care of. And Dean was our last hope. We exhausted all other avenues. Please, understand that."

Alex shook her head slowly, looking at him with an odd expression. "You should know better than this," she told him in a voice that was softer, almost wounded. "I don't even know you. But I know you should know better than this, Castiel." The angel's eyes flickered between hers as his dark brows drew together faintly. Did he agree? Was she way off base? It was her instinct that he really should know better. He seemed different than Uriel and even Anna, in a way she couldn't put her finger on. Maybe she was reaching. Maybe she was wrong in her gut feeling about him. After a minute or two of silence, Alex glanced at Cas. "So what's this crap about God's little protective orders on me going poof? You buy that?"

"Yes," Castiel replied. "I'm no longer your protector." Did Alex imagine the faintest hint of reluctance in his voice?

She wasn't sure, but she felt oddly let down by his response. "Just like that?"

He was looking into the space in front of him with furrowed eyebrows. "Yes. It's for the best, I think."

"The best? Why?" Alex asked.
Cas's expression was strange. "What I said before. My superiors saw that I was becoming too attached. Too emotional."

"You? Emotional?" Alex made a face. "That's fucking rich..." she muttered. Looking at him sidelong, she studied him darkly. "So if Dean had refused. Were you really prepared to, you know, torture me to get him to do what you wanted?"

"Dean didn't refuse," Castiel said, looking down at the floor, sidestepping the question entirely.

There was a disappointed silence on Alex's part. "So, basically, yes," she supposed out loud. He said nothing, only let his eyes flicker over to hers for a moment guiltily. She felt a cruel sense of betrayal, followed by discouragement that she had allowed herself to trust him, in however small a way. She looked away, confused at herself and her instincts that were proving wrong about him. "And here I was thinking you might be different. Better than that." Damn.

Castiel's jaw clenched and he looked up slightly. He didn't answer her. They heard a loud scream in the other room, and Alex's face fell into an apprehensive, wide-eyed stare as she looked at the shut door that her brother was behind. God she wished she and Dean were anywhere else but here. That he'd kept that damn hex bag intact. Another scream followed, and then another, and another. Alex looked at Cas, who finally met her gaze. She didn't bother to hide her hurt, betrayed, resentful expression. Don't let this happen, she wanted to beg him. He stared back, looking strangely affected by the way she was looking at him. Then he got up and walked a few steps away, his back to her, where she could only see his stern profile. Alex considered him for a moment, then the screams coming from the room beyond. Without warning, she broke into a dash for the door, no plan at all in her mind, just a need to rescue her brother somehow.

Before she even reached the door, Castiel suddenly appeared right in front of her, a wind blowing over her from the speed at which he moved. It startled her and she almost ran right into him but came up short, stopping just in time to hit the toe of her shoe up against one of his. He was only perhaps five inches taller than her, but he seemed like a solid, towering wall, blocking her way. His blue eyes were filled with soft, grudging warning. "Let me past," Alex said, and he said nothing and did nothing, only remained in her way. She made to brush past him and he suddenly seized her wrist and pulled her back, holding her there close to him in a strong grip. "Let go of me!" Alex protested, trying to get out of his impossible grip.

"This must happen, Alex," he told her somberly, and he almost seemed to be appealing to her, maybe she was imagining it, but he seemed a little urgent. "Please—don't make me restrain you. I know you don't like it."

His grip didn't hurt, but she pretended it did. "You're hurting me," she lied, putting a note of pain in her voice to sell it, even though she didn't think he'd care. But immediately, surprisingly, his face registered a reaction and he let go, stepped back, held a staying hand out, trying to keep her from continuing her efforts to get to Dean. Alex's surprise showed on her face as she stared at him. What the hell? He was threatening to torture her if Dean didn't comply but wouldn't even hold her tight by the wrist when she complained of discomfort? He looked conflicted, and she was mystified. Another scream sounded and Alex's jaw tightened, her anxiety soared... but she couldn't do anything. She recognized that she wasn't going to get past Castiel. Resigned, Alex retreated and sat leaningly against the empty metal table behind her. She folded her arms and slouched, uncomfortable and unsure, hating how she had to sit here and stand by while Dean was forced to do what haunted him. Cas's eyes remained on her, and she could feel them. She said nothing.

A few tense minutes passed, with Alastair's screams punctuating the silence, and sometimes Dean's shouts, indistinct, echoed in between. A sudden movement to her left caused Alex to look up. She
was startled to see Anna there—young, slender, pale, red-headed Anna, who had last been seen in a blaze of Grace. Was she an angel again? She must have been—she'd appeared out of thin air.

"Anna," Castiel greeted dryly, coming closer—not toward Anna, but toward Alex, as if he were being protective.

"Hello, Castiel. Alex." Anna seemed different somehow—taller, fiercer.

"Anna..." Alex returned neutrally, looking at her apprehensively, suddenly suspicious that Anna had rejoined club angel and was backing Cas up on this. "You here to join the fun?"

Anna's expression was grim. "No. I'm here to end it." Her comment surprised and perplexed Alex.

"You shouldn't be here," Cas said, approaching Anna further now. "We still have orders to kill you."

"Somehow, I don't think you'll try," Anna said, and Alex was interested. Why? Because Anna was a great warrior who would kick Cas's ass? Or something else? Anna looked at Castiel intensely. "Why are you letting Dean do this?"

"He's doing God's work," Cas replied stoically. Another one of Alastair's screams rang out.

Anna's expression was pained. "Torturing? That's God's work? Stop him, Cas, please. Before you ruin the one real weapon you have." What weapon? Alex looked between the angels questioningly, but they weren't looking at her.

Cas shook his head. "Who are we to question the will of God?"

"Unless this isn't his will," Anna said. Alex watched the exchange with growing intrigue—Cas seemed to be listening, or at least considering what Anna was suggesting.

"If not God, then where do the orders come from?" he asked.

"I don't know. One of our superiors, maybe, but not him."

Another scream broke the silence, and Anna grew earnest, pleading. "The Father you love. You think he wants this? You think he'd ask this of you? You think this is righteous?" Castiel couldn't meet her questioning gaze. "What you're feeling right now? It's called doubt." She touched his hand, a subtle action Alex didn't miss. Cas looked at her hand in puzzlement. "These orders are wrong and you know it. But you can do the right thing. You're afraid, Cas. I was too. But together, we can still—"

"Together?" Castiel repeated, and yanked his hand away, his thoughtful expression turning hard and deadly. "I am nothing like you. You fell. Go."

"Cas..." Anna said, but Castiel's voice shook with murder.

"Go." He repeated himself darkly. Anna looked at him sadly, but then did as he said and disappeared. Cas looked shaken up and angry, which was interesting to see—genuine emotion, a real reaction? Anna's points seemed valid, too, and Alex wondered that was why Cas was upset. Because he thought so too, maybe. Or maybe that was Alex projecting, hoping.

"I thought you had orders to kill her," Alex said, testing him a little, wondering about him. Castiel looked at her almost balefully, as if he didn't want to be reminded of the fact. Alex copped a disarming, easygoing air that would have made Dean proud. "Death sentence or not, you were
kinda harsh there at the end, buddy."

Castiel looked at her sharply. "She suggested blasphemy."

Alex stood up and threw her arms wide in a shrug and let her hands hit the sides of her legs with a loud slap. "She suggested using your freaking brain."

"It's not that simple," Cas replied, his voice decidedly agitated.

"Um, yes, it is," Alex said. "You need to wake up. Something's wrong here about this, can't you feel it?" She paused. He seemed to have no clue about what was going on, or was too stuck on following orders and being a good little boy to care. Why was she appealing to him like he'd actually see it like she did? She didn't know. Wishful thinking again. Alex decided to get snippy again, angry at herself for trying to get him to listen to reason when clearly, it wasn't going to happen. "You could take some lessons from Anna, you know that? She questions things and decides herself what's wrong or right. She isn't a blind follower like you are."

She seemed to have touched a nerve—Cas snapped, whirling on her. "I am not blind!" he thundered.

Alex looked at him in mild surprise, shrank back a little, because she suddenly remembered how strong he was, how powerful. Maybe pissing him off was a bad idea. Still, she found it in her ability to make a snide remark. "And that, my friend, is called denial," she remarked, even as she was wondering if maybe the angels were right. Maybe he was beginning to become emotional.

Cas's jaw worked oddly, and he looked at her contemptuously as if she'd insulted him somehow. "You speak as if you know everything. You know nothing." It was meant to be an insult and Alex took it as such, but she was honestly surprised at him for it. At that point he seemed to remember himself and swallowed, his expression falling away into an apologetic state. "It's—" he started, then frowning abruptly, looked toward the cell. "No."

"Cas?" Alex asked, looking around in confusion. He had disappeared. A sudden, terrifying thought came to her, and she dashed to the the door of the room where Alastair was, peering through the glass. What she saw sent horror reeling through her, and she yanked the door open, rushing in, only to be slammed against the wall, frozen in place.

"Stay back!" Castiel barked, and Alex had no choice but to comply.

On the floor at the edge of the devil's trap, Dean's body laid lifelessly, his face a mess of bruises and blood. Alex struggled desperately against the hold Castiel had put on her, but it held. Alastair, who had somehow been freed from the trap, was grinning wickedly, pulling Ruby's knife out of his chest, completely unharmed by Castiel's attack. He chortled eerily, and charged Castiel—Alex could only watch, ineffectively struggling, as the angel and the demon began trading devastating blows, destroying parts of the room as they threw each other around. It was only a matter of maybe ten seconds, but Alastair gained the upper hand, slammed Cas against one of the walls, holding him up by his neck. Blood ran down the side of the angel's face, and Alex felt the hold on her lessen as Alastair began exorcising Castiel, shouting Latin. Frozen in sudden terror, she watched as Cas's mouth and eyes began to glow in fierce blue light. She tumbled forward, free to move once again. Just there, a couple feet away, she saw a cinder block. Without a second thought, Alex grabbed it, heaved it up with both hands, and lifting it high, she crashed it down on Alastair's head, stunning the demon and freeing Castiel from the chokehold. Cas tumbled to the ground, momentarily dazed.

Alastair, recovered, strode toward Alex, who was backing up fast, but not fast enough. "Alex,
"It's not us. We're not doing it!" Alex heard someone shouting, followed by bizarre sounds of someone screaming in pain.

She opened her eyes unevenly, and everything came rushing back as she blinked, her eyes refocusing awkwardly. She was staring at the ceiling, laying on her back, one of her legs tucked under her weirdly.

"I don't believe you," came a familiar voice. Sam? Alex struggled and rolled onto her side, supporting herself on an arm. Her head was pounding, and there was something wet on the side of her head. She touched her fingertips to it, and saw bright crimson there. Woozily, she looked up at the spot where she remembered Cas being. He wasn't there, but she saw that a pair of shoes were right in front of her face.

"Lilith is not behind this," Alastair said, his strangely nasal, lisping voice full of an ominous happiness. "She wouldn't kill seven angels. Oh, she'd kill a hundred, a thousand…"

Alex looked up foggily at the owner of the shoes in front of her face, to see Castiel reaching down for her. There was still blood running down the side of his face. He pulled her to her feet, and Alex clutched onto his arm for support, a little off kilter. She stared at him, a little groggy and muddled as she reached her full height. He was so handsome, she thought idly, that it was sad he had to be such an asshole. She lurched as her vision swam and she hung onto him tighter so that she didn't fall down.

"Go ahead. Send me back, if you can," Alastair taunted Sam, who smiled faintly.

"I'm stronger than that now," Sam said darkly. "Now I can kill." He held his hand out, and his expression became concentrated, aloof. Alastair's face fell and golden light flickered inside him, the outline of his skeleton pulsing through the skin. Adrenaline or fear seemed to overpower Alex's woozy state, and she stared in sudden breathless horror as Sam's outstretched hand slowly clenched into a fist. How was he doing that? Beside her, still supporting her, Castiel watched, his expression matching hers. Almost in unison, they clutched each other tighter as the demon began to scream, the pulsing golden light intensifying, then exploding inside of him. The host collapsed, dead. Sam looked pleased, a strange smile on his face that Alex would never, ever forget.

A soft groan from over by the devil's trap drew everyone's attention, and Alex jerked herself out of Castiel's grip, staggering over to Dean's crumpled body. She fell onto all fours and put her head to his chest, listening for his breath. Sam, seemingly back to being himself, was right behind her. Alex drew away. She was startled to see that she'd left a blood stain on Dean's shirt where she'd pressed her ear. She knew she had just cut herself and been given a solid knock on the head... but Dean was barely breathing. "We need to get him to a hospital," she said in urgent alarm.

Castiel came to them, his expression dogged. "Hold on."

Alex and Sam stayed by Dean's beside, hoping for a sign that Dean would regain consciousness. Castiel had taken them to the emergency room and then disappeared without even a word. It had
been a couple hours, and Dean had been stabilized, but still remained unconscious. The doctor had wanted to treat Alex, too, who had refused. It was only a cut, and possibly a mild concussion. Baby stuff, as far as she was concerned. She'd stopped the bleeding—she was fine. She sat on the edge of Dean's bed, and gently ran her palm down the side of his still face. He looked free of worries, at least. A small mercy. But would he be okay? Sam, who was sitting in a chair next to her, suddenly shot up to his feet. Following his suddenly hostile gaze, Alex rose too. Castiel stood in the doorway, silent. He looked normal again, free of blood, no rips in his coat. Wordlessly, the angel turned and walked away. Exchanging a glance, Sam and Alex took after him, Sam leading the way. Alex hadn't confronted him on what he'd done to Alastair. Not yet.

"Sam—" Castiel started as he caught up to the angel in the hospital hallway.

Sam jabbed a finger back toward Dean's room. "Get in there and heal him. Miracle. Now."

"I can't," Cas said, eliciting incredulous expressions from the twins.

"What do you mean, you can't?!!" Alex demanded, incredulous and quickly getting pissed. "After all of the times you healed me, that's one hell of a lie, Cas!"

"I mean I can't," Castiel repeated firmly, but his expression wasn't the usual confident and stern frown. He looked upset. "I shouldn't even be here right now. I've been warned for the last time about healing."

Alex was beside herself. "But he needs it!"

Sam was similarly aghast. "You and Uriel put him in there—because you can't keep a simple devil's trap together!"

Cas looked between the two siblings, who had pretty much cornered him. "I don't know what happened. That trap... it shouldn't have broken. I am sorry."

"Oh. You're sorry?" Alex asked scornfully.

"This whole thing was pointless. You understand that?" Sam demanded. "The demons aren't doing the hits. Something else is killing your soldiers, and that's the truth. Hope you're happy." Fed up, Sam whirled and stalked back to Dean's room, leaving Castiel and Alex alone in the dim hallway.

"Perhaps Alastair was lying," Cas attempted, only to be quickly cut off by another angry retort from Alex.

"Yeah and perhaps the sky is purple! You're honestly going to stand here and not do anything—after Dean did everything you asked? You forced him to do the most inhuman and horrible thing, for what?!" She was infuriated. "So that you can leave him to rot in there?!"

"I don't know how that devil's trap could have failed—" Castiel tried again.

"It was sabotaged!" Alex exploded, "Or rigged! Maybe by you, Cas! Huh?" Clear incredulous shock rippled across his features as she looked at him while shaking her head in almost disgust. "I wouldn't put it past you at this point." She was bitter, blinded by betrayed anger and confusion. "I never should have trusted you, not even a little bit. Not for one second."

"How can you even say that?" he asked slowly. He sounded offended and wounded. "I've done nothing but stand at your side and give you assistance and guidance from Heaven."

"Yeah, thanks," Alex said, sounding anything but thankful. She looked at his stupid face that she
currently hated more than anything; pissed at how clueless he looked. How could he not know how much he had risked by letting Dean torture Alastair? Or how twisted it was to force Dean to do what he did? Alex's rage was collecting inside of her blindingly, and she realized she needed to walk away before it made her do something she'd regret. She was losing her mind to her temper.

She turned to walk away, but he grasped her arm lightly, stopping her. "I'm only here to help." Castiel said, and Alex, infuriated, rounded on him.

"Don't touch me!" she snarled, hauling off and punching him squarely across the face... and immediately she hunched forward, cradling her fist in pain. "Son of a bitch!" She groaned. He was completely unaffected by her physical attack, which pissed her off even more.

He looked chagrined. "You can't hurt me, Alex," he said, sounding as if he felt sorry for her for thinking she could. He was silent for a beat, looking at her hand tensely. "Is your hand all right?"

"What do you care?!" Alex shot back, holding her hurt hand to herself pitiably, reeling from pain and trying not to show it.

Cas looked grumpy. "You shouldn't exert yourself. You've sustained a head injury."

"This 'head injury' isn't half as bad as the pain you've been in my ass!" She retorted, yanking her arm out of his grasp. Maybe she couldn't hurt him physically. But she had a hunch that she could hurt him another way, a childish way, and she didn't hesitate to try it. "I hate you, Castiel. Hate," she bit out acidly, feeling absolute sick triumph as his expression fell completely in response. And high on the bullying behavior, she let another cruel remark fly. "Go die," she snarled thoughtlessly, and she received exactly what she had been aiming for: his face registered absolute confusion, hurt. But instead of feeling better again, Alex felt a very strong pang of regret and contempt... for herself. Pride held her fast and she lifted her chin and stared at him, refusing to let him see through her, trying to let him think that's actually how she really felt. If for no other reason than to protect herself at this point.

He seemed at a loss, devastated by her words. "I… I don't understand. I risked everything out of compassion for you. To give you back your voice. Despite everything—I know I've made some errors—but despite everything, I am your friend."

Friend? Alex felt like she'd been socked in the gut when he said that. Did he really think that? He seemed so innocent and vulnerable right then, so full of earnestness. He seemed like the Castiel she kept catching glimpses of and liking. His eyes showed hurt and he gazed at her in confusion. "Why would you say this to me?" His wounded question hung in the air, and Alex couldn't deny the guilt that washed over her as he had said that, nor the knowledge that he was pretty much right.

Grudgingly, she looked away, not sure what to do now. "You know what, I appreciate what you've done. I do, Cas." More than anything, really. She shook her head, frustrated, feeling emotion brimming in her eyes. "But if you're my friend, then you'll help us. Please! Dean might die!"

Cas's face showed reluctance and as he spoke, there was an intensity there, as if he were trying to ask her to please understand. "Alex—I cannot help you. It's out of my hands. I've been ordered not to—" he stopped mid sentence, seeing the pained look on Alex's face. Surprisingly, Cas addressed exactly what Alex was worried about. "Dean won't die. He'll survive this, I promise you."

Alex just looked at him in hurt confusion. She felt let down and betrayed. "You can help us. And you won't. Why?" Cas's gaze faltered as if her words shamed him and Alex gritted her teeth together, realizing she had made a huge mistake. Trusting him in a small way, enough to hope that he would help them. Her voice got cold and trembled. "What you did today, what you let happen was wrong." She retreated back from him a step. "Just stay the hell away from my family,
understand?" And without waiting for a reply, she turned and left him standing there.

She didn't look back to see if he stayed. She was too busy squeezing her eyes shut and trying to shove the shame and confusion away. She saw his face in her mind's eye, hurt and disillusioned at her verbal jabs. Why wouldn't he listen? Why wouldn't he wake up and get his mind out of the mindset of blindly following orders? He could help and he wouldn't. And the worst part was how Alex found herself believing Castiel should help, that it was within his character to help them. She scoffed at herself. She didn't know him. All she knew was that he was confused and confusing. She tried to push him out of her mind. She just wanted to be done with entire, messy ordeal. In vain, she rubbed her fist in her other hand, wincing. Punching him had been like punching a tree trunk. And the worst part was that he had turned his head with her fist when she hit him—she knew that if he hadn't done that, if he hadn't moved his face when her fist impacted him, she probably would have broken her hand all together. She thought bitterly that she didn't deserve that, for him to be looking out for her still, especially not now after she'd been such a total bitch.

She grimaced against the shooting pains in her knuckles as she re-entered Dean's room. Sam was sitting again at Dean's bedside, leaned over his knees as he watched their brother intently. Sam glanced up at her. "I've never seen him this bad."

Alex took her seat opposite of Sam, not able to hide her anxiety. Dean looked horrible and sallow, and she'd seen him this bad only once or twice in her whole life. She gritted her teeth together, breathed out heavily, weary and hopeless and worried beyond comprehending. "Sam—what are we gonna do?"

Sam's jaw clenched, he thought for a minute. "We're gonna lay low. We're gonna get him better. And then we're going to figure out a way to get these damn angels off our backs for good."

Alex shook her head hollowly. It would all be easier said than done. For a minute, they watched Dean silently, the beep, beep, beep of the heart rate monitor punctuating the silence.

A little nervously, Alex cleared her throat. She didn't want to have to ask what she was about to. "Listen, Sam. How were you able to kill Alastair like that?" She paused. "You were… full on telepathic." She was struggling not to sound repulsed or afraid. "Not even Ruby's knife did anything to him."

Sam was somber, his gaze stony. "Uh, yeah, I dunno. My abilities are just stronger."

Alex felt like she wasn't getting the full story, but was afraid to set Sam off. "I mean, do they get stronger every time you use them?" she asked, trying to pry something more out of him.

"Something like that," Sam said and sighed, looking away uncomfortably. "Sorry. I don't like to talk about it. I, you know, don't understand them myself."

Alex nodded, and let it go, even if she would retain her suspicions about it all for some time to come. "It's okay Sam. It's fine." But it wasn't fine. She looked at him from underneath her lashes across the bed. Even though he was within arms reach, he could have been a hundred miles away. That's how close she felt to him right now. Troubled, she remembered how he had barely been able to exorcise Samhain, some punk street demon, a couple months ago. So how was it that he so easily kill one of the most powerful demons in existence… with only his mind? Alex looked at her oldest brother, wishing she knew what to do. Wishing she didn't feel slightly afraid of him right now.

Castiel found Uriel sitting on a bench in the middle of a snowy glen. His brother had his eyes
closed. "There you are," Uriel said, as if he'd been expecting him, and opened his eyes. His demeanor was agitated and distressed. "Castiel, I received revelation from our superiors. Our brothers and sisters are dying and they… they want us to stop hunting the demon responsible."

Castiel sat carefully beside Uriel, remaining silent, distracted. He couldn't stop remembering Alex's angry words and the way she'd attacked him like he was the enemy. Why didn't she understand he was here to protect and care for her? Why did she look at him so mistrustfully and like he was a stranger? Didn't she realize he was the one in the shadows and the still moments who made sure she would always be safe? Before this vessel, he hadn't dared to imagine that they would ever speak to each other, but if he had... he never would have imagined she could ever be so angry with him. Make him... hurt so much. How was it possible for mere words to sting him inside? He felt dejected and defeated, wishing he could change this somehow. How could he undo this damage?

Uriel sighed, ignorant to Castiel's inner struggles. "Something is wrong up there. I mean, can you feel it?" Uriel looked heavenward, greatly troubled.

Castiel glanced Uriel's way, torn out of his thoughts. He didn't want to address his growing doubt in the purity of Heaven's orders. "The murders," he said, distracted. "Maybe they aren't demonic. Sam Winchester said the demons had nothing to do with it."

"If not the demons, what could it be?" Uriel asked, sounding shocked at the idea.

"The will of Heaven," Castiel theorized. His shoulders were slumped at the reality. "We are failing, Uriel," he said heavily, distressed at the thought of how dire these times truly were. "We are losing the war, perhaps the garrison is being punished."

The suggestion seemed to bother Uriel. "You think our Father would—"

"I think maybe our Father isn't giving the orders anymore," Castiel said, emboldened, letting himself take Anna's stance, take Alex's stance. He thought about how Alex had insisted, repeatedly, that something was wrong with the scenario. Off. And Castiel decided that he, too, felt that way. "Maybe there is something wrong."

Uriel's brow furrowed. "Yes. I believe there is."

Castiel looked Uriel's way again. He was preparing to broach an uncomfortable subject. "Uriel. I asked around. No one else in Heaven received revelation about the end of Alex Winchester's guardianship."

Uriel turned slowly to look at Castiel. "Well I did," he said evenly.

"Did you?" Castiel challenged quietly.

Uriel's eyes narrowed. "What are you accusing me of?" he asked in a soft, dangerous tone.

Castiel returned Uriel's gaze unblinkingly, under the knowledge that there would be no going back from what he was about to say. As of late, Castiel had been under the influence of outsiders—namely Alex and Dean Winchester. In the privacy of his own mind, he wondered if they were the reason he had begun to suspect Uriel of lies and deceit. But no matter who or what had caused him to think these things, he thought them all the same. Castiel gathered his courage to reply to his brother. "Of manipulating the situation to your advantage."

Uriel scoffed, and shook his head. "Our superiors are right. You have begun to lose your mind." And without another word, Uriel disappeared, leaving Castiel even more lost than before.
Castiel heaved a tired sounding sigh and stood up. This was not supposed to happen. He was not supposed to be obliged to mistrust and second-guess his brethren. And still, he did. The growing sense of unease, of *wrongness*, was too strong to deny. Yet, he wanted to deny it. Heaven had been stable once. He had known his place and has carried out his duties without question. Things were different now. Castiel was considering very terrible and blasphemous things in the depths of his mind. Things like disobedience and defiance.

Absently, he wondered about Dean. His injuries were bad, but he would survive. Still, seeing him beaten and bruised and unresponsive had sparked a strange feeling in Castiel's spirit. It didn't have to be that way, yet Heaven said he was to do nothing about it… he was to stand idly by and allow the man to suffer. Why? What Alex had wanted to know, Castiel wanted to know, too. He then thought of her again. He could still see her hazel eyes flashing and her cheeks flushed red as she had hit him. He had felt nothing, at least physically, upon the impact of her fist. But internally, he'd been shocked and affronted by the action—she'd been trying to hurt him. To attack him. Again he remembered hearing her shout *'I hate you!'* He didn't understand how such a simple declaration could have made him feel so bad or why it still bothered him so deeply. And above all, he knew that spending so much time thinking of her was not prudent or advisable. And still, he did.

Night came and Castiel finally stood. He needed help, and perhaps seized by madness for a moment, he asked for it from the strangest of places. He stood underneath a dim streetlight and called for her. "Anna!" A moment passed and she made no appearance. His voice softened as he searched the darkness for a sign. "Anna, please." The light above him flickered softly and Castiel looked up into it, then turned around.

Anna stood there—youthful and small, lithe. "Decided to kill me after all?" She glanced around, as if she thought other angels were hidden nearby.

"I'm alone," Castiel assured his sister plainly. His entire mind felt consumed with worry and fear, conflict.

She seemed a little surprised. "What do you want from me, Castiel?"

Castiel looked at his sister and confessed his greatest sin. "I'm considering disobedience," he told her heavily, barely able to withhold how fearful it made him to admit such.

The smallest smile came over Anna's face and she smiled. "Good."

"No," he insisted, "it isn't." Was this what panic felt like? Confusion? He tried to explain it to her. "For the first time, I feel…" he didn't know what else to say. "I feel." He knew no way of standing up underneath the metaphorical weight of the things he felt. The longer he was around the Winchesters, the more feelings came over him, and it was like a monsoon he couldn't control.

"That's *good*, Castiel," Anna repeated, coming a little closer, giving him a hopeful and reassuring smile. "I know it's intense and frightening and new, but it *is* good."

Castiel was perplexed. "How can it be good?" He questioned. "The things I'm feeling are corrupting my thoughts and actions." His voice softened because he felt ashamed of himself. His eyes flickered downward. "The things I feel… they *tempt me.*"

"Tempt you how?" Anna asked, concern in her eyes.

"To choose my own actions," Castiel said. "To disregard orders in favor of what I deem appropriate."
"And why should that be wrong?" Anna asked, her concern melting away into a studious, earnest tone. "We were taught never to question anything, Castiel. Because they knew if we questioned, we would begin to see." She was deadly serious and quiet. "A war is coming. A different war than what we fight now. You can sense it, can't you? The future is dark and uncertain. Heaven's not what it used to be." Anna contemplated him with sadness in her eyes. "Do you even know who it is you serve anymore?"

Castiel's eyes went down slowly as he thought very hard and realized the answer was deeply horrifying. "No," he murmured. "I don't think that I do."

"You could be like me, Castiel," Anna appealed. "You could choose your own course of action. Use the power and ability our Father gave to you to help the humans you choose to help. The humans you care about. Her." Castiel's eyes snapped to Anna's at the nameless mention of Alex. Anna's eyes were soft and questioning, curious. "Tell me, Castiel. What things do you feel for her?"

Bristling, Castiel's face returned to a mask. "I am her Heaven-elect protector. Feelings are not part of the arrangement."

Anna gave the softest little laughing sound and she shook her head ruefully, seeming to see straight through Castiel's attempts. "You and I both know that's not true. Why do you think you got in trouble for restoring her voice, Castiel? You felt back then. She made you feel compassion. You were moved to action by her." Castiel was looking down, ashamed at himself for being disobedient. Anna saw his expression. "Would you take it back, if you were able?" She asked him intently.

Castiel raised his eyes to hers. His answer was immediate and strong. "Never." He didn't understand himself. But the shame he felt for disobeying was nothing compared to the deep feeling that he had done the right thing. He remembered hearing Alex laugh out loud for the first time. He would never choose to not give her that. It had made him... happy. That sound and what it meant. That she had been happy, too.

"Why are you fighting so hard?" Anna asked gently, peering at him in true confusion. "It's obvious to me that your time as a blind follower of Heaven is over."

The thought of the new and unknown—the thought of existing in a way where he was in charge of his every action—it was terrifying. Shouldn't he accept who he was? A 'hammer' as Dean had put it? Still—he had his doubts and questions. There was a war inside of him, and Castiel didn't know how to win. "I was created to follow," he said, trying to rationalize and use logic, attempting to remember himself. "I shouldn't presume myself the commander of my own destiny."

"But maybe you should. And maybe that's what God wants." Anna put her hand on Castiel's shoulder, trying to comfort him or sway him, he didn't know. He looked at her hand balefully and she dropped it away. Hurt crossed her face. "That's right. You're too good for my help. I'm just trash," she said in a sharpened voice, "a walking blasphemy." She turned to leave him.

"Anna, please—" Castiel said, voice rising a little bit in response to the turmoil he felt inside. "I don't know what to do. Please tell me what to do." He waited for her to say something, to continue telling him things that helped him feel as if perhaps his actions weren't wrong or sinful.

Anna turned halfway to look at him and there was a bittersweet smile on her face. "No, Castiel," she said softly. "I'm sorry. It's time to think for yourself."
Alex gave the corner vending machine a swift kick, cursing it under her breath. She grabbed it with both hands and shook, trying to get the freaking thing to dispense the pack of M&Ms. "Come on—you—jackass—son of a bitch—motherfucking jerkoff—" she grunted, rattling it with violent, exasperated force. Finally, the little packet tumbled loose, and she was able to fish it out of the machine. She clenched the little bag of candy tightly… it had proven to be very coy. So much so that she felt mad at it. She set off down the quiet, dark hallway of the hospital back to Dean's room, where her brother, awake and on the mend, was anxiously awaiting the delivery of his snack.

"Well, thanks to your little midnight craving—" she started as she opened the door, but then fell silent at the sight of him. Castiel stood up as she entered the dark room. He'd been seated beside Dean, in her seat. And then she saw Dean's face in the dim moonlight that came in through the window. He was stricken and distressed, his cheeks looked tear stained. "Dean! What's wrong?"

She asked in sudden alarm, then looked at Castiel accusingly as she went to Dean's side protectively. "What did you do to him?!"

A slab of moonlight fell diagonally across the angel's face, and she could see him looking at her with a strange expression. Discomfort. "I answered his questions. I told him the truth which I uncovered."

"Which is?" Alex asked, stepping closer to him with dread rising.

Castiel's gaze faltered. "I discovered that Uriel was the one who was killing angels. He wanted to raise Lucifer. He said other angels do, too." He paused, looking into her eyes.

"What?" Alex asked, her face going soft with surprise. "What happened when you found that out?"

A muscle in Cas's jaw jumped and he looked away. "He's dead." From the way he said it, Alex thought Cas was saying he killed him too.

Not what Alex had expected to hear—none of it. Castiel looked resigned and burdened—different somehow—and Alex could find no retort or jab to aim at him. Actually, she didn't want to. She simply looked at him, and realized how exhausted he looked. How overwhelmed. "There is a war in Heaven, and I must fight for righteousness," Castiel said. "You and Dean and Anna were right." He sounded so, so, tired. Alex just looked at him in stunned silence, not really sure what to say. He looked like he'd been to Hell and back emotionally, and Alex felt incredibly guilty and incredibly cruel. He was trying. To be their friend. Her friend. She looked away, but Cas didn't take his eyes off her. His gaze fell to her hand. "Is your hand all right?" he asked—again—catching her off guard completely. She looked at him incredulously, hearing the concern in his voice. After how awful she'd been to him, he was still wondering about her hand? He remembered that, was thinking about it, was concerned about it?

She withered slightly underneath his questioning gaze. "Uh... y-yeah, it's fine." She swallowed oddly, looked away, feeling mortified.

Castiel was as tense as ever and looked to Dean. His frown deepened. "I'll leave now." But before he did, he looked at Alex once more, his expression unreadable. "I'm sorry, Alex." And he was gone, before she could ask what for. Although Alex couldn't know what he meant he was sorry for, Castiel had meant he was sorry for several things: hurting her hand. Making Dean torture Alastair. And letting her think that he would ever, for even a moment, willfully hurt her. Castiel had known, the entire time, that should the moment come, should Uriel have told him to hurt Alex to coerce Dean into action... Castiel wouldn't have been able to bring himself to that. And he was sorry that he'd had to let her think that he would.

But she didn't know what he meant, and Alex stared at the spot Castiel disappeared from, confused.
"Dammit," she muttered, unable to put her conflicting frustrations into coherent thoughts or words. Why did he always leave her in a jumble of confusion? She didn't roll like that. In this life, she made up her mind about things and stuck by her decisions. But with Cas, she kept going back and forth. She couldn't make up her mind about him, and it was infuriating.

A soft sniff tore her out of her thoughts and she turned her attention to Dean, who was struggling to control his face. He was clearly upset. "What is it?" Alex asked in dismay, sitting down on the bed and gently brushing his wet cheeks with the backs of her fingers. She always got extremely upset herself when Dean was upset, but his tears—those terrified her.

He caught her hands in his to stop her, and held them firmly, his eyes squeezed closed. "Cas said that I was the one who started the apocalypse." His eyes opened, his face contorted in guilt and pain and he looked at her with a horrible, pained expression. "Me. In Hell, I broke the first seal. I started it."

"What?" Alex whispered.

"When I tortured souls, it started this whole freakin' thing," Dean whispered tearfully.

Alex grasped at straws for the right words to say to comfort her miserable brother. "Well, you'll be the one to end it, right? You and me. And Sammy. We'll beat this. Dean... hey. Hey."

What little composure remained was fast crumbling, and Dean shook his head. His voice cracked with raw emotion—with a certain note of hopelessness. "I'm not strong enough, Al. I've carried too much for too long, and I can't do it. I just can't. I don't have the strength anymore." He shook from a sob that wracked his entire body, and Alex didn't know what else to do. She half crawled into the bed, embracing him tightly, even though she herself was beginning to feel as though she were falling apart, too. "You don't have to do it alone, Dean. I'm here."

He just wept, and she clutched him in total terror, glad he couldn't see her face right now. When Dean, her rock, fell apart, she didn't know how to be okay.
"You took away my world."
- Fastball

"I see your giant snickers bar and raise you a cup of room temperature hospital jello," Dean said, plunking the aforementioned item down on his bedside tray.

"Dangerous stakes, Winchester. You sure?" Alex asked, feigning deadly seriousness as she stared at him over her cards.

"Oh yeah," he replied in a low voice, matching her theatrics with a challenging eyebrow shrug. "I'm sure. Hit me."

She laid down her hand with a triumphant smirk and he grimaced as she announced, "Full house."

"Dammit," Dean sighed, throwing down his hand in disappointment. "Three of a kind. You win this round, Pipsqueak."

"Ah... victory..." Alex said with a note of comic uncertainty. She took the cup of Jello and squinted at the wiggly red substance—her hard earned prize—as Dean sighed restlessly and settled back against the pillows of his bed, half-sitting.

"I am so damn ready to get outta here," he said, sounding mostly exasperated but a little forlorn, too.

Alex glanced at him sympathetically. It had been about a week and a half that he'd been here at the hospital. "Well, the doc said if all the tests came back normal today we can leave tomorrow," she reminded him. He rolled his eyes. "One more day. We got this," she said, chuckling a little as she picked up the playing cards and began to shuffle them. "Another game?"

Dean shook his head. "Nah, I'm poker-ed out."

Alex stopped shuffling for a second. "Okay, who are you and what did you do with Dean?" She joked, receiving a glancing smile from her brother. Honestly, she was tired of poker too. There had been lots of poker, blackjack, and bad daytime TV the past week or so. But there'd been sleep which was nice. She'd been there almost every day and night—bringing in food from fast food places, fussing over him, and just keeping him company. She would leave when visiting hours were over, then sneak back in at night, sleeping in the chair beside him. After his breakdown the first night there, Alex had a deep instinct that he shouldn't be alone; that he needed her there, even if it was just her physical presence. That, and she didn't want to be alone, either. They'd always been close to each other like that their whole life, anyway. Sam too, once.

They hadn't brought up any of it again—not the apocalypse crap, not Alastair, not Castiel, not Dean's feelings. She knew, sooner or later, she'd have to tell him what really happened to Alastair. He wasn't going to like it. As if reading her mind, Dean cleared his throat. "So, heard from Sammy today?"

Alex pursed her lips to the side, her good mood fading. She stuck the shuffled cards back in their
box roughly. "Called earlier and said he's on his way back." She felt sour recalling how their brother had left almost a week ago on a whim. Bobby had come to visit Dean, mentioned he was headed to Rapid City next to take care of a ghost, and Sam had all but jumped at the opportunity. In Alex's eyes, leaving when Dean needed him most. She still felt rubbed-wrong by it.

"Why didn't you go with him, again?" Dean asked. "I'm sure they could have used your help. And at least you wouldn't be stuck here."

"Those two didn't need help with one little vengeful spirit," Alex said, trying to sound lighter than she felt. She sounded false even to herself. "And I wasn't going to leave you to be bored all by yourself."

Dean just tilted his head to the side, scrutinizing her. "Okay, Al. What aren't you telling me?"

Dammit. He'd been off the pain killers for a couple days now and was getting his clarity back. She huffed and looked down, found out—she guessed it was time to come clean. She shrugged, reluctant. "Sam got mad at me because I wouldn't go with him. But, I wasn't gonna leave you, Dean. Not now. Not after…" she trailed off, thinking better of actually bringing it up. "And then he and I… we had another fight, he said I was being selfish, that you're my favorite, he couldn't be around me… blah, blah, blah, same old crap."

Dean gave her a disappointed look. "Fighting? Again? Why didn't you tell me that like six days ago when it happened?"

Alex shrugged again, guiltily. "Didn't wanna upset you while you were still recovering."

"Oh come on, I'm fine," he said, glaring at the insinuation that he was too weak to handle some bad news.

"Internal bleeding and severe head trauma aren't fine," Alex retorted, receiving a dirty look. She glanced at him, realizing now was the time. She swallowed apprehensively. "But, since you are mostly recovered… there is something else I need to tell you."

Dean got a suspicious look on his face at the tone of her voice, and Alex let out a big breath, wishing she could save Dean the oncoming confusion and pain. "So, Ruby's knife? It didn't work on Alastair. Didn't affect him at all."

Dean was puzzled, and Alex could see the wheels of his mind turning. He knew Alastair was dead, but they hadn't exactly told him the details. "Then how…" he trailed off, and then his expression went cold in understanding. "No. Not Sam...?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," Alex confirmed, her voice full of the sadness and confusion she felt.

"But—but he could barely exorcise Samhain a couple months ago," Dean protested, still confused.

"I know," Alex said, remembering the scene with distaste. "I don't know how he did it. All I know is I saw him do it. He did it so easily too, Dean. Like it was a walk in the freaking park. Like he's been… practicing, or… I dunno." She threw her hands up slightly in frustration.

"So, there's something he is not telling us," Dean surmised grimly.

"I get the feeling there's a lot of things he's not telling us," Alex replied. There was a sad, heavy silence, and Dean, suddenly looking tired and haggard, rubbed his forehead.

"You shouldn't have let him go by himself up there with Bobby. Dammit, Alex. He could have
finished with the job days ago for all we know, and be with Ruby, or... who knows?" His sadness was escalating into anger. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

She raised her eyebrows at him. "Look at the heart rate monitor. Your blood pressure just went up like twenty points," she said, being totally reasonable, but still getting a look of annoyance from her brother. "I did call Bobby, after Sam called today. To make sure Sam was telling the truth. To make sure he'd actually been with Bobby the whole time," Alex said, getting Dean's attention. "Bobby confirmed."

Dean looked mildly corrected then shook his head vaguely. "Sad that we're at a place where we have to do that crap," Dean commented emptily, then glanced around the room unhappily. "When we get out of here... I'm halfway tempted to go to Timbuktu. Where Ruby can't get to Sam, where the damn angels can't get us. Surround us with hex bags, good beer, cheap burgers... watch the world go to shit and stop worrying about it being our fault." Alex said nothing, just watched her brother with complete understanding of what he was feeling.

"I'm tired of it," he said, growing quiet. "All of it. I just want..." he trailed off, his expression strange and lost. "I don't know what I want." He looked down into his lap, and Alex could see how burdened he felt. He shook his head. "Just not this."

Three Weeks Later

Alex Remington woke up to her cell phone alarm ringing as it usually did at six o'clock in the morning. She swung her feet over the edge of the bed and pushed off into another day of her life. She spent the first few minutes of her morning meditating and practicing Yoga, as she did every day. After showering and drying her hair, she paged through her closet, picking a pencil skirt, cherry red flats, and gray cardigan over a pressed white blouse. She applied her makeup—foundation, mascara, eye liner, gloss—then combed serum into her hair and straight ironed it, sweeping it into a low pony tail, completing the look with a thin headband. She looked herself over in the mirror—she looked polished and professional, as usual. Still, something looked off and she couldn't figure out what it was. She felt a faint sense of frustration and distaste, but couldn't figure out why. Chalking it up to fatigue, she went to the kitchenette of her apartment and made a cup of tea, had whole grain toast and an organic banana, did a little research for her paper that was due on Thursday, and then it was time to leave for work.

The office was only a few blocks from her apartment, so she walked, keeping a brisk pace in the early morning chill. She looked up at the towering structure of Sandover Bridge and Iron as she arrived. It was hard to believe she worked here now. She'd been hired three weeks ago, and before that had worked at a consulting firm, where work had been.... well, it was a blur now. She could barely remember what she did there, and she frowned. She made a mental note that she needed to start taking a multivitamin. A person her age shouldn't have so many problems with remembering things that happened three weeks ago, and it seemed like she was having problems remembering things a lot lately.

She rode the elevator up with a bunch of other business people, including one guy who was a little taller than her. He was dressed nicely, with short brown hair and handsome features, bright green eyes. For some reason, she instantly decided he was a douche bag. He smiled politely at her, and she returned it, even while mentally, she was telling him to screw off, and that his face was stupid. Men that good looking were always jerks in her experience. She hopped off on her floor—technical support, and entered the reception area. Her domain. She set her things down on her desk and took her seat, switching on her computer and getting her earpiece out of the drawer. Employees were filing in now, dressed in the pale yellow polo uniform shirts. She was glad she got to wear what
she wanted—fashion was basically her life.

The computer chimed, finished turning on, and she smiled at the desktop picture of fluffy white kittens playing with each other. She loved cats. She looked at the picture a little longer, her smile fading, a weird sensation in the pit of her stomach. She loved cats... didn't she? Didn't she love cats?

"Good morning, Alex!" Came a familiar voice, and Alex looked up.

"Oh, hi Sam!" Alex greeted, smiling at the latest arrival. Sam Wesson, who had been hired at the same time as her. They'd hit it off in the two day training and had discovered they both loved the Red Hot Chili Peppers, hiking, and karaoke.

"How good was 24 last night?" Sam asked, and Alex's eyes went wide.

"So good, right?! Oh my god." Alex grinned at him. "Jack Bauer is the man."

Sam chuckled, and took one of the M&Ms she kept in a bowl, popped it into his mouth. "See you at lunch?" He asked.

Alex was putting on her earpiece and flashing him a smile. "I'll be there."

With another smile, Sam left, heading back to his cubicle. She watched him go and wondered again why she wasn't attracted to him. He was tall, built, handsome, and really nice. They got along famously, like they'd always known each other. But he just didn't do anything for her. It was more like a friend or a brother vibe. Weirdly enough, she was more interested in Miller, the weird boss, than Sam. Speaking of him, in he walked, dressed in his normal business suit. Over it, he wore a tan trench coat. Come to think of it, she'd never seen him out of it.

"Good morning Mr. Collins!" She greeted him cheerily, and he acknowledged her with a glance. He was an odd guy, really. He always had a look on his face like he was slightly pissed off about something. He arrived to work in the mornings and shut himself in his office all day, only coming out to leave. And he always watched her hawkishly, intently. Sometimes she felt like a tiny mouse under his stare. But she kind of liked that for some reason.

"Good morning, Alex," he replied in his deep voice, looking at her in that peevish way of his, and without further ado, he went into his office. Alex watched until the door was shut, her chin in a hand. So weird. She had no clue why she found him so intriguing. Or so attractive. Maybe because he was so mysterious. He never said more than a few words at a time, and the five o'clock shadow, the scowl, the intense stares, the bright blue eyes, the strangely boyish old man handsomeness... something about him was so—

The phone rang, rattling her out of her daydreams, and she glanced at the time on her computer screen. Eight o'clock already. And so the day began. She picked up the phone and answered in a cheery voice. "Good morning, Sandover Bridge and Iron, how may I assist you today?"

6:00am. Wake up, Yoga, shower, dress, breakfast, walk to work. Arrive, say hi to Sam, say hi to Mr. Collins. Answer phones, redirect calls. Print memos, order supplies, refill printer ink. Clean break room refrigerator. Answer more calls. And before Alex knew it, another day was drawing to a close.

It was time to go, but Alex planned on staying a little late. Mr. Collins came out of his office and stopped at her desk, looking at her through narrowed eyes. "You're still here."
She smiled up at him, hoping maybe he would smile back. "I just need to finish up a couple things... I won't be long."

His expression didn't waver in the slightest. "See you tomorrow."

He turned and left, leaving her slightly disappointed. Sighing, she opened up her purse and took out her jump drive where her paper draft would be. She was taking night classes at one of the local colleges, and this paper was due in a few hours. She didn't have the time to go home and then to campus, and would rather work here than in the creepy college library. She only had about two hours to get it done, so she set to work, hoping she wouldn't get in trouble for using company property for personal use. It was after hours, she figured, so it couldn't hurt. She noticed about twenty minutes later, when the sun set, that behind her, there was faint blue light coming from one cubicle. She wasn't the only one staying late.

She worked for about an hour more, polishing up the paper and hoping she never had to read or analyze *Heart of Darkness* ever again. It was a heavy read and she couldn't quite honestly see why the professor thought it was so life-changing. But, in her pursuit of a degree in English, she supposed she would have to write a lot of papers on books she didn't get. She paused for a moment, wondering how she had let herself wait until her mid-twenties to go to college. Why hadn't she started at eighteen? She couldn't recall a specific reason.

A strange sound interrupted her thoughts. Behind her, somewhere in the cubicles or maybe the break room, she heard a very strange sound, popping, like a muffled explosion, and then a man's scream. She stood in alarm, her heart beginning to hammer. "Hello?" she called, and no one answered. She entered the quiet darkness of the cubicles, and saw that halfway down the room, the light in the break room was on. She cautiously approached the slab of light on the dark carpeted floor, frowning as she got closer, the smell of something like burned meat hitting her nostrils. "Hello?" she called again, and peeked into the break room... only to see a man, clearly dead, hanging out of the microwave, head-first... blood and chunks of flesh spattered inside the microwave and on parts of the floor and ceiling. Alex tilted her head to the side, grimacing in disgust. "*Ugh.*" Then she frowned at herself, not sure how she could react so casually to such a horrific sight. She needed to call the police—but as she stood there, she felt the temperature of the room drop, and as she breathed out, her breath made a little puff of vapor. And in the shiny glass of the coffeepot, she thought she saw a movement behind her, a hazy reflection of an old man. She whirled, but no one was there.

A little disconcerted, she hugged her arms to herself and looked around, beginning to feel legitimately spooked. "Okay, definitely time to call the cops."

Sam and Alex watched as the coroner team wheeled the body out. People from other floors were gathered in reception, watching in horrified curiosity. Beside Alex, Sam was shaking his head. "He really stuck his head in a microwave?" he was appalled.

"Yes, just like I told you. It was sick," Alex said, then shook her head sadly. "He was two weeks from retiring. I was helping to plan a little office party for him. He was excited about it... I don't get why he did this."

"Yeah it's all... very bizarre." Sam sounded as suspicious as she felt. Something about it wasn't normal, wasn't natural. Sam looked at her, concerned. "Sorry you had to see all of that, Alex."

"Ah. It wasn't so bad," Alex said, drawing a surprised look from her coworker.
"Wasn't so bad?" he repeated.

"Well I mean, it was horrible," she backpedaled, not wanting Sam to think she was a freak. "But I dunno, I'm fine. Not that shaken up." She frowned. "Maybe I should be worried that I feel fine." She thought about telling him about the chill in the room, the reflection she thought she saw, but wasn't sure if that would make her sound crazy or not.

"Hey!" Came a loud voice. It was the assistant floor manager, Dave. "Everyone needs to quit standing around and gawking, and get to your cubicles. Yes, it's sad, but we have work to do, people."

The employees all dissipated, and Alex gave Sam a wan smile. "See you at lunch?" He asked halfheartedly.

"I'll be there," she confirmed, and headed up towards reception. She ran into a rushed looking Ian—he was Sam's desk neighbor and today she almost didn't recognize him. He was actually in company dress policy, clean shaven, and hair neatly combed. Another bizarre thing to add to the growing list. "Morning, Ian," she greeted, looking at him curiously.

"I don't have time to talk, I need to get to work," he said replied, brushing past her and making a beeline for his cubicle. Alex frowned, unable to shake the growing feeling that something was off.

"My pleasure ma'am. Thank you for calling Sandover. Goodbye." Alex disconnected the phone call and yawned restlessly. It was around lunch time and Ian had gone up to HR about an hour ago. When he didn't come back, Sam went to go see what happened. She was feeling the mid day lull coming on, and was already thinking about how much she couldn't wait to get home and watch the Oprah show that would be waiting on her DVR. Just then, Sam came back in. From his expression, Alex could tell something was wrong, and stood up. "What happened? Where's Ian?"

Sam's face was blank. "Ian stabbed himself in the neck with a pencil in the HR bathroom."

Alex blinked. "What?"

"Yeah."

"What the hell?" Alex asked, then covered her mouth with her hand in embarrassment. "Sorry. I don't usually swear."

"I don't know," Sam said, ignoring her apology. "He was acting all weird this morning, like all... anal-retentive and worried about work. That's not like him."

"Yeah, he seemed off this morning." Alex dropped her voice, leaned in. "Do you think... something is going on? I mean, two extremely weird suicides in two days?"

"I'm not sure," Sam said, but from his troubled, thoughtful expression, she thought that was exactly what he was thinking.

Wake up, meditate, shower, dress, breakfast, walk to work. Arrive, say hi to Sam, say hi to Mr. Collins.

Alex found herself staring blankly at her computer for most of the day, taking calls and doing her tasks in a disconnected kind of way. She felt strange, and couldn't pinpoint why. Inside, she was beginning to fear that maybe she was going crazy, that she was seeing things or imagining things.
And last night, she had dreamed about a vintage black car, a man in a puffy vest and flannel calling her an 'idgit', and flickering neon motel signs. She wasn't sure why the dream had stuck with her, but it was eating away at her. In an attempt to distract herself, she smoothed her flowy blouse, readjusting the line where she had tucked it into the waist of her skirt. She stared down at her feet, which were shoved into black heels, and then looked at her manicured fingernails. Somehow, the sight of both seemed wrong. Maybe it was time to change her style.

"Alex!" Sam had appeared out of nowhere, and was intently leaning over her desk. "I just got a call from Dean Smith."

"Who's that?" Alex asked, frowning at his sudden arrival and urgent tone.

"A big time guy who works upstairs in HR. He wants to see us."

Surprised, Alex stood up. "Are we in trouble? Why both of us?" Alex asked, not understanding.

Sam lowered his voice, becoming furtive. "I think it has something to do with... with the deaths. He told me to 'bring the girl who saw the other guy's corpse.'"

At that, Alex felt a twinge of intrigue, and her sense of adventure sparking alive inside her. She felt herself smiling. "Okay. Well, what are we waiting for?"

In hushed excitement, the two of them ducked out of the office and onto the elevator up to the seventh floor, where they found Dean Smith's office. After Sam knocked and Dean called them in, Sam led the way into a spacious modern office. With a gray color palette and black and white photographs of famous cityscapes lining the wall, the office reeked of position and upper management. Standing behind the desk was the guy from the elevator—the yuppie douche bag guy. Alex felt a little disappointment.

"Come on in," he said, both hands on the back of his chair. "Shut the door." Dean paused a beat, and looked at Sam through narrowed eyes after they'd done what he said. "So wanna tell me who the hell you are?"

Sam looked a little surprised by the direct question, and Alex answered with uncharacteristic boldness when he said nothing. "This is Sam Wesson. I'm Alex Remington. And... you called us here. Shouldn't you know who we are?" She fixed him with an expectant look.

"I've seen you in the elevator before," Dean said flippantly, looking at her for the first time. "So you're the one who saw... the body?"

"Yup. And you're the one who saw... Ian die."

"Yup," he confirmed uncomfortably, and then cleared his throat. "Among other things. I, uh... so you two started working here three weeks ago, huh?"

Sam and Alex both nodded, not sure where their superior was going with this. "Yeah, me too," he said, walking over to one of his shelves. He grabbed a water bottle full of a dirty-looking liquid and unscrewed the cap. "It's, uh, the Master Cleanse. You tried it? Phenomenal. Detoxes you like nobody's business."

He took a swig and Alex scoffed. "It looks disgusting."

"Oh, it is," he said, grinning.

Sam, however, wasn't interested in their trivialities. He had fixed this Dean guy with an intent gaze,
and stepped a little closer. "When you were in that bathroom with Ian... did you see something?"

Dean looked caught, his expression chilling in fear, then softening as he tried to laugh it off. "I don't know. I don't know what I saw. I was tripping."

Sam's frown deepened. "What did you see? You saw something... I can tell."

Dean looked uncomfortable and hesitant, and Alex's mouth hung open slightly. Somehow, she knew what he had seen. "You saw a ghost didn't you?"

At her direct question, Dean's expression showed stunned confirmation. Alex was nodding, suddenly excited, looking between Sam and Dean both, glad she could finally tell someone about what she saw. "I think I saw one too. When I found Paul—" her excitement faded, as she remembered the sad reality of Paul's demise. "When I found Paul, may he, uh, rest in peace—the room got cold, like, freezing cold. And I saw this blurry reflection in the coffee pot..." she had both of the guys' rapt attention. "I turned around... and no one was there." She waited to see if they would think she was crazy. "It was a ghost, wasn't it?" she asked, looking at Sam, and then Dean, hoping.

"Was it... an old white guy? Gray hair, wrinkly face?" Dean asked slowly, sounding like he was both dreading and eagerly awaiting her answer.

"Yeah!" Alex breathed, in disbelief that she wasn't crazy, and someone else had seen the same image.

"Guys—what if these suicides aren't actually suicides?" Sam asked breathlessly, emphatically. "I mean, what if they're something... not natural?"

"Something... paranormal? Like... ghost murders?" Alex asked, her voice lowering to a whisper at the last two words.

Dean was scoffing, trying to be reasonable. "Come on guys... that sounds kind of crazy... I mean, first thing first: ghosts are real? And not only that, but they're responsible for all the dead bodies around here?"

He sat down at his desk, and Sam and Alex grabbed seats across from him. "I know it sounds crazy," Sam said earnestly. "But guys... that has to be it!"

"What makes you so sure?" Dean asked, obviously not as on board with the idea as Sam was.

Sam took a minute, looking for an answer. "Instinct," he finally replied, and Alex felt a chill run up her spine. That was exactly what she had been thinking, too. She looked at Sam in amazement, and he looked back at her. It was like they were thinking the same thought.

Dean had a look on his face like reluctant agreement. "Yeah. I've, uh, got the same instinct."

"You do too, don't you Alex?" Sam asked, even though he sounded like he already knew her answer was yes.

"Yeah, I mean, it's crazy... but I don't see what else it could be," Alex said, meaning every word.

There was a short, pensive silence. "Dean, you know those dreams I was telling you about?" Sam asked. "I was dreaming about ghosts."

"Wait, what dreams?" Alex asked, puzzled, thinking of her strange dream last night.
"I dreamed that I fought ghosts, like, that it was my entire life," Sam explained.

"And that I was helping him do it," Dean added, sounding a little unenthused.

Sam got a little quiet, hesitant. "You weren't the only one, Dean… Alex, you were in the dreams too," Alex and Dean exchanged glances as Sam continued. "And then it turns out that there's a real ghost, and the three of us here, now..." he trailed off. "Coincidence?"

"So, what, your dreams are visions?" Dean asked, a little sarcastically. "You some kind of psychic?"

"No!" Sam exclaimed quickly. "I mean, that would be nuts."

"Why would that be nuts?" Alex cut in, amused. "Did you guys forget the subject matter? Ghost murders?"

Dean chuckled a little, as Sam continued. "I'm just saying something weird is definitely going on around here, right? So I've been digging around a little." Sam pulled some papers out of his bag, and handed half of them over to Dean, half to Alex.

"I think I found a connection between the two guys."

"You broke into their email accounts?" Dean asked, frowning, but before Sam could backpedal, Alex grinned at him over the printouts.

"Sam... that is so against company protocol… but… oh my God… so very cool!" She was almost starstruck.

Sam looked at Dean nervously, but Dean was busy trying to hide an impressed smile. He shrugged. "It is pretty badass, if I say so myself."

"Uh, thanks," Sam said meekly, and cleared his throat. "Yeah. Okay. So it turns out Ian and Paul both got this same email telling them to report to HR, room fourteen forty-four."

"But HR's here on seven," Alex said, and they all shared a significant glance. "This email has something to do with the murders," Alex surmised, getting more excited by the second. "Guys. We have got to check this out."

"Like right now?" Sam asked hesitantly.

"No. No, it's getting late," Dean said, although he didn't sound convinced.

Alex looked between the two of them. "Guys."

"I'm dying to check this out right now," Sam said, and Dean's expression showed that he was too.

"Right?" Dean asked, already getting to his feet.

The three of them hopped on the elevator up to the fourteenth floor, and searched down the room in question. "Fourteen thirty-eight, we're getting close," Sam said as they rounded a corner. And suddenly, they heard a man scream. Breaking into a run, they found the door to fourteen forty-four was locked. Sam wiggled the door handle, then without a word, drew back and kicked the door in, leaving Dean and Alex to stare in momentary awe, saying "whoa!" at the same time. Sam led the way, and they ran into the dark room, which looked like a computer storage unit. All the screens were on, gray static playing. The room was ice cold.
"Look!" Alex said, pointing to a man laying on the floor with a heavy shelf on top of him. Dean and Sam rushed to him and began to lift the shelf off. And then, flickering into existence behind Dean, the ghost appeared—the old man from the reflection. "Dean! Look out!" Alex shouted, her eyes wide as she saw the old man fling Dean against a wall and shove Sam over. She felt herself fly backwards without even being touched, and she collided with a pile of old computers. She rolled over easily as if by instinct, crouched on the ground, and stared as the old man reached for the tech support employee, his hand sparking with blue lightning.

She sprang up, rushing across the distance that separated her from the man who was about to be zapped, and with a strength she didn't know she had, she lifted the heavy metal shelf off the man—but not fast enough. The ghost's finger was a fraction of an inch from the man, who was screaming in horror. And then, just in the nick of time, Dean swung a wrench at the old man, who dissipated like a cloud of smoke. All the screens switched off, and the room went silent. The three of them stared at each other, agape. "How the hell did you lift that?" Dean asked Alex, incredulous.

"I guess I'm stronger than I thought?" Alex said, not entirely sure herself. "But never mind that, how did you know how to do that wrench thing?"

Dean shook his head, as puzzled as they were. "I have no idea."

About twenty minutes later, the three of them, were settling into Dean's apartment, still reeling from their ghost encounter. "Holy crap, dude," Dean said, pacing back and forth and guzzling his master cleanse liquid.

"Yeah. I could use a beer," Sam said, letting out a heavy breath.

"Oh, sorry, man. I'm on the Cleanse," Dean said, heading for his refrigerator. "I got rid of all the carbs in the house."

"You suck," Alex said, wishing she could get her hands on a Killian's Red or a Newcastle.

"So, how the hell did you know that ghosts are scared of wrenches?" Sam asked as Dean grabbed water bottles out of his refrigerator.

"Crazy, right?" Dean asked, handing a water bottle to Alex, and then Sam. "And nice job kicking that door too. That was very Jet Li. What are you, like a black belt or something?" He looked at Alex, his eyebrows raised."And you, Hulk Hogan. That shelf had to weigh more than a hundred pounds."

"Yeah, I had no idea my own strength," Alex said honestly, and flexed her arm muscle curiously, poking the defined bicep with her pointer finger, in a shocked kind of awe. "Whoa. They are kinda big. I've never noticed before. Do I work out? I don't think I work out…" she trailed off, frowning. Sam was in deep thought. "It's like...we've done this before."

"What do you mean, before?" Dean questioned.

"Like in a previous life?" Alex asked skeptically. "I don't know how I feel about reincarnation..."

"No," Sam said, shaking his head. "I—I just can't shake this feeling like I—like I don't belong here. You know? Like I should do something more than sit in a cubicle."

Dean chuckled. "I think most people who work in a cubicle feel that same way."
Alex, however, looked at Sam. "I think I know what you mean. I wake up in the morning and just... something's off. But I'm not sure. I feel really foggy sometimes, like I don't even like what I think I like." It sounded insanely stupid when she said it out loud, and she shrugged. "Not sure how to explain it, really."

"I know, right?" Sam seemed to agree with her. "I mean, I don't like my job. I don't like this town. I don't like my clothes. I don't like my own last name." Alex was nodding, hanging onto every word, feeling like he was talking for her. "I don't know how else to explain it, except that... it feels like I should be doing something else. There's just something in my blood. Like I was destined for something different. What about you? You ever feel that way?"

"You're starting to sound kind of Star Wars, there, Yoda," Alex joked. He'd lost her at the destiny stuff.

"I don't believe in destiny," Dean said, earning a look of respect from Alex. "I do believe in dealing with what's right in front of us, though."

"All right, so, what do we do now?" Sam asked.

Dean grinned. "We do what I do best, Sammy. Research."

"Okay. ...wait." Sam looked at Dean oddly. "Did you just call me Sammy?"

"Uh, did I?" Dean asked.

"I think you did. Yeah. Don't."

"Sorry," Dean said.

Alex chuckled. "Get a room, guys."

"Shut up," the two men said in unison.

"Here's the beers, Sam," Alex said, plopping down a six pack of Newcastle on the table. Both Dean and Sam had a laptop in front of them.

Sam cracked open a beer. "You're the best, Alex. Thanks for getting these."

She sat down between them, grabbing herself a beer. "What've you guys found?"

Dean was eyeing the beer a little wistfully from the corner of his eye. "Sure you don't want one?" Alex asked as she opened hers.

"I'm on the cleanse," he replied dutifully, tearing his eyes away from the bottle in her hand. "Anyway, I just found the best site ever. Real, actual ghost hunters."

Sam and Alex leaned their heads over, peering at Dean's screen. "These guys are genius," Dean said, a certain note of admiring in his voice. "Check it out."

An instructional video began playing, two guys who called themselves Ghostfacers. They watched the video, hovering close to the screen in rapt attention. When it was over, they sat back in unison, silently absorbing everything they had just heard. "Okay," Sam said slowly, "so we just need to research this ghost, figure out who he is, and then find his remains... or the haunted item."

"Sounds good," Dean said. Alex, however, was just sitting there, a huge grin on her face.
"Those guys were so cool," she breathed, glancing at Sam, then Dean. "This makes me wish I could be a ghost hunter. Wow."

"You seem easily impressed, kid," Dean said, giving her a superior smile like she were dumb.

She ignored the comment and just looked at him sidelong. "Have a beer already, will you?"

His jaw clenched. "The cleanse," he said, this time sounding blatantly depressed.

She smiled to herself and took a long swig of hers so he could watch jealously.

Wake up, meditate, shower, dress, breakfast, walk to work... Alex arrived at work like normal, wearing a shorter floral dress (Friday, casual day), cardigan, and heels. Behind her, she heard the low hum of the office—people taking calls on the phone, the printers going. But she was remembering last night, when she, Dean, and Sam had killed a ghost. It had been the most thrilling and life-altering thing she had ever done—after researching the Sandover building and its history, they had recognized the face of their ghost, and learned that there was an item of his still in the building—a single glove. Together, they had fought off the ghost, found and burned the glove. All with just fractions of seconds to spare. After they came within an inch of their lives, they had gone back to Dean's office, where Sam had proposed they quit their jobs and go hunt down ghosts. Alex had thought it was an exciting prospect, and even let herself dream about actually doing it for all of thirty seconds, until Dean had shot the idea down.

Alex was so lost in her thoughts there at her desk that she didn't even notice when Mr. Collins came in. If she had looked up, she might have seen his eyes traverse her bare legs, she might have seen him swallow strangely, she might have seen him go into his office faster than he usually did. But she was staring at her screen blankly, unsure. Just, unsure.

Sam had been disappointed after Dean had said no, and then he left without talking to Alex about it. She honestly would have dropped everything in that moment and left with him right then. Something about what happened last night felt right. But this morning, Sam had come in, with a face of stone, and he didn't even say hello. Alex sighed restlessly, staring at the kitten wallpaper of her computer. She could hear some kind of commotion going on in the cubicles behind her, but was unable to care or look away from the kittens... their soft white fluffy fur, their wide blue eyes, their wispy whiskers... she felt a growing sense of hatred the longer she stared at it, and suddenly a burst of pure, undiluted rage. "I hate cats!" She shouted, and taking hold of the computer with both hands, she stood up and ripped it from its chords, and threw it across the room, where it smashed against the wall. She stared at it, blinking in surprise, then realized someone was standing just off to her side.

Sam stood there, staring at her, a fire poker in his hand. He seemed a little out of breath. "I... just killed my phone," he explained, which explained nothing, but she nodded, feeling like she understood him perfectly.

"I hate cats. Like, literally despise them," she replied, and he, also, nodded, seeming to understand her somehow, too. She rounded her desk, coming to him and speaking in hushed, urgent tones. "Let's go. You and me. We'll go on the road, like you said. We can ask Dean again, but even if he doesn't want to... we can. We're supposed to. You know?"

"Yeah," Sam said, nodding and looking happier than she remembered him ever looking.

As if on cue, the door to the right of Alex's desk opened. Miller Collins peered out at then sullenly, then glanced at the smashed computer to his left. He then stepped aside, holding the door open
They shared a glance and obliged quietly, their momentary high fading into quiet dread.

"Look, sorry about the phone—" Sam started, but stopped talking when he saw Mr. Collins reaching out to touch him on the forehead. Alex watched, mystified, and then Mr. Collins touched her, too. And suddenly, she remembered everything—she was Alex Winchester, that was Sam, her brother, and... her jaw dropped and she looked down at herself then at Mr. Collins... a.k.a. Castiel.

"What the hell, Cas?" She asked, mouth agape.

"Explain. Now," Sam said angrily.

"Is this real?" Alex asked, looking around and down at herself again. She looked at Cas, barely able to process her thoughts.

He looked stoic, as usual. "Yes, this is real," he replied apathetically. "This was Zachariah's idea. It was to prove to the three of you that the life you live; hunting, is what you're meant to do. It's your destiny."

"Is this some kind of sick joke?" Sam asked, aghast. "You take three weeks of our lives for your own angel comedy hour?"

"And who the hell is Zachariah? Another one of your angel pals?" Alex felt herself shaking in outrage. In the tiny dress, with her legs bare, she felt naked and violated somehow. "You took all of our memories? You... turned me into... this?" A cat-loving, skirt-wearing freak?!

"It was not my idea," Castiel said simply, as if that would fix everything.

"No, you just played along, watched me live a life I don't belong in... sit here, answer phones, worry about my college career, and stare at my kitten screensaver...?" She was getting loud now. "I don't even like cats, Cas!"

"Yes, I heard you. You shouted it quite loudly," he said, looking at her sideways, looking mildly annoyed. "The point of all this is that you—the Winchester family—are supposed to hunt. It's in your very blood. But more than that, you're supposed to stick together." His eyebrows knit together as if in earnestness. "The past three weeks, the two of you have been closer than you have in the entire past year."

He had a point, but it wasn't one the twins were happy about. Sam and Alex glanced at each other. Unlike a few moments ago, when they had been Sam Wesson and Alex Remington, the glance was now tinged with bitterness. "Maybe that was because I couldn't remember anything about what he's done to screw up the family," Alex said.

Sam scoffed and chuckled humorlessly. "You sure do know how to hold a grudge, don't you Alex."

"It's not a grudge, it's me remembering the facts," she replied in a short tone of voice.

There was a silence, and Castiel looked down, seeming to be disappointed.

"Yeah. Well, Cas, you got us," Sam said brusquely. "Good job." Heated, he took a few steps back, running a hand through his hair, trying to calm down.

Alex just stared at Castiel with a frown. "I don't get it. What gives you angels the right to think you can screw with our heads like that. Huh?"
"Alex—" Castiel started, only to be cut off.

"No. You did something that violated us. Nothing you say can justify it, so don't even try." She crossed her arms angrily, beyond incredulous at the entire thing. "I'm so tired of your weird tests and stupid righteous attitude and how you come in and think you can just do whatever you want with my family!"

Castiel seemed to be trying to remain reasonable. "It's regrettable that you feel violated…"

"Yeah, regrettable!" Alex interrupted again, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Thanks, Cas. This is my life, and I don't appreciate—"

"The life that I gave you!" Castiel thundered, and the room seemed to darken, his deep voice seemed to carry a power that it hadn't before. A little intimidated, Alex had taken a step back, in shock. Behind her, Sam was staring, slack jawed, at Cas.

The angel's expression was fiery—jaw clenched, brow furrowed, breathing harder than normal. He was angry, and it was all directed at Alex. "You know that before I touched the hand of healing upon you, your life was not what it is today. You were set free of the prison of your mind. By me." He had approached her, and was staring her down unflinchingly. The edge of his trench coat brushed against her bare knee. "But you've never once stopped to realize what I did for you. Have you truly never wondered why, after a lifetime of being mute, how you could suddenly speak? And not only speak, but speak perfectly, as if you had been speaking for your entire life? I didn't simply give you the ability to speak, I made you whole. It wasn't easy, Alex Winchester." His bright blue eyes seemed to hold some unspoken pain or secret. "It cost me more than you know." His voice softened, his anger faded, and he looked away. His next words were utterly convicting. "You make me regret the kindness I've shown you."

Alex stared at him, stunned and speechless, feeling very, very small and yes... ashamed.

Without warning, she and Sam were no longer at Sandover, but in a very dim motel room. Castiel was gone.

The twins were silent for a short moment as their eyes adjusted to the darkness. "We were staying here right after Dean got out of the hospital," Sam said, and Alex realized he was right—she saw their bags piled in the corner, just as they'd left them.

Exhausted in a way that wasn't physical, Alex sat on a bed, burying her face in her hands. She felt overwhelmed, tricked, but mostly humiliated, almost to the point of tears. You make me regret the kindness I've shown you. She heard Sam sit opposite of her, but she didn't look up. Just kept covering her burning face.

Suddenly, there was a sound to their right. "Whoa. Honey, I'm home." It was Dean, in a business suit, his hair slicked down. "Well would you look at us. It's like Halloween," he commented wryly, looking at his siblings who were still in their weird Sandover outfits.

"Dean!" Sam said in relief, standing. "So I'm guessing you met Zachariah."

Dean's brow furrowed slightly. "How'd you know?"

"Cas told us," Sam said, glancing at Alex, who still sat on the bed. She had her hand down over her mouth, was slouching with an elbow on her knee. "He was... our floor manager."

"Of course he was," Dean said. "Well, I, for one, am starting to get real tired of these angels yanking our chains around." He looked at Alex, who still wore the dress and heels. "You look
"Yeah well at least I didn't just do the Master Cleanse," she muttered, which Dean made a face at.

"Well what did Zachariah say to you?" Sam asked, not interested in small talk. "Hopefully more than Cas did, because he barely explained anything. He just chewed Alex out."

"Yeah?" Dean asked, looking mildly interested.

"Did you really have to bring that up?" Alex asked Sam, giving him a somber look. He shrugged.

"Listen, before we get all heart to heart, I need food," Dean said. "Real food. And a beer. Lots and lots of beer. Bring on the carbs."

"Yeah. Okay," Sam agreed. They went and grabbed dinner at a local diner, dressed the way they were. Alex listened as her brothers did most of the talking, her mind far away. She faded in and out of paying attention.

"I mean, I was drinking rice milk," Dean said. "Rice milk. I had a gym membership, and ate salad."

He said salad like it was a dirty word.

"I went home every night and played XBOX. Like all night." Sam admitted sheepishly.

"The highlight of my day was Oprah," Alex said glumly.

"Wait, you don't really like Oprah?" Dean asked, grinning and plunking a fry into ketchup. "So, you ever gonna tell me what Cas had to say to you?" Dean asked as he chomped the fried potato.

Alex stared at her plate, her eyes seeing nothing, her mind going to a strange place. "Eh. Just bitching about random stuff, nothing major."

Dean clearly knew she was avoiding telling him everything but it didn't seem to matter as he munched on fries. Alex slunk down further into her seat, Cas's words still on the forefront of her mind. She felt bad. She felt like the world's biggest bitch. She was really starting to get the feeling that she'd misjudged Castiel completely. He clearly wasn't perfect but... he kept saying he chose to give her the ability to speak at a great cost to himself. She kept thinking on that for the rest of the day, wondering who he was. Who he really was. This being she kept getting glimpses of beyond his duties and loyalties.

Alex sat outside the motel on the edge of the sidewalk underneath a clear midnight sky. It was cold and she was listlessly watching highway traffic pass by, thinking. She was once again looking like herself—in her favorite pair of jeans, her well-loved boots, a tank top, and a warm cargo jacket. She'd showered off the makeup and hair products and was no longer a caricature of herself.

She thought back to the past three weeks, where she had been free of all the pains of the past. Instead of torturing herself over her brothers, the apocalypse, the endless list of hardships in her life, she had been content to fix her hair every day, watch mindless TV every night, and her biggest concern had been what outfit she would wear for work the next day. So now, she could say she knew what a 'normal life' was like—and it was pretty horrible overall. And lonely. Isolated.

She still didn't like the fact that the angels had duped them like that—stolen their memories, transplanted their lives—but she was admitting to herself that treating Cas the way she had probably hadn't been right. It hadn't been his idea, after all. He'd just been following orders. Ridiculous, stupid orders, but still. She thought of her attraction to him when she thought he was a
man named Miller Collins, and felt intense embarrassment. The angels must have implanted that into her mind along with the other things, as some kind of joke, or test. Right? Well. She did think Cas was handsome, didn't she? Ugh.

All Alex knew is that when he stood up to her like that, told her off about her behavior... at first she'd been humiliated and pissed. Now, she realized she had to respect him for having the courage to tell her what he felt and thought. She thought of his face when he said he regretted the kindness he'd shown her. Inside, her heart broke a little, and she thought of how ungrateful and undeserving she was, how much she regretted her words and actions, how disappointed she was in her lack of self control. If Cas could have seen, before he healed her, how she would treat him, he probably never would have bothered at all. She owed him the apology of the century and felt so bad.

She drew in a deep breath and let it out, getting a little nervous about what she was about to do. This felt absolutely ridiculous and even if he did show, he'd probably just bitch at her some more, which she deserved but... eesh. He'd given her a new chance at life, like he said. And she had to do this. Gathering her courage, Alex screwed her eyes shut, and in a voice just above a whisper, she spoke. "Um. Castiel? Are you there?"

She opened her eyes, and flinched slightly. "Hello, Alex," he said, standing just in front of her. She stared up at him with a shocked expression, almost too caught off guard to speak. "Wow... just like that," she breathed out. "You come when I call?"

"Of course. I am your guardian angel," he replied, almost sounding like he was surprised she would ask that. He didn't look angry or disappointed as he had the last time she saw him.

Her brow furrowed in confusion. "You are?" she asked. Last time she'd heard, Uriel said those orders or whatever were no longer valid.

Cas looked down slightly. "Yes. I discovered that Uriel was lying about that."

"Oh." Alex nodded as she took that into her understanding. She'd suspected as much. She gave a tight smile and somewhat awkwardly patted the spot beside her, indicating that he should sit—no sense in standing there where she had to crane her head up to look at him. He didn't seem to understand for a couple seconds, then he joined her, sitting close enough that their elbows brushed against each other's. Since the curb was so low to the ground, his knees were level with his chest, but he didn't seem to have the poise Alex had (her arms were leaned onto her knees). He just sat there, arms at his sides, knees in his face, looking ridiculous. She couldn't hide the amused little smile that sprang to her face. She tried to fight it, tried to look serious, but it didn't work.

"I'm sorry, I can't... you need to put your arms on your knees... that just looks... wrong," she said through a mouth that was trying to smile. He frowned, not understanding. Uncertainly, he looked at her for reference but got it all wrong, placed a hand on each knee, his arms straight against his legs, increasing his awkward ridiculousness by about a hundred percent. Chuckling out loud now, Alex shook her head. "No, no, that's worse," she said, grinning, and grabbed his forearm, showed him what she meant, guiding him to a more casual, relaxed stance. He looked at her hand on his arm, then at her, his expression unreadable. Alex's smile faded, and she let go, remembering why she had called him. She wet her lips and mustered her courage, bracing herself.

"I, uh, needed to tell you something," she began, not entirely sure how she was going to work it all. She struggled for the words, her pride taking a hit as she forced herself to begin talking. Her skin burned a little from embarrassment. "I'm..." she forced the next word out, "sorry, Cas." He looked back at her, his expression stern as usual. "I've been... a total bitch to you," she mumbled, then quickly added on, "I mean, some times you did deserve it." She cleared her throat. "Uh, but... I told
you that I hated you or whatever. You should die or something." Her ears were burning. "I was pissed, and the words just... like, came out. I was trying to hurt you. Because, um, you hurt me."

_Ugh, Doctor Phil, eat your heart out._ Alex wanted to die, talking about this Hallmark crap. But Castiel just listened. Didn't rub it in or make her feel worse.

Alex found the ability to continue as he waited, listening. She swallowed and sighed, shutting her eyes. "After all you've done for me... you didn't deserve the things I said." She opened her eyes again and forced herself to look him in the eye, which was hard. "What you did for me... you're right. You gave me so much." Her skin was on fire with uncomfortable feelings. Honestly, she could have thanked him for an eternity for what he had done and given her, but underneath his intense gaze and imposing presence, Alex was done, embarrassed completely. "I hate apologies, Cas. But, I hope you know I mean it. I'm sorry, okay?" She sighed heavily and shrugged, looked down between her knees, feeling supremely awkward. "Well—that's all I got." She threw her hands up a little, then let them go. Somehow, what she'd imagined as a grand and beautiful apology felt small and awkward and sappy.

Cas looked at her a moment longer, and his expression was surprisingly un-pinched. It made him look years younger and more open. "Yes. I do know that you are sincere," he said, making her stomach flip. "And I accept your apology." Just like that? Alex was floored by his ready forgiveness. Castiel looked out ahead of them, his expression growing softer. "I have thought about how difficult it would be to suddenly have memories back you didn't remember. You were disconcerted. And felt what was yours was taken away. In truth, it was. I've thought about many things you've told me I was wrong for doing." He drew in a deep breath through his nose, expelled it the same. "I appreciate your perspective, even if I don't always understand it."

Again, her stomach flip-flopped and Alex glanced his way sidelong, surprised at him. He always caught her off guard in the most unexpected of ways. Who _was_ this angel? Was he this softer, thoughtful, curious creature she saw glimpses of one-on-one? Or was he the fierce, staunch soldier of Heaven? She didn't know, but he intrigued her more and more. They sat in silence a moment longer, Alex trying to summon the courage to say what she did next. "You could've done nothing," Alex said, watching his expression. "I would've never known the difference.

He almost smiled when she said that—his lips turned up and his eyes crinkled slightly at the edges as he watched the traffic passing by. It was a bittersweet appearing expression. He turned his head toward her, his eyes meeting hers with a soulful intensity. "I was not willing to do nothing."

"Of course," he replied and Alex stood up. He followed suit. His voice stopped her a couple steps toward the door. "Goodnight, Alex."

She turned to look at him over her shoulder.

He had put his hands into his pockets—and that caught her attention. Standing there in the parking lot with neon signs behind him and light illuminating the side of his face, Alex felt like she was seeing him for the first time. He seemed very interesting to her in that moment, she wondered about him and why he looked at her like that. A little stricken by her thoughts, she felt a certain, mostly unfamiliar shy feeling overcome her.
She tucked her hair behind her ear, avoiding solidly meeting his eyes. She gave him a small, tight smile all the same. "'Night, Cas."

Alex Winchester turned and went into the motel as her guardian angel stayed and watched until she was safely inside.

Chapter End Notes

Inside joke: They all had the last name of gun brands. Smith & Wesson and Remington.
Metafiction

"Fate is knocking at the door, but I don't live there anymore."
- Sonic Syndicate

Four Days Later

Alex rolled over on the motel bed, flipping onto her stomach, thoroughly engrossed in the book she was reading—after all, reading about your own life through someone else's eyes was fascinating, if not a little awkward and horrifying, too. That morning the Winchesters had been blindsided by a strange discovery… a series of books, starring them.

On the other end of the room Dean and Sam were both on their laptops glued to their screens, the books in question littering the table around them. The books included specific and perfect detail all the things they had done for the past three or so years. Although they were dead set on finding out who this author Carver Edlund was and how he or she knew everything about the Winchesters' private lives, they'd gotten temporarily distracted after Sam had stumbled onto the Supernatural fandom online.

Dean was chuckling. "Whoa, check it out… these fans are not playing around. There are 'Sam girls' and 'Dean girls.'"

"Are you serious?" Alex looked up from the pages of Wendigo. She let loose an unladylike snorting "Ha!"

Dean looked at her over his shoulder. "Why's that funny?" he demanded.

"'Cuz what those fans don't know is that both of you suck," she replied, already looking back at the pages of her book. "I'm an Alex girl, personally," she quipped.

Dean rolled his eyes and turned back to his computer screen. "Hey, what's a 'slash fan'?” he asked.

Sam looked hesitant to answer, and Alex looked up in mild curiosity. "As in... Sam-slash-Dean," Sam said. "Together."

There was a short silence, where Dean and Alex were trying to figure out exactly what was being implied. "Like, together together?" Dean asked, his voice full of the beginnings of incredulous disbelief.

"Yeah," Sam confirmed, drawing disgusted expressions from both of his siblings.

"Bleurgh." Alex's face was twisted in repulsion.

"They do know we're brothers, right?” Dean asked, sounding hopeful that there had been some kind of misunderstanding.

However, Sam shrugged, his expression pretty disgusted. "Doesn't seem to matter. And there's also some… um… of all three of us. Together. And, there's also, uh... 'Twincest?'" He looked at Alex and and pulled a face.

Alex sat up, throwing the book down, her face stricken with shock. "Gross! What is wrong with these people? I'd rather rip out my own lungs!"
Sam's chuckled. "Well, looks like some people wish you would… I just found a post called 'Alex: Love her or hate her?' on one of the fan sites. Some fan named River Winters posted this on it: 'Hate her! The series is perfect except for the awkward addition of Alex, who I think undermines the entire story. Instead of being about men and brothers in arms, it's about these two brothers and their mostly useless, third-wheel sister—she's stubborn and hard headed and too talkative once she gets her voice back in the last few books. She's always crying and bitching. Alex Winchester ruins the entire series for me.'"

Alex made a face and shrugged defensively. "Geez, sorry for existing?"

"No, this one's better," Dean said, reading from his screen. He clearly thought the whole thing was funny. "LisaMack wrote 'Alex Winchester is a totally unbelievable and flat character, and her mysterious, unexplained recovery from the lifelong condition of mutism is just too far fetched for me. Wish she wasn't in the books; I also don't like how she gets so much time with my boys.'" Dean paused. "Her boys?" He scoffed. "What, we're personal property now?"

"I'm not believable?" Alex asked, frowning at the ridiculousness of it all. "LisaMack isn't believable." Both of her brothers tried to hide their chuckles at her indignant comment. "It's not funny! I mean, don't these people have anything better to do with their time than complain about me?"

"Haters gonna hate," Dean said with a good natured shrug. "There's nice ones too about you but why would I read you those? Hey!" He ducked a spare sock she threw at him and chuckled when she missed. He returned to reading out loud from his screen. "Hey guys, please read my brofic, in which Sam and Dean hunt on their own. No Alex in this alternate universe. Please don't hate, I know brofic isn't everyone's cup of tea."

Alex guffawed. "Like you two's life without me in it would be interesting at all," she joked.

Dean closed his laptop with a face. "Dude, this crap is just weird. Funny... but weird."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, closing his laptop too and leaning his elbows onto the table. "It's amusing, if not a little… uh, creepy, to say the least, but we really need to find out who wrote the series."

"Okay, so where do we start?" Alex asked, sliding off the bed and crossing the room to her brothers. "The name Carver Edlund turned up nothing on the databases or address searches."

"We go to the publisher," Sam said. "Carver Edlund is probably a pen name."

Dean was already standing up. "Well, what are we waiting for? Daylight's wasting."

"Dean, we just got here," Sam pointed out, sounding reluctant and weary. Alex couldn't say she was crazy about getting back into the Impala for another however-many hour drive either.

But Dean was grabbing his jacket. "And we're just leaving," he replied, his mind already made up.

The twins exchanged a mutually sympathetic glance, and with no choice, grudgingly got up and followed their brother. Yet again and as always, the Winchesters were on the move.

"Thanks for all your help!" Sam called as he sat back into the passenger side of the Impala. The publisher, Sera, waved from the front porch of her house, her expression a little starstruck.

"Did you guys really have to show her your tattoos? I think you turned her brain to complete mush," Alex said, still laughing at how the publisher had basically lost her crap when Sam and
Dean showed her their anti-possession tattoos and subsequently shown off their bare chests.

"Hey, it worked, didn't it?" Dean asked, but by the grin she could hear in his voice, she knew he thought it was funny too. "We got Carver Edlund's real name and address. All thanks to these handsome faces, bulging muscles, and irresistible sex appeal."

Dean and Sam chuckled, and Alex leaned forward between their seats, grinning. "And long, flowing locks," she said, waving the title book, Supernatural at them—on which a shirtless Sam (who looked more like Fabio) had sandy hair to his shoulders blowing away from his face. The rest of the cover wasn't much better—Dean was in a sleeveless cutoff shirt and looked like a knock-off of a Street Fighter character—Alex was in the background, leaning seductively against the car, in a tiny strapless shirt that clung to her ridiculously disproportionate body (no one's waist was that tiny). And her hair was platinum blonde.

"Did the guy who illustrated this cover even read the book?" Sam asked as Dean pulled the Impala out into the road. The ridiculousness of the book cover had them all giggling as they set off for Kripke's Hollow, the town where Chuck Shurley, a.k.a. Carver Edlund lived.

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**The Next Day**

**Kripke's Hollow, Iowa**

The Winchesters approached the ramshackle house with trepidation—the lawn was overgrown and unkempt and an old motorcycle with a busted axel leaned against crooked, peeling porch railing. This was the place where the author lived. What would they find inside? Why were their lives someone's entertainment hour? And how did Chuck Shurley seem to know everything about their life and times?

Dean led the way up the stairs and at the door, the three of them paused, trading apprehensive looks. Alex shifted the gun in her waistband so that it wasn't visible. Sam had the demon knife and nodded to Dean, who shrugged his eyebrows up. The sentiment was clear: Here goes nothin'. He pressed the doorbell and they waited.

The door creaked open to reveal a thirty-something man who squinted in the light of day—it wasn't early by any means, but he was still in slippers, boxers, a stained off-white tank top, and a ratty old robe. He looked disheveled and disgruntled, his wavy brown hair unstyled and poking up in weird places like he'd rolled out of bed that way. "...You Chuck Shurley?" Dean asked doubtfully.

"The Chuck Shurley who wrote the Supernatural books?" Sam quickly added.

"Maybe..." the man answered, his eyes sliding across the three of them guardedly. "Why?"

Dean was quick and to the point. "I'm Dean. This is Sam. That's Alex." He paused for effect, even as Chuck quickly got weirded out. "The Dean, Sam and Alex you've been writing about."

Chuck made to close the door—but Alex reached out and smacked her palm into the front of it even as she kicked the toe of her shoe out, stopping him from shutting them out. He was startled by the action and she gave him a facetious little smile. "Rude."

"Look, uh... I appreciate your enthusiasm," he said. "Really, I do. It's, uh, it's always nice to hear from the fans. But, uh, for your own good, I strongly suggest you get a life."

Again, he tried to shut the door, but Alex's foot was still in the way and Chuck looked mightily annoyed at it, too. "See, here's the thing," Dean said, drifting forward a little. "We have a life.
You've been using it to write your books." Dean walked straight into the house, forcing Chuck to back up into the dim interior of the house.

"Now, wait a minute. Now, this isn't funny!" Chuck protested, getting freaked out as the Winchesters crowded him and forced him back into his disgustingly messy living room.

Dean had his most intimidating expression and tone out. "Damn straight it's not funny."

"Look, we just want to know how you're doing it," Sam reasoned, more quiet and reasonable sounding than Dean even though he was on edge, too.

"I'm not doing anything!" Chuck protested.

"Are you a hunter?" Dean asked.

"What?" Chuck looked like he'd never heard anything more ridiculous. "No. I'm a writer."

"Then how do you know so much about demons?" Dean advanced on Chuck, whose face fell in fear—he backed up and fell down onto his couch as Dean continued demanding answers. "And Tulpas, and changelings?"

Cowering on the couch in just his underwear and a ratty tank top (his robe wasn't hanging around him as he laid there), the author looked pretty pathetic. "Is this some kind of 'Misery' thing?" He asked, paranoia coloring his features. "Ah, it is, isn't it? It's a 'Misery' thing! You're gonna make me rewrite everything then murder me!"

"Come on man, have some self-respect," Dean muttered at the sight of a grown man in his underwear close to blubbering. "Believe me, we're not fans!"

"Well, then, what do you want?!" Chuck demanded, refusing to move from his station on the couch.

Sam was getting pissy. "I'm Sam. And that's Dean. She's Alex."

Chuck only got more flabbergasted, looking at them like they were the crazy ones. "Sam and Dean and Alex are fictional characters. I made them up! They're not real!"

The Winchesters looked at each other for a minute, frustrated. Alex shook her head and went over to Chuck, grabbing him and manhandling him up. "Get up, you look like an idiot."

Chuck looked at her in awe. "Whoa, you're pretty strong for a chick," he said, suddenly seeming to see her in new light and seeming fascinated. "You work out? Lift weights? Pilates?" Alex gave him a weird, amused look.

"All right chuckles, enough," Dean said, grabbing Chuck by the arm. "Got something to show you."

Chuck protested vehemently, but Sam and Dean escorted him to the Impala, where Dean opened the trunk and began to show Chuck evidence of who they were.

Chuck stared down at the arsenal with wide eyes. "Are... those real guns?"

"Yup. This is real rock salt, these are real fake IDs," Dean showed him both things then let them fall back into the trunk and he crossed his arms as Alex picked up a couple things too and waved them at Chuck.
"Dad's journal," she said, then pulled out a dog-eared notebook that had been well-worn. "Some of my notebooks from when I couldn't talk."

Chuck was both impressed and flabbergasted. "Well, I, I gotta hand it to you guys. You really are my number one fans." He stared down at the guns again, his nervousness showing through. "That's, that's awesome, s-so..." he mumbled breathily, cleared his throat, and started backing up, jerking a thumb toward his house. "I-I think I've got some posters in the house, yeah, I... uh..." he began to scurry back up the way they'd come out.

"Chuck, stop!" Dean thundered, already following him.

Chuck turned and held his hands out in weak defense, panicking at the three Winchester's taller forms and imposing presences. "Please. Wait. Please, don't hurt me!"

Alex was exasperated. "We won't hurt you Chuck, so stop being such a little pansy." Clearly affronted by her words, Chuck went silent.

"How much do you know?" Sam asked intently. "Do you know about the angels? Or Lilith breaking the seals?"

The author's face showed confounded surprise. "Wait a minute. How do you know about that?" He asked.

"How do you?" Alex challenged.

Chuck paused, baffled. "Because I wrote it?"

"You kept writing?" Sam asked, his eyes narrowing.

The author's confusion was growing by leaps and bounds. "Yeah, even after the publisher went bankrupt, but those books never came out." Suddenly, Chuck grinned, laughed, crossed his arms and visibly relaxed. "Okay, wait a minute. This is some kind of joke, right? Did that—did Phil put you up to this?"

Dean, Sam, and Alex shared brief glances, then Dean cracked a cynical, tight smile. "Well, nice to meet you. I'm Dean Winchester, and this is my brother, Sam, our sister Alex."

Chuck's smile faded. "The last names were never in the books. I never told anybody about that. I never even wrote that down." He was overcome by shock. "You're real? The three of you are... are real?"

"In the flesh," Dean quipped humorlessly.

Chuck swallowed. "I... I need a drink."

Sam bracingly leaned down onto the kitchen chair back, staring at Chuck, who was gulping down a huge glass of whiskey, his back turned to the Winchesters. Dean was pacing slightly behind Sam, and Alex was further back in the room, frowning at the discovery of a shirt wadded up and shoved in between some books on a shelf. There was an old pizza crust near it that looked hard as a rock. The guy's house was packrat heaven.

Chuck turned around and groaned at the sight of the Winchesters in his living room kitchen area. "Ah! You're still there."
Dean nodded once. "Yup."

"You're not a hallucination."

Dean shook his head once. "Nope."

A silence stretched out as Chuck stared at them with a slackened jaw. "Well, there's only one explanation. Obviously... I'm a god."

Alex shot him a humored, thoughtful look. That was quite the leap.

Sam laughed softly. "You're not a god."

"How else do you explain it? I write things and then they come to life." He sighed gustily. "Yeah, no, I'm definitely a god," he said. His face twisted into confused self-loathing. "A cruel, cruel, capricious god." He looked at them all in turn as if he were horrified at himself. "The things I put you through! The physical beatings alone..."

"Yeah, we're still in one piece," Dean muttered, obviously internally rolling his eyes at Chuck's dramatics.

"I made you mute, Alex!" He said, appealing to her with his gaze. "I put you through terrible things—loneliness, a crazy dad, a twin who abandoned you?! A brother-sister relationship with Dean that most readers thought was incestual?!"

Alex felt put on the spot as she and Dean exchanged a very odd look indeed. "Uh…"

Chuck was looking at Dean, then Sam. "I killed your father. I burned your mother alive. And then you had to go through the whole horrific deal again with Jessica..."

"Chuck…" Sam cut him off, but Chuck kept going.

"All for what? All for the sake of literary symmetry. I toyed with your lives, your emotions, for... entertainment."

"You didn't toy with us, Chuck, okay?" Dean asked impatiently, moving forward a little bit. "You didn't create us."

Alex was now beside Sam, and all three of the Winchesters watched as Chuck crossed his arms and stared at them in worried interest. "Did you really have to live through the bugs?" He asked.

"Don't remind me," Alex commented in a mutter.

"What about the ghost ship?"

"Yes, that too," Dean answered brusquely.

"I am... so sorry," Chuck apologized. "I mean, horror is one thing, but to be forced to live bad writing... if I would have known it was real, I would have done another pass, a few more drafts, maybe tried to—"

"Chuck, you're not a god!" Dean insisted a little loudly.

"We think you're probably just psychic," Sam explained, standing to his full height.

Chuck made a face. "No. If I were psychic, you think I'd be writing?" He made a pained face.
"Writing is hard."

Sam and Dean exchanged a yeah right glance.

"Well for whatever reason, your psychic mumbo jumbo is... focused on our lives," Alex reasoned.

"Yeah, like laser-focused," Dean put in. "Are you working on anything right now?"

Realization came over Chuck's face. "Ho-ooly crap," he breathed.

"What?" Dean asked cautiously.

Chuck picked up a draft printout that was laying on the kitchen table next to his computer. "The, uh, latest book?" He paused, tried to be casual. "It's, uh, it's kind of weird."

"Weird how?" Sam asked.

Chuck stared at the page blankly and took too long to answer.

"Weird how, Chuck," Alex asked in a louder, less patient voice than her twin had used.

Chuck winced. "It's very... Vonnegut?"

Dean studied Chuck intently. "'Slaughterhouse Five' Vonnegut or 'Cat's Cradle' Vonnegut?"

"What?" Sam asked in a startled, high-pitched voice—he was obviously shocked that Dean even know who Vonnegut was.

Dean looked at his brother defensively. "What?"

"It's, uh, 'Kilgore Trout' Vonnegut," Chuck said grimly. "I wrote myself into it. I wrote myself, at my house... confronted by my characters."

"Well, that was interesting," Dean commented wryly as they sped away from Chuck's dilapidated house. Sam chuckled and said something back, but Alex wasn't paying attention. In the back seat with a hefty manuscript draft, she was busy skimming the text with increasing attentiveness. There was so much detail, and it described the past three days of their life perfectly... the way they had gotten zapped back to the motel, her apology to Cas, the burnt pancakes they had for breakfast, the long drive, the encounter in the comic book shop, the friendly spat Dean and Sam had gotten into over the music on the radio... how did Chuck know all of this?

Not even he knew. Shaken up and unable to provide them with anymore solid answers, Chuck had sent them away with the newest manuscript he'd been working on, telling them that he had no idea how he knew everything he did about them. Only that he had 'visions' and wrote what he saw.

The Winchesters were headed to find a laundromat until they could come up with something, or figure out how exactly this Chuck guy was doing what he was doing. Alex flipped to a few pages further. This page took place earlier that morning, when they had been on the road to Chuck's house. Her eyes got big as she read further.

SUPERNATURAL, The Monster at the End of this Book (working title), Page 14.

Alex leaned tiredly against the window of the car, yet again letting her mind wander to a place she would never admit to anyone that it went. Castiel. Ever since she had apologized to him, she hadn't seen him. Not that she wanted to, she told herself. Even though she did. To Alex, Castiel was...
someone she was beginning to dare to trust. She wasn't sure if she would ever understand him very well, but after all he had done for her, she was beginning to think, maybe, he wasn't as bad as she'd originally thought. Maybe there was hope for him yet. And it didn't hurt that he was attractive, either... uncomfortable with the direction her thoughts were taking, Alex forced herself to sit up, trying to banish the thoughts from her mind.

_What the hell?_ Alex glanced up from the draft, first at Dean, then at Sam, and stealthily took that page of the manuscript and cleared her throat, shoving the page into the pocket of her jacket. That was the last thing she needed—Dean and Sam knowing she found Castiel physically attractive. Which, she _didn't!_ Or at least, she didn't want to, and didn't think she _should._ He wasn't... a human. There was no reason for her to be attracted to him. But she thought of the tousled wild hair, the eyes that could stare into her soul, the stern line of his mouth. The subtle ways his expressions shifted. The crinkles around his eyes when a smile crossed his face. The constant five o'clock shadow. The way her name sounded when he spoke it. The power and authority he wielded... _Oh my god,_ Alex thought miserably as she finally gave up on trying to convince herself out of it. _I'm the world's biggest idiot. Why couldn't I pick someone to like who I would actually have a chance with? I'm hopeless._

Dean pulled into the laundromat parking lot, the car bumping over the uneven pavement. A sudden, terrible thought came to Alex, and she hurriedly paged through the manuscript. The drive to Chuck's, the visit with Chuck—and there, staring back at her: _Alex glanced up from the draft, first at Dean, then at Sam, and stealthily took that page of the manuscript and cleared her throat, shoving the page into the pocket of her jacket. That was the last thing she needed—Dean and Sam knowing she found Castiel physically attractive._

_Agape,_ Alex took that page too, shoving it into her pocket with the other page, mortified. How had Chuck done that?! The second Dean stopped the car, she hopped out anxiously, hugging the draft to herself. This was weird, weird, _weird!_ And she didn't want anyone, especially not her brothers, to know about her love life. Or, her embarrassing _lack_ of one. Or her entirely unrealistic and irrational little crush. Alex thought in another moment she might have laughed at herself—a capable hunter who wasn't scared to face any kind of paranormal enemy, but turned into a dramatic thirteen-year-old girl when she thought her brothers might read her diary.

"The hell is wrong with you?" Dean asked as he got out of the car, giving her one of his suspicious, narrowed-eyed stares.

"Just, uh, really stoked to do laundry!" Alex said, realizing that she overdid it, not quite managing to sound normal.

"Yeah, whatever, lemme see that," he said, motioning for the manuscript. She handed him the manuscript right away, trying not to let her reluctance show through. "Weirdo," Dean muttered, and turned to go into the laundromat. Sam was grabbing all the bags out of the trunk, and Alex told herself to stop thinking, and just start helping with laundry.

Dean settled down onto one of the counters, intently paging through the manuscript. The twins began working on the laundry, dumping everything out and sorting it into piles. Alex glanced at Dean every few seconds nervously. She wasn't sure why she was so freaked out about it. Maybe because being teased about that would hurt too much. She wished, so badly, that she wasn't the way she was... that is, headed for spinster life. But past a certain age, she guessed it was hopeless. She was pretty much a freak, and needed to just accept it. Her lifestyle didn't exactly leave her much in the way of meeting men or having a relationship. Also, she wasn't a normal girl at all—what kind of man would go for the likes of _her?_ No wonder she was getting so desperate as to be attracted to an angel. _No, stop thinking about him,_ she told herself, and glanced up at Dean again.
"I'm sitting in a laundromat, reading about myself sitting in a laundromat reading about myself. My head hurts," Dean complained.

"There's gotta be something this guy's not telling us, right?" Sam asked, gathering all of his darks into a huge pile.

"He's psychic," Alex said, throwing all the lights into one of the laundromat carts. "Has to be. Can you think of another explanation?"

"Well, no, but that doesn't mean there isn't one," Sam said. He turned and tossed his darks into one of the machines.

Dean began to read from the manuscript. "Sam tossed his gigantic darks into the machine. He was starting to have doubts about Chuck, about whether he was telling the whole truth. Alex glanced at Dean, scowling."

Alex's scowl dropped in surprise. "Alex's scowl dropped in surprise," Dean read, chuckling a little now.

"Stop it, Dean," Sam said.

"'Stop it, Dean,' Sam said," Dean read, thoroughly enjoying himself. "'Guess what you do next, Sam.' Sam just turned around, his expression unpleasant.

"'Sam turned his back on Dean, his face brooding and pensive.' I mean, I don't know how he's doing it, but this guy is doing it. I can't see your face, but those are definitely your 'brooding and pensive' shoulders."

Sam scoffed over his shoulder at Dean. "Ah, and you just thought I was a dick," Dean said, reading from the manuscript again.

Sam turned around, looking impressed. "The guy's good."

"Good? He's scary," Alex said. "He's inside our heads."

"'He's inside our heads,' Alex said with her trademark sarcastic flair." Dean all but giggled. "Trademark sarcastic flair, I like that, Al. Sassy."

"Give me that," Alex said, grabbing the stack of paper from him and whacking him over the head. He threw up his hands in pitiful protest, still giggling.

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**The Next Day**

**Chuck's House**

"This was all so much easier before you were real," Chuck said, pacing in front of them. His house was still dark and messy, littered with papers and empty bottles, dirty laundry, old pizza boxes.

"We can take it; just spit it out," Dean said impatiently. "What does the new chapter you wrote say is gonna happen next?"

Chuck looked between all three of the Winchesters hesitantly. "It's Lilith. She's coming for Sam."

"What do you mean?" Dean demanded, stepping closer to Chuck, whose eyes widened slightly. He was clearly intimidated by Dean. "Coming to kill him? When?"
"Tonight," Chuck said.

"Where?" Alex asked intently.

Chuck looked at her and nodded, muttered something, sat on his couch, and put on reading glasses. "Uh... let's see, uh... 'Lilith patted the bed seductively. Unable to deny his desire, Sam succumbed, and they sank into the throes of fiery demonic passion.'"

"Whoa," Alex said, and Dean's expression matched hers: total wide-eyed disbelief and disgust. Sam, however, was laughing. "You're kidding me, right?"

"Why are you laughing?" Alex demanded, not seeing the humor in the situation.

"Why aren't you?" Sam asked, and then seeing Dean's disapproving glare, his smile faded a little. "I mean, come on. 'Fiery demonic passion'?"

"It's just a first draft," Chuck said defensively.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait," Dean said, suddenly thinking of something. "Lilith is a little girl."

Oh yeah. All three Winchesters looked at Chuck, waiting for him to explain. "Oh, no, uh, this time she's a 'comely dental hygienist from Bloomington, Indiana.'"

"Well that makes it all better," Alex said with her trademark sarcastic flair. "You need to give us some context, here, Chuck. What happens before the… demonic passion?"

"Well, I don't really… I only got the… fiery part… I mean, I can let you guys read it, but it's really random. Just, basically, what you guys do all day after you leave here."

"Great. Perfect," Dean said wryly. "So then what happens after the fiery whatever?"

"I don't know, it hasn't come to me yet," Chuck said, shrugging shallowly.

"Geez, what good are you for?" Alex commented a little rudely.

But Chuck just looked at her, a little smile on his face, like he was fond of her. His eyes searched her face in an odd way. "You know, you're exactly how I imagined you. Even better, in fact."

Both of the brothers looked at Chuck strangely, and Dean grabbed Chuck by the shoulder, startling the writer. "Hey—keep the creepy flirty crap outta the equation. Got it?"

"Uh, yeah Dean," Chuck said, trying to act cool, but failing completely.

"Now, about this whole love scene between Sam and Lilith—" Dean started.

Sam didn't let him finish. "Dean, look, there's nothing to worry about. Lilith and me? In bed?"

Alex looked at him sidelong, saying what everyone else in the room was thinking. "What's so crazy about that?"

"The name Ruby ring any bells, Sam?" Dean added, driving in the nail.

Sam's expression fell into something like chagrin or frustration and he looked down, saying nothing.
A Few Hours Later

"What color you want, honey?" the woman asked Alex, who looked up from her hands, which laid flat on the table.

"I don't know. Red. Whatever color other girls get," she said impatiently.

The woman tilted her head to the side, perplexed. "Lots of colors, honey. You pick one."

"Red," Alex repeated, quickly losing her patience. "Just pick a damn red bottle and paint my friggin' nails, lady!"

"Okay, okay," the lady said, looking offended, but quickly complying.

Alex didn't know how any woman could subject herself to this, but this is what Dean had ordered her to do. Sit in a frigging nail shop. It seemed like one of the more ludicrous plans he'd ever had. After leaving Chuck's, Dean had immediately said they were leaving town. As luck would have it, the only way out of town, a bridge, was flooded. So, back to the drawing board, they had read the chapter Chuck had written, and Dean had the harebrained idea to do everything opposite of what they usually did in an attempt to avoid what was supposed to happen with Lilith that night.

That was why he sent Alex off, alone, and told her to do everything she normally wouldn't have —"you know, girl stuff… go get your nails done, I don't know!" Because if she could have chosen what to do with her free time, she would have wanted to go to a gun range and target practice or read a book in bed or lift weights, maybe sharpen her knives. She was pissed off that she was being subjected to this waste of time instead of doing something to prepare or stop Lilith's approach. Honestly, she thought she should have stayed with Sam. But Dean had insisted this was the only way to avoid the outcome they didn't want. To separate from each other.

"You want design on here?" the nail lady asked, and Alex opened her mouth to say no, then remembered what Dean had said. Do the opposite of what you normally would.

"Yeah," she said, and the lady handed her a menu of options. Alex looked at the options, searching for the one she hated the most.

Alex returned to the motel room at dusk and entered sullenly. Sam looked up as she entered, then his face scrunched up. "Whoa… you look… weird."

Alex just crossed her arms. "I got my nails done. I got my hair done. I went window shopping at the mall, and then I let some old lady do a makeover on me. I'm exhausted, and I have literally done nothing."

"I mean, you look…"

"Ridiculous?" She asked, looking down at herself. She'd done her best to do everything opposite, outfit included. She was wearing a short jean skirt, knee-high black boots, a dark red top, and a pleather crop jacket over it. Her hair had been curled and glossed, her nails were shiny red with ridiculous cherries on them. And the makeup—dark eyeshadow, dark liner. If this wasn't the opposite of what she'd normally do, nothing would be. She felt like a moron.

At that moment, Dean burst in, and headed straight for his bag. "Come on. We're getting out of here."

"What? Where?" Sam asked, standing in surprise.
"How? I thought the bridge—" Alex asked, and Dean suddenly noticed her appearance and did a double take.

"The hell are you wearing?" He asked, seeming to be totally startled by the very un-Alex outfit. "Never mind. We are leaving this motel, this town. I don't care if we gotta swim, we are getting out. I tried doing everything backwards, but it still happened, just like Chuck said." He looked around, confused. "Dude, where are all the hex bags?"

Alex followed his gaze, realizing she hadn't noticed their absence.

"I burned them," Sam said.

"You what?" Dean asked dangerously.

"Sam!" Alex exclaimed, stunned.

Her twin was attempting to explain, his expression earnest if not defensive. "Look, if Lilith is coming, which is a big 'if'—"

"No, no, no," Dean growled. "It's more than an 'if.' Chuck is not a psychic. He's a prophet."

"Wait, a what?" Alex asked, looking at Dean in complete confusion.

Dean let out a short, frustrated breath, impatient, shoving stuff into his bag. "Cas showed up, and apparently Chuck is writing the gospel of us."

At the mention of Castiel, Alex's stomach dropped a little. "Cas showed up?"

"Never mind that, let's get the hell out of here," Dean said, and headed back to his bags.

Sam shut his eyes and wet his lips. "No."

Getting agitated, Dean threw down his bag. "Sam, Lilith is gonna slaughter you."

"Maybe she will, maybe she won't," Sam said evenly, trying to be calm and reasonable. "Only one way to find out, Dean, and I say bring her on."

"That does not sound like a good idea, Sam..." Alex said, her voice full of caution.

"You both think I'll do it, don't you?" Sam asked dispiritedly. "You think I'll go dark side."

"Yes!" Dean barked out. "Okay? Yes. The way you've been acting lately? The things you've been doing?"

Sam looked startled, and Dean nodded grimly. "Oh, I know. How you ripped Alastair apart like it was nothing. How you killed him without batting an eye." Sam looked at Alex, hurt and betrayed. She just stared back without remorse as Dean continued. She had nothing to be sorry about—she'd told Dean the truth. "I know that you've been using your psychic crap, and you've been getting stronger. We just don't know why, and we don't know how."

"It's not what you think," Sam said, fumbling for words.

"Then what is it, Sam? 'Cause I'm at a total loss. Come on Alex, now." Dean grabbed his bag roughly off the bed and headed for the door. He turned back to Sam and Alex. "Are you coming or not?"
Sam didn't move. "No."

Dean's jaw clenched, and he just stared at Sam unhappily for a couple beats, then threw his bag down and left, slamming the door behind him. The silence resounded for a couple seconds, and then Sam turned to look at Alex, his expression harsh. "Your favorite brother just left," Sam said. "Aren't you gonna follow him like you always do?"

Alex forced herself to ignore the jab. "Sam, just listen to reason," she said, receiving a soft, bitter laugh from him. Still, she forged ahead, trying to be gentle and reasonable. For his sake, not hers. "Confronting Lilith while knowing what Chuck said is going to happen—it's a bad idea. You know that. Let's dodge this bullet. Let's go while we still can."

"I'm not running away, for once, Alex. I'm gonna face this. With or without you and Dean."

Alex wished she knew how to tell her brother how much she was worried, how scared she was for him. "It doesn't have to be you against the world, Sam," she said, coming closer to him, trying to get through to him. "Why can't we be on the same side?"

He shot her a dark look. "You're one to talk… I'm not the one who told Dean about Alastair."

Alex felt her expression sour. So, it was going to be like this. "No. You're not. And you should have been. But I knew you weren't going to tell him." She felt a bitter smile on her face. "In fact, you hoped I was too out of it to see what you did to Alastair. But I saw." She felt her smile fade. "I saw." Sam's expression was dark. Alex swallowed, suddenly feeling overwhelmed by sadness. She didn't have any ammo left, and she had no idea how to get her brother to listen to reason or come with her. "Sam… can't we just back off this Lilith thing and figure out what's going on with you first? Please. I want you to be okay."

"I am okay," he replied acidly. His expression was unflinching. "And this time, I'm doing things my way. For once in my life, you and Dean can't do anything to stop me." His jaw was set. "The door's right there. Now leave me alone." He turned away, effectively ending the conversation.

Alex stared at his back, hurt, yeah, but mostly frustrated. She gave up, leaving the motel room and exiting into the chill of night. She looked to her left, where she could see Dean, his familiar silhouette lit by the blue glow of the soda machine… he was brushing past another figure angrily. Was that…?

Alex approached. It was. It was Castiel. "You must understand why I can't intercede," he was saying to Dean intently. "Prophets are very special. They're protected." Castiel looked at her in acknowledgement as she came to Dean's side. "Hello, Alex." He took in her appearance, and she could see that he was mildly perplexed by it.

She didn't give him time to comment. "Cas. What's going on guys?"

"Well our good buddy Cas here was just telling me why he can't interfere with the prophesy… or basically lift a damn finger to help us," Dean said angrily, staring down the angel wrathfully.

Alex shut her eyes for a couple seconds tiredly. Sounded familiar. "Okay. Well… what options does that leave us?"

"The hell if I know!" Dean exclaimed irately. "I'm about to go in there and knock Sam unconscious and tie him down if we don't come up with something." He huffed a heavy breath out, sounding tired. "Come on, halo over here is fresh outta helpfulness," Dean said, shooting Castiel a glare and grabbing Alex by the arm, about to turn her away with him.
But Castiel spoke before he could. "You should both know… if anything threatens a prophet... anything at all… an archangel will appear to destroy that threat. Archangels are fierce. They're absolute." He lowered his chin, narrowed his eyes. "They're Heaven's most terrifying weapon."

Dean's head tilted slightly to the side. "And these archangels, they're tied to prophets?"

"Yes," Castiel confirmed.

"So if a prophet was in the same room as a demon..." Dean prompted.

There was an oddly sly, conspiratorial smile on Cas's face. "Then the most fearsome wrath of Heaven would rain down on that demon." The smile was still there. "Just so you understand... why I can't help." He looked at Dean and then Alex significantly. Alex felt a smile spreading over her face. Was Castiel being tricky and clever? He was, and he knew it, too.

Dean was nodding, also understanding. "Thanks, Cas."

"Good luck."

Castiel's gaze left Dean and met Alex's. If Dean had noticed, he might have been puzzled at the intense nature of it, the way they silently seemed to be saying something to each other. But he was already heading for the car. "Come on Alex." She turned to look at Dean, then back at Cas—but he was gone.

Disconcerted, she jogged to catch up with Dean. "But shouldn't I stay with Sam?"

"No. I don't want you alone with him," Dean said, and looked at her over the top of the car, sadly. "We'll be back in time to save him."

They swung into the car, and the engine roared to life. Dean tore out of the parking lot, and for a few minutes, the car was silent. Then, Alex turned slightly. "Dean, why did Cas help us like that?"

Dean didn't answer for a few seconds, and she could see that he was in deep thought. "Dunno. At first I thought he was... I dunno, a self-righteous asshole with wings." Dean chuckled, then grew pensive. "I owe the guy a whole hell of a lot. My life, your voice... this." Dean shifted his hand on the wheel, turned a shade more darkly thoughtful. "Maybe he wants something."

Alex glanced at him sidelong. In her experience, everyone had an ulterior motive. Still, she shook her head slowly. "I don't think so."

"Why not?" Dean asked, sending a cursory glance her way.

"He's a freakin' angel," Alex said. "What the hell could he want from us? Flannel shirts? Rock salt?" She gave a short little laugh. "I mean, what do we have that anyone in their right mind would want?"

Dean chuckled. "Good point."

Alex thought about how Anna had wanted to be a human to experience love. How Cas had said he was her friend, back at the hospital. She grew reflective, wondering about the motivations of angels. "Maybe he just wants friendship."

Dean made a face like he thought the idea was doubtful, but possible. "Interesting theory." He squealed to a halt on the sidewalk in front of Chuck's house. "We'll have to think about that later. Let's get this jackass and hightail it back to Sammy."
Dean hurried inside, Alex close behind. They found Chuck sprawled on his couch, wrapping up in a blanket and drinking. He sat up in surprise upon seeing them. "What are you doing here? I didn't write this. Hey!"

Dean was yanking him to his feet roughly. "Come on. I need you to come with us."

"What? Where?" Chuck protested.

"To the motel where Sam is," Alex said.

"But that's where Lilith is!" Chuck protested.

"Yeah, exactly," Dean said. "I need you to stop her."

"Are you insane?" Chuck demanded, yanking out of Dean's grip. "Lilith? I know what she's capable of, Dean! I wrote her!"

Impatiently, Dean seemed to realize he needed to stop and explain. "All right, listen to me. You have an archangel tethered to you, okay? All you got to do is show up and boom! Lilith gets smoked."

"But I-I haven't seen that yet. Th-the story—" Chuck fumbled.

Alex smacked him in the back of the head. "Shut up, Chuck! Get yourself together!"

"Ow." He cowered away, holding his head. "B-but... I'm just a writer, I... I can't do anything!"

Dean grabbed him again. "This isn't a story anymore, man. This is real! And you're in it! Now, I need you to get off your ass and fight."

Chuck drew in a deep breath, and for a second looked like he was bracing himself to do just that. And then he shook his head. "No friggin' way."

Dean sighed, blinking a few times. "Okay, well, then, how about this—I've got a gun in my pocket, and if you don't come with me, I'll blow your brains out."

Chuck looked at Dean, slack jawed. "I thought you said I was protected by an archangel," he said timidly.

"Well, interesting exercise," Dean said, his voice lower. He had stepped a little closer to Chuck, who shrank back. "Let's see who the quicker draw is."

"You guys wouldn't shoot me..." Chuck said, trying to call a bluff.

At this point, Alex grabbed a fistful of his shirt and shoved him back a couple steps. "Chuck. Enough with the bullshit." He stared at her in a mix of awe and fear. "You know how Dean and I feel about Sam. We may fight each other ninety percent of the time, but I don't care about cutting you up a little to get you to do what I want... which is for you to help save my brother." She showed him the knife she had pulled out of her belt loop and his eyes widened. "Now, move."

"Okay, yeah, okay." He was smiling now, a breathy laugh escaping his mouth. "Wow, that was kinda hot."

"Shut up," Dean said, smacking him in the back of the head.
Chuck cowered slightly, grabbing his head with both hands. "Ow! Would you guys stop doing that?!"

The unlikely three got into the Impala and Dean raced them back toward Sammy. Just as they entered the tiny downtown area, the engine puttered and choked. "Damnit!" Dean shouted, hitting the steering wheel in frustration. "Out of gas. I knew I was forgetting something!" Luckily they were close to a gas station, and Dean coasted in, making it to the pump on gas fumes. He jumped out of the Impala and pointed a threatening finger at Chuck, who sat in the back seat with Alex. "Don't go anywhere."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Chuck said, smiling nervously then seeming to think better of it. He grimaced at himself and looked at his lap.

Alex looked at him out of the corner of her eye, then cleared her throat, spoke furtively. "So. Chuck. You seen any visions of me and… anyone? In the future?"

"That's a really open-ended question, Alex," Chuck said, looking at her mistrustfully.

Alex sighed and rolled her eyes. She would have to spell it out, then. "Me and Cas, okay? The way you were writing some of the last chapter was like… a lead up to a romance."

At that comment, the author smiled coyly, looked at her sidelong. "Read a lot of romance novels, huh?" He asked, laughing nervously, then becoming quiet. "That was a rhetorical question. I know you read them."

Alex gave him a surprised look which quickly became an evil eye. "Don't tell."

"Uh, well, it's mentioned in the books," Chuck said, flinching a little in anticipation of her reaction.

"Aw shit Chuck," Alex muttered, bringing her face into her palm. Her brothers knew, of course, but… she didn't want anyone else to know about her sappier side.

"I'm sorry," Chuck apologized, leaning away a little, as if anticipating an attack. "Please don't cut me."

"Come on dude," Alex said, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms while letting out a huff. "I wouldn't cut you unless I absolutely had to."

"That's… that's comforting," Chuck said. He frowned in thought, growing pensive. "To, uh, answer your question, no, I haven't seen anything about you and Castiel. But, I do know that he likes you. More than anyone else, I think. That has to count for something, right?"

Alex looked at him sidelong again, not letting her real reaction show. "Hell if I know."

"And you… you like him, too, don't you," Chuck supposed softly. He suddenly seemed very wise and thoughtful, knowing. Alex withered underneath his gaze. "Only, you're trying to run from what you feel. Because you don't know where it would lead."

She looked at him sharply, getting defensive and loud because of how right he was. "Nowhere. It would lead nowhere."

Chuck drew in a deep breath, still looking at her with that terrifyingly knowing look. "I'm not so sure."

Alex fell silent and looked the opposite direction, wishing she hadn't broached the subject at all.
Chuck was giving her false hope, which she didn't need or want. It had been a stupid question to ask—what had she wanted Chuck to say? Yes, Castiel has been in love with you for a long time and you're going to have the romance of a lifetime that defies the odds—cuz face it baby, you're a human and he's an angel and, oh wait, you're delusional. Jesus Christ it showed how many romance novels she read.

Alex kicked herself inside. It was a fantasy, and she knew it. It was just because Castiel was one of the only men besides her father or brothers or Bobby who had said more than ten things to her. It was only because he had showed her a kindness by healing her voice. It was only because he was handsome and interesting and had eyes that carried heaviness that she recognized in herself. It was only because she was confused and sometimes he looked at her like he was interested in her but she was a clueless relationship virgin (and otherwise-virgin too) and any look from a man not related to her seemed to mean something it probably didn't.

Dean yanked the driver's door open and slid back into his seat, slamming the door behind him. He startled her out of her thoughts.

"Okay, let's go cut this fiery demonic passion short," he said, and they burned rubber out of there.

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**Later That Night**

They rode away from the Red Motel under the cover of night, Sam in the back seat, Alex in the front, Dean driving. "So lemme get this straight, you didn't think *once* about taking it?" Dean asked incredulously.

"You kidding me? Dude, you spent all day trying to talk me off the Lilith track," Sam said.

"I'm just saying… a deal to call off the whole thing… angels, seals, Lucifer rising, the whole nine?" Dean glanced at Sam in the rearview.

" Doesn't sound legit," Alex muttered. She heard Sam shift a little in the back seat.

"Yeah. And even if it were she would have found some way to weasel out of it. And all it would have cost us was our lives. Anyway, that's not the point."

"What's the point?" Dean asked.

"The point is, she's scared," Sam said. "I could see it. Lilith is running."

"What would hell's most terrifying bitch be running from?" Alex asked, completely disbelieving. "The archangel we brought over for a visit?"

"No. Something else. But she was telling the truth about one thing."

"Which was?" Alex prompted.

"She's not gonna survive the apocalypse. I'll make sure of that."

"*We'll* make sure of it," Dean corrected. "Together."

"Yeah, that's what I meant," Sam said, and grew quiet.

Dean cleared his throat and cranked up the volume on the radio, covering over the silence. It was a familiar, upbeat classic rock song with a yowling guitar rift to die for.
"I've got a tombstone hand and a graveyard mind, I'm just twenty-two and I don't mind dying. Who do you love? Who do you love. I said-a who do you lo-ooove?"

Dean piped up, sang along suddenly, trying to make the mood in the car light after everything they'd been through that day. "Who do you loooove?"

"Stop before you break the windows," Alex joked, making a face.

"You love when I sing," he teased.

"I love when you stop singing," she retorted playfully.

In the back seat and unnoticed by his siblings, Sam sank down a little in his seat, shame rolling over him like the incoming tide. If they only knew the things he was doing in the dark these days… Dean wouldn't say that he wanted to do anything together. And Alex would never give him a second chance ever again.

Oblivious, in the front seat, Alex smiled a little in Dean's direction and grabbed her book from the floor of the car. She flipped open Wendigo, starting where she'd left off, reading in the dim light of passing street lamps.

Dean looked back over his shoulder, checking to see that his sister was still there—in the back of his mind, he always feared he'd look and Alex would be gone without a sound. He could never forgive himself if that happened. But she was there, in her worn out cargo jacket and with the predictable messy hair, holding herself firmly, calmly, her expression leveled in attentive focus. Unlike almost everyone else there, she was not freaking out, not getting crazy, not drowning in fear. She just looked ready and determined. Focused. He almost smiled to himself, realizing how proud he was of his kid sister, who had something that could potentially hold her back in life—but she didn't let it. That was her, wasn't it? Strong despite having what others would label a weakness. Resourceful, clever, and always doing her best, never complaining. She carried a lot of sadness with her, but faced every day just like he did: ready to kick its ass.

Alex looked up from the pages, a little smile on her face. She glanced at Dean sidelong, smiling. He caught her glance. "What?"

"It's just a pretty good book," she said, smiling to herself. She glanced at Sam in the rearview. He looked distracted, off in another world, and troubled. Her smile faded, and she remembered the harsh words traded earlier. She wondered how many more wounds their relationship could sustain before dying completely. She wondered how someone who she had once been so close to could be so far away. Lately, the moments where they were okay, where they weren't at odds were less and less. Once again troubled, Alex put the book down, lost in the dark places of her mind.
The Becoming

"Everybody says time heals everything. But what of the wretched hollow? The endless in between?"
- Imogen Heap

A Week Later

Alex stared stonily into the flames where the body of her half-brother Adam burned—she'd only learned of his existence a few days ago.

Just when she thought nothing else could ever surprise her ever again...

Life had been turned upside down for the Winchesters. Alex thought she should probably be sad that she never got a chance to meet the real Adam, sad that she hadn't known of his existence until a few days ago, sad that he died a slow and painful death at the hands of vengeful ghouls… but her dominant emotion was was a sense of betrayal and pained confusion. And extremely disoriented wooziness. But that probably had something to do with the alcohol.

She turned away from her brothers and loped off into the woods, her flask of absinthe clutched tightly. Her brothers watched her go and exchanged a glance, then turned back to the fire, giving her space, and it was a good thing, too. Sam and Dean would probably have taken the flask from her right then and there if they knew what was in there. A few years ago they had banned her from drinking absinthe entirely… it made her turn a little psycho... but she still snuck some at times. And today, of all days, she needed it.

Adam… did Dad name you? Is his name similar to mine on purpose? Starts with A, four letters…

Alex mourned for someone she didn't even know. Her breath made little puffs in the winter air, and her boots crunched against the frosty ground. She was at the point where she was all out of anger and instead full of pained questions that she didn't want to have to ask. She thought she knew Dad. She thought she knew him. How could he have another kid out there they had never known about? Why would he never tell them about Adam? Why'd they have to find out like this?

The thought of John Winchester soured Alex's mood and she bitterly swigged down more burning absinthe to numb the feelings. She stumbled a little, toe catching on a tree root. Maybe I shouldn't be standing right now. Plunking down unevenly to lean against a large tree trunk, she worked on nursing the booze. It burned like a bitch, but was doing the job of medicating her, numbing her, making everything seem funny and ridiculous instead of painful and raw. She sighed really loudly and shut her eyes, turning the flask up. She was beginning to feel good, loopy, like nothing mattered. Also, the world was spinning.

Alex took another huge gulp and when she opened her eyes, almost choked—standing in front of her was Cas, arms at his sides. Startled, she dropped the flask, the contents clumsily sloshing around. She grabbed it up and hugged it to herself, frowning up at Cas. He was difficult to see in the dim light but the mere sight of him made her feel odd, and she got mad about it. "What're you doing here?"

He stepped a little closer, and she could see his face a little better in the light from the fire that was twenty feet off. He was looking down at her intently... and was that concern on his features, or judgement? "I sensed your sorrow from Heaven," he said, his deep voice steady. "I thought I should see if you were…" he looked at the container she was clinging to—his expression wavered
a little. "All right."

She giggled throatily—he was cute, he was funny—she tilted the flask toward him, as if in salute. "Good for you, Cas," she said, saying his name slowly and deeply. It sounded so hilarious to her, and she was giggling again before she got peevish again. "Now... unless you've got vodka or tequila with you, go away."

"I... have neither," he stated, his eyebrows furrowing slightly.

"Then get lost... I have things to do," she said. The only person she wanted to spend time with right now was this flask.

Cas crouched down in front of her, searching her face sternly and she was a little caught of guard by his closeness and how deep his eyes looked, how vast the brilliant blue spheres looked in the darkness. "Things to do?" He asked her. "Such as sitting here in the dark and consuming potentially lethal amounts of alcohol?"

She turned her head sideways, momentarily intrigued. "Was that you being funny?" She asked and pointed a finger at him then shook it like she was chiding him. Her face was flushed with drunkenness. "I like you, angel man," she slurred, then giggled again and accidentally hit herself in the teeth with the metallic rim of the flask. "Ouch, son of a bitch," she mumbled, clapping a hand to her hurt teeth awkwardly.

Cas tilted his head slightly, not understanding, but obviously trying to. His eyes flickered over her face, he was frowning intently, trying to comprehend her actions. "Why are you doing this, Alex?"

"Doing what?" She asked, her good humor slipping. Something about his tone didn't sit well with her. He looked at her a minute longer, as he weren't finished deciding what he thought. Feeling like she was being judged, she glared. "I can do what I want," she said acidly, no longer in a good mood—at all. She stared at him and decided in misery that she hated everything about that handsome face and brilliant blue eyes that were staring into hers. Getting angry that she wasn't blasted to the point of not caring, she crossed her arms over her chest and the flask alike. "You wouldn't get what I'm going through. Why this hurts so frickin' bad." She snorted. "And I doubt you'd want to know, either..."

She was growing agonized, sadness running her over like a train. "Why'd he do it, Cas? Why? Why'd he take Adam to baseball games, and teach him to drive and visit him for his birthday?" She stared off unseeingly into Castiel's right shoulder, breathing heavily through her nose, glazing over. "He forgot mine and Sam's birthday all the time and left me behind on half the hunts and made us do stupid training drills aaaaaalllllll day..." she chuckled darkly, a sound that was blurred by the alcohol. "You wanna know my favorite part? He refused to learn sign language, said I didn't need to, said he was gonna find a way to fix me, said it was a waste of time, oh, and that he didn't have the time, blah, blah, blah... ah, bastard. That son of a bitch." She was laughing now, her head lolling back and forth unsteadily.

"He thought he knew best, and the sad part is I thought he did too. Well, I know now whyyyyy."

She drew the word 'why' out for several seconds, pointing her finger at nothing in emphasis. "Cuz he thought I was a second best daughter." She laughed again, but the sound came out wrong, like she'd been punched in the gut. "Cuz he had a normal son Adan he rathered spend time with..." she made a face, hearing herself beginning to lose her grasp of the english language. "He didn't want the world to know about his weird daughter Alex who couldn't talk or his son Dean who was never good enough, or Sam who hated the family business." She got quiet, stared a minute, then looked at Cas sullenly. He shocked her when he put a hand onto her arm, just above her wrist. The touch was hesitant and uncertain and for a minute, behind the haze of drunkenness, Alex felt shocked at the
gentle touch, the worried way he was looking at her. What is he doing? Why is he looking at me like that? For a minute, she was scared and confused for reasons she didn't know. She yanked her hand away from his at to herself, looking at him mistrustfully, trying to figure out what would make him do that, what his motive was. "You need to stop asking me all these questions," she said really loudly, trying to defend herself against how he was making her feel. Then she frowned to herself, not sure if she remembered him asking anything at all. Cas seemed chastened when she pulled her hand away, slightly rueful, like he had done the wrong thing and felt... embarrassed? Getting agitated again—with everything, herself, him, the warm feeling crawling all over her skin, Alex jerked back, standing up and almost falling sideways. Cas stood too, clearly ready to catch her if she fell over. "Well, screw my dad, and screw this, and screw—uh, screw the… um, uh the…” she forgot what she was going to say and swore in aggravation, went to take another swig of the alcohol... but Castiel silently took the flask from her.

"Hey! Give me that!" she shouted, and tried grabbing it, only to pitch forward unsteadily. Dropping the flask unceremoniously, Cas caught her, bracing her with strong hands, and she stared into his eyes, startled. His serious, apprehensive face was only inches from hers. She looked at his weird, flat lips and her stomach flopped, a strange sensation pitted in the bottom of it. She looked up at his eyes, thought she imagined it maybe, but saw his eyes flicker upward, like he'd been looking at her lips, too. His eyebrows were pressed together closely, turning upwards in a strange expression. She swallowed deeply, began to breathe heavily, getting really annoyed with Castiel, or maybe it was with herself. "Stop doing that," she growled, and tried pushing him, but he wouldn't budge. He looked her in the eye, vastly confused.

"Doing what?" he asked, sounding slightly frustrated with her.

"The…” she stared into his eyes dumbly, forgetting words—so, so blue. Was that even possible for them to be so blue? He was waiting for her to reply and she got flustered. "Uh," she blinked a couple times. "I don’t… know?" she answered honestly. She couldn't remember what she meant or what she was mad about, and the world was beginning to turn all kinds of strange angles and directions and her stomach was beginning to feel queasy. I overdid it. She couldn't quite manage to keep her head in one place, and felt like she might float apart into a bunch of pieces. She moaned in annoyance and flopped her head forward, knocking it against Cas's chest. With her wrists each gripped tightly by his hands, she was hopelessly stuck.

"Hey, what's going on?" Dean's gruff voice came, along with the sound of his boots against leaves. He stopped short, seeing Alex in Castiel's grip. "Cas? What are you doing?"

"Yes. Hello Dean. Sam." Castiel was distracted and seemed mildly exasperated as Sam came up behind Dean. He looked down at the back of Alex's head in something like chagrin. "Your sister is very intoxicated."

"No inn not," Alex insisted matter-of-factly, her head shooting up. She swayed a little in Cas's grip.

"Geez," Sam commented, and the brothers looked at each other in a mixture of annoyance and exasperation. "Sorry Cas, she's a sloppy drunk," Sam said apologetically, grabbing the forgotten flask up from where it had fallen and sniffing it, then immediately grimaced. "Uh—absinthe."

Dean threw his hands up. "What the hell, Alex?" he demanded. "You know how that crap makes you!"

"And she drank like half of it," Sam said, shaking his head.

Dean was aghast and chagrined. "I turn my back on you for two seconds and… look at you—you're completely shitface hammered!"
"No-o-oo—I'm—no-oot—!" Alex shouted in a weird cadence.

"Sure you're not," Dean said flatly, grabbing her from Cas by both arms.

She was further agitated by that and squirmed. "Lemme go!"

"Come on, Al, don't be like that," Dean tried, but she had pretty much lost any clarity she had.

"You're ugly and your voice is stupid dumb stupid!" she yelled, receiving an annoyed eye roll from Dean. She probably thought she was being really clever. Absinthe turned her into a raving lunatic.

"Ahh geez. It's been awhile since you've been this trashed," Dean commented wryly as her hand found its way into his face—she was trying to push him away ineffectively and Dean had to lean away before she poked his eye out or accidentally stuck a finger up his nose in her clumsy attempt. "Hey—uff—watch it!" he protested, struggling to subdue her.

"Get off me, because, I'm going to kill myself," she declared, squirming without stopping. "Kiiiiiiill myself!"

Castiel's expression went dark. "Alex, I can't allow you to do that."

"Oh my god," Sam was laughing now, maybe because that was all there was left to do. "Don't worry Cas," he said evenly, chagrinned amusement playing on his features. "Anything she says right now… just don't take it seriously."

"I'll do it, I will!" Alex was losing it, and fast. "And you'll be sorry, sorry, srrrrry..." she suddenly stopped and made a strange face. "I think I'm going to be sick, uuugh..." Dean let her go, and she stumbled a few steps and then fell forward, collapsing into a heap. She made more strange groans and then sobbed a couple times, declaring that everyone in the world hated her.

"Should we… help her somehow?" Cas asked as he looked down at her with a face screwed up in confusion and worry.

"How?" Dean asked, staring at his sister in almost embarrassment.

On the ground, Alex was trying to stand up, but rolled over onto her side, mumbling incoherently, then asking, "where are we?"

Dean covered half his face with a hand and shut his eyes, heaving a deep breath.

"This would be funny if it wasn't so pathetic," Sam said, looking at Dean for agreement. Dean just made a face.

Alex was groaning loudly, mumbling. "I wanna drive the empanda, no one ever lets me drive the impalana… ah…?"

Dean got an idea and turned to Castiel. "Cas buddy, I think I know how you can help."

That got the angel's attention. "How?" Cas asked, his frown deepening intently, like he was anxious to do so.

"Lay your hands on," Dean said. "Send her to la la land."

Cas didn't understand the reference. "Send her… where?"

"Cas, just lay her out!" Dean said, getting impatient. "Do your angel mumbo jumbo and put her to
sleep so I don't have to put up with this crap! Cuz trust me, it'll go on all night."

"I'm not sure—" Cas started.

Dean was hauling Alex to her feet. "Lemme go lemme go, I'm dot nrunk," Alex slurred, pitching wildly in Dean's arms. Again, she tried to put her hands in his face.

"Mffbbhhhh!" Dean leaned his head back and manhandled his sister in his arms, trying to get her away from his face, turning her outward to face Cas. "Anytime now, Cas! Just do it!" Castiel hesitated, then complied and touched two fingers to her forehead. She went slack in Dean's arms.

"Thank you," Dean said, very relieved, to which Cas just gave him a grudging look.

"We'll hear about this in the morning," Sam said, sounding like he was already dreading it.

"If she can remember a damn thing," Dean pointed out.

"...True," Sam said, seeming to be encouraged by the idea.

Heaving a huge sigh, Dean nodded toward the Impala, which was parked back near the fire that was now dying down. "Help me shove her into the back seat."

Dean hooked his arms under Alex's armpits, and Sam got her feet. "Hey, Cas—" Dean turned to his left, where Castiel had been, but saw that the angel was gone. He looked around and saw him nowhere, frowned. "What the hell, man? Where'd he go?"

"Who knows," Sam said as they started toward the car.

"Great," Dean muttered sarcastically.

"You know, last time she got this wasted was when you died, Dean," Sam said, walking backwards and watching over his shoulder as they carried Alex's unconscious form.

"Yeah, well, I get why she's upset," Dean said. "But, I mean, really? Absinthe? I thought we all agreed she never needed to drink that crap again." He shook his head, aggravated. "That's just what I needed to end today with… Alex making this whole thing about herself."

They reached the car, Sam balancing Alex's feet awkwardly on his knee with one hand as he pried the car door open. He threw her legs onto the seat. "I don't think that's fair, Dean. I mean, we're all pretty upset about Adam, Dad… the whole nine."

Dean shoved the rest of her awkwardly into the back as Sam helped. "My point exactly. Why does she get to freak out about it on such a spectacularly insane level?"

They stood back. "Because, I dunno. Like you said to me earlier… I'm a lot like Dad, which is why we butted heads so much. You wanted to be like Dad, and Alex… she went back and forth, but mostly set herself up for disappointment with Dad. And Dad knew it." Sam looked pensive. "He knew how he let her down, how much he broke her heart. And he just held her further away for it so he didn't have to try." Sam had Dean's attention. "So this, about Adam, Dad's secret life… I know it's eating at her. Maybe more than it is us."

Dean looked mildly chastened, and covered it up with an impatient nod. "Yeah, well. Me too, Sammy." Dean held out his hand and made a 'give it here' motion. "Now gimme that flask."

Sam looked at Dean with mild suspicion. "To dump it out, right?"
Dean gave him a wan, deadpan look. "Don't be an idiot," he said, then when Sam gave him a look, he threw his hands up in the air. "Yes, to dump it out!"

Sam handed it over, and Dean turned it upside down, the green liquid pouring out onto the cold ground. Sam turned around to look down at his twin sister, who looked kind of like a rag doll, the way she had been haphazardly shoved into the back seat. Her dark hair was strewn across her face, some of it stuck in her half-open mouth.

Without thinking, Sam leaned down a little and brushed Alex's crazy, tangled hair back from her face, smiling down at her with fondness. Despite everything that had happened the past year, that was his twin sister Alex and there was no one else in the world who could replace her. Nothing could change the fact that he loved her, would die for her. Hell, he felt the same about Dean. Sam's hand hovered near her face and his smile faded. He pulled his hand away, troubled.

The past few days with Adam had been particularly hard on his brother and sister. Unlike Dean and Alex, Sam had never idolized Dad like that. He'd never invested all his hopes and dreams in the man or even really respected him that much. Maybe that's why he wasn't shocked to discover that Dad had been less than a saint. He didn't feel as torn up inside as Alex and Dean obviously did, he didn't feel blindsided or betrayed like they did. He closed the door of the Impala firmly then shoved his hands into his pockets and walked around the car to the passenger side. He only wished he knew how to tell his brother and sister about the demon blood. Even if he knew how to tell them, he was reminded that they would never understand or accept it. That was too much to hope for. And there were darker things too, inside. Things he would never tell anyone.

He checked his phone furtively before getting into the car. No missed calls, no texts. He was beginning to feel desperate. He needed more demon blood, and he knew it. Knew it, and hated it. He was starting to feel sick and shaky, short-tempered and unfocused. Where the hell was Ruby and why wouldn't she answer his calls?

Alex woke up and the instant her eyes cracked opened, she squeezed them shut again, groaning miserably. She was laid out on a bed in what she assumed was a motel room. Even though the room was dark and it was clearly still nighttime, the light coming from the bathroom was blinding. Her head was killing her. Her stomach was churning with nausea. Her mouth was dry, her vision was weird. She opened her eyes again slowly, sore all over and feeling intoxicated still. Dizzy. Gross. She looked down, peering at her feet. Her shoes were still on and everything. She tried to remember what happened last night—or was it tonight, still? Must still be tonight. She groggily swung her legs over the side of the bed and with some effort, got up and shuffled toward the light of the motel bathroom, her stomach pitching, threatening to empty itself any second. Sam stood there, clutching the sink rigidly with both hands, his head down like he was fighting sickness. She momentarily forgot herself and her illness ebbed away into concern.

"Sam? You okay?" Alex asked, and he shot up, turned around, his expression strange and startled. He looked sleep-deprived and wan, a little sallow. Was he ill?

Her twin attempted a smile to cover up his ill appearance and the slight scare she'd given him. "Yeah, yeah, just, uh, feeling kinda sick I guess. Headache. Stomach. No big deal." He looked at her with a studious frown. "What are you doing up, anyway? It's like three in the morning. I thought you'd be passed out for a couple weeks at least."

Alex tried to chuckle at Sam's little joke but grunted with a wince instead. "How much did I drink?"

Sam's face softened with a crooked smile as he chuckled. "I don't know if it was how much or if it
Alex folded her hands over her stomach, queasy. Absinthe... the thorn in her side. "Never again," she vowed flatly.

"Do you remember anything?" Sam asked. There was the slightest little smile on his face.

Alex's eyes went off to the side and she thought hard, squinting again her pounding headache. She came up with nothing and shook her head. "That would be a negative."

Sam was hiding amusement. "Not even Cas holding your drunk ass up?"

Alex's eyes went wide. "What?"

Sam chuckled and teased her, his amused expression making Alex feel like she'd done some really embarrassing stuff. "Oh yeah," he said, enjoying the good-natured ribbing. "It was pretty great. He didn't know what to make of you like that."

Alex groaned and shut her eyes in mortification, put her face in her hand. "Sam—"

"Don't shoot the messenger," he told her with mild playfulness.

She gave him an unamused, sullen look. Hadn't she made an idiot of herself in front of Cas enough? She could only imagine what she'd done or said and was humiliated... even though she guessed if he'd watched over her as her guardian angel or whatever he'd seen her shitfaced before. But still.

Back in the dark motel room, bedsprings squeaked as Dean suddenly rolled over and sat up. "Hey, Thing One and Thing Two," he said, his voice scratchy from just waking up. "Cas just came for a visit. We gotta go." He flicked on the bedside table lamp and Alex squinted in response, held a hand up in front of her face.

"Wait, what? Cas came for a—what are you talking about?" Sam asked, watching as Dean grabbed up his keys from the bedside table.

"I dunno, man, all I know's he shows up in one of my dreams and said it was important and to hurry," Dean replied, shoving his feet into his shoes. "He wouldn't say what, just gave me an address. It's not far."

Alex was pitiful. "I'm still drunk and my head hurts."

Dean looked at her like he was ruefully thinking told you so. "Not my fault now is it, princess?" He asked, shrugging on his jacket and giving her a pointed look. "We'll get some aspirin into you and you'll be good as new. Now, come on." He paused, frowned. "I think Cas might be in trouble."

Underneath flickering lights in an old manufacturing plant, the Winchesters swept the darkness ahead with flashlights. The only sound was of buzzing, dying lights and the hunters' echoing footsteps. "You sure this is the place?" Sam asked, his voice a hushed whisper. Alex turned her head over her shoulder to briefly look behind them into the tunneling darkness.

Dean sounded terse. "Yeah. I'm sure."

"So where's Cas?" Sam asked, asking what they all wanted to know. Alex shined her flashlight to the side of the dim hallway they were following. A huge portion of the wall had crumbled away, like something big had hit it. Her stomach clenched with a strange feeling of dread. She vaguely
remembered his face, lit softly by the glow of firelight as he crouched in front of her earlier that night. Hadn't he touched her arm? She thought he had.

"Here," Dean said, turning and leading them up a set of metal stairs, into more darkness. As they came to the a large, open area of the plant, all three of them were taken aback at what they found. "What the hell?" Dean muttered, throwing the beam of his flashlight across total wreckage—metal scaffolding had been torn asunder and was piled up like ribbons—torn electrical wires overhead and within snapped and popped, showering sparks down over the destruction at an uneven cadence.

"It looks like a bomb went off," Sam commented softly as they stole into the foreboding space and continued to look around, flashlights held high.

Obviously there had been some kind of knock-down drag-out fight here between really powerful beings but it was silent now and ominously so. Alex's heart and blood pressure were both elevating. Where was Cas? Had he done this? Or had it been done to him? Could angels be hurt or killed by each other? She was pretty sure the answer to that was yes. There was a small explosion as another wire burst and fizzled somewhere close to Alex, and she jumped away with a hand against her ear, startled by the abruptly loud sound. She steadied herself and skirted the edge of the twisted metal pileup, trying to see anyone or anything in it or near it. Her head was still killing.

Dean noticed something as he continued to sweep the darkness with his flashlight. "Check it out," he said, drifting toward a far concrete wall. On it, drawn in bright red blood that was still shining and wet: an angelic symbol like the one Anna had made to send Cas and Uriel away. "Look familiar?" he asked grimly.

Sam was behind him and came to his side, frowning deeply while Alex gave it a cursory glance from where she was. "So, what's that mean?" Sam asked. "Cas was fighting other angels?" He turned and looked around the wreckage again. "That doesn't make sense."

Alex's flashlight caught a glimpse of something that looked like beige clothing and her heart jumped in shocked recognition. "Guys!" She called her brothers, even as she stumbled over a twisted beam, ducked underneath another, then crouched down over Cas—he was laying on his back and a small metal pipe laid across his body. He looked unconscious, which was terrifying. Did angels even go unconscious? Alex didn't know. She was yanking the metal pipe off of him and smacking him lightly on the side of the face a couple times. "Cas?" She asked. No response. She heard her brothers coming up behind her. "Hey, Cas!" She smacked a little harder—and then Castiel's eyes flew open in an expression of sheer panic and he bolted upright to shove her away as if he didn't know her—startled, Alex fell back into Sam's legs and her twin reacted fast, caught her underneath the arms to keep her from falling back completely.

Cas recoiled—he'd backpedaled away from Alex and was half-laying half-sitting, looking at the three of them in shock. He seemed disoriented. "What's, what's going on?" He asked in a breathless, high voice. Overhead, more wires suddenly sent a snap of sparks raining down and in a strangely alien way Cas cringed and jumped as if he were scared. Alex, standing as Sam hauled her up, stared through wide eyes. What was wrong with him? He was sitting up and clutching at his chest, looking around in dismay and he didn't look anything like himself. "No, no…" he moaned, eyes huge and terrified, darting around as if in paranoia. Dean offered him a hand and Cas refused, stood up clumsily, backing away from them.

"Cas, you okay?" Sam asked urgently, and all three of the Winchesters stared as he stood and panted, obviously in severe distress.

"Castiel," he said, his voice high and hollow as he looked down at himself in sheer disbelief. "I'm not Castiel." He looked at them again, face slack. "It's me."
There was a stunned silence at his unexpected assertion. "Who's 'me'?!" Sam asked in a loud voice.

"Jimmy," he answered tightly, and when he said that, he seemed to calm a little. He swallowed and then spoke in a more even voice, as if the name gave him confidence. "My name's Jimmy. Jimmy Novak. I'm... I'm from Illinois. I have a wife, a daughter. I'm not who you're looking for."

It was like being hit with a ton of bricks. This was the man Castiel had been possessing. Jimmy. Alex could find no words at all.

"Where the hell is Castiel?" Dean asked suspiciously.

Jimmy shook his head, seeming to be at a loss but certain. "He's gone."

"Gone where?" Alex asked.

Jimmy shut his mouth and looked at her with a grim expression. "I dunno. Just gone."

"Okay... 'Jimmy.'" Dean paused. "Do you know who we are?"

The man who looked like Castiel but otherwise was obviously nothing like him at all nodded, his face expressive and drawn. "Yeah. Dean, Sam, Alex. I know who all of you are and—" he suddenly swayed sideways, almost fell down—Sam reacted fast and helped him stand. Jimmy grimaced, a hand against his stomach—which suddenly gave one of the loudest growls Alex had ever heard. The man looked close to passing out suddenly and he gave a soft moan of pain. "Uh. I need food. Bad."

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**Last Year**

Jimmy Novak—taxpayer, always on time, faithful church tither—kept a quiet, proper life. He married his high school sweetheart Amelia when they were both eighteen. He believed in traditional family values. He didn't use profanity or drink in excess or gamble. He'd dedicated himself to a lifetime of faith in God. He lived humbly and devoutly. However, even though he had always followed the bible and done everything a good Christian should, there had always been a nagging feeling that there must be more for him, that God was calling him to deeper things.

*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened.* Words from the book of Matthew that Jimmy clung to and kept in mind as he prayed for years that the Lord would use him for something truly meaningful. Maybe his prayers implied that Jimmy thought his life as a father and husband wasn't enough. But he loved his wife and daughter very much—more than anyone. Still, he was never able to shake the longing for greater things and always felt there should be more for him somehow—some grand calling or adventure. A grand purpose.

After over fifteen years of marriage, Jimmy's life was predictable and had a feeling of routine to it. The greater things he longed for never came. Only more of the same... a slow downward spiral into monotony and habit and routine. He was in a marriage that didn't inspire or fulfill him anymore, he worked a job that left him wanting. His daughter was the best thing in his life—his little girl, who wasn't so little anymore. She was approaching womanhood and in a few short years would leave for college. Jimmy wondered what would become of himself and Amelia when that happened. They'd been unable to conceive more children and Claire was the thing that held them together. Jimmy didn't believe in divorce and loved his wife deeply, but the spark was gone. It wasn't like they were miserable—they were friends and companions and were content enough, accepting of the way their relationship was quiet, dying embers instead of roaring flame like it used
to be. They didn't fight much. Sometimes, Jimmy wished they would fight. It would mean the relationship was more alive if they'd fought.

On one night that was like all the others, Jimmy had fallen asleep in front of the television. His life changed forever when he was roused by a warm, whispering voice from Heaven. Castiel came to him the first time that evening, reaching across the divide of the corporeal and incorporeal, speaking to him in a voice that was so deafening and magnificent that Jimmy had been physically wounded. He didn't even remember the seizure, only his Amelia's frantic face above his when he regained consciousness. But Jimmy hadn't been panicked at all. He had smiled at Amelia and said he was all right. He'd felt such a peace and sense of purpose.

The angel spoke to him in dreams and in whispers as the months went on. He told Jimmy of great plans concerning God's will and purpose. Castiel told Jimmy that he was a servant of Heaven, that he wanted Jimmy to give himself over to divinity and answer the call, to let himself be used as a vessel of righteousness when the time came. And Jimmy had been eager, willing. So unaware of what it would actually be like.

On an unremarkable weeknight evening, Jimmy was preparing dinner unassumingly when Castiel's whispers lit up the quietness. The angel spoke to him and asked him to prove his faith. Wonderstruck, Jimmy did as the angel asked unquestioningly. Amelia walked in and dropped the bag she'd been carrying. Jimmy had his hand stuck down into the pot of boiling water on the stove and was staring at it, entranced.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Amelia had gasped, rushing over.

Jimmy held a hand out, smiling and trying to calm her down. "It's okay. I'm okay—look!" He drew his hand out of the raging hot water. He was unharmed and fine in every way. Unburned, untouched by harm.

Amelia hadn't looked amazed. Instead, she'd looked absolutely terrified. "W-what's wrong with you?"

Jimmy, unruffled, was still smiling, overwhelmed with amazement. "Nothing's wrong. He asked me to do it."

"Who asked you to do it?" Amelia asked, looking at the pot of boiling water with wild, scared eyes.

Euphoric, Jimmy stared at his hand, not noticing his wife's utter distress. "Castiel, to prove my faith. Look—I'm fine." He showed her his hand again, astounded at the smooth, unburned skin there.

"Who's Castiel?!" Amelia asked, growing more and more afraid by the second.

Jimmy smiled again, feeling lighter and more wonderful than he had in years. He had thought Amelia would share his wonder when he told her: "An angel."

"An angel?" She repeated. Her fear grew quieter and more deep.

Jimmy could barely notice. He was so amazed. Grinning, he swept her into his arms, elated and high on thoughts of restoration and repair within his life. He imagined everything as golden and bright and made of the things of Heaven. "It's a miracle, Amelia! A miracle!"

She stared back at him with eyes that were not overjoyed. Only petrified. And when Jimmy realized she was afraid of him and what he was saying, his tight hug loosened and faltered. His wife pushed him away as she stepped back. She was looking at him like she didn't know him. "No,
it's not a miracle—" her voice trembled. She shook her head and swallowed, looking at the boiling water again. "I don't know how you did that b-but… this isn't normal."

Present Day

"This isn't normal," Dean Winchester said, staring at Jimmy in something like disgusted awe. "How many burgers are you gonna eat?"

Jimmy shamelessly shoved another burger into his mouth, ravenous. "I dunno." He didn't bother waiting until he'd stopped chewing to talk.

After going through a twenty-four-hour drive-thru and getting Jimmy a bag full of burgers after he insisted he could eat them all, the Winchesters had brought him back to their motel. It was still dark out, the middle of the night, and Jimmy was on his third burger with no signs of stopping. The three Winchesters were watching him with odd expressions. "When's the last time you ate?" Dean asked, flabbergasted by Jimmy's appetite.

Jimmy shook his head. "I don't know. Months." He took another huge bite and made appreciative sounds, thoroughly enjoying the fast food and not bothering to hide how into it he was. He took a noisy sip out of the straw in his cup and returned to his burger.

"All right, so what the hell happened back there?" Sam asked, interrupting Jimmy's concentration. "It looked like an angel battle royale."

Jimmy shook his head and shrugged. "All I remember is a flash of light and I, uh... I woke up and I was just, you know, like, me again."

"So, what?" Dean looked at him closely. "Cas just ditched out of your meat suit?"

Sitting across from him, arms crossed and feet propped straight out, Alex looked at him intently. "Do you remember anything about when he was possessing you?"

Jimmy looked at her with Castiel's eyes. He no longer wore the trench coat—just the suit and tie. "Yeah, bits and pieces," he answered cryptically. He watched her out of the corner of his eye for a minute as he chewed thoughtfully, and Alex fell silent, didn't ask anything else. She felt let down somehow… and worried. Where had Cas gone? Why would he just abandon ship out of nowhere? Did he not need his vessel anymore? If not, why? So many questions. Her head was pounding still and she felt sluggish from her fading state of drunkenness.

"I mean, having an angel inside you's like being chained to a comet," Jimmy said conversationally, working his jaw in between sentences. He was reflecting now and seemed a little uncomfortable at the memories. "I couldn't keep up."

Dean's eyebrows raised. "Sounds like fun."

Jimmy pulled a face, and even though he looked exactly like Cas, he managed to look like a completely different person in that moment. "Understatement." He took another huge bite.

"Cas said he wanted to tell us something," Sam said. "Please tell me you remember what it was."

Jimmy looked down, mild ruefulness playing on his face. He shook his head. "No, sorry."
"Well what do you know?" Dean asked.

Jimmy stopped eating, given pause by Dean's question. "I know who I am. Jimmy Novak. I'm from Pontiac Illinois." His face softened with something like pain. "I have a family." He was suddenly stricken and sitting back from the table, seeming stunned. "I need to see my family."

Dean stood up, his expression hard and thoughtful. "Hold that thought. Finish eating, okay?" He looked at Sam meaningfully, then jerked his head toward the door, indicating he wanted a word alone. "Sam, I need to talk to you."

Alex watched her brothers go and didn't move to follow. Other times she might have gotten up and trotted after, but that day she was too physically exhausted and mentally messed up. Anyway, she got the silent implication… stay and watch Jimmy. He didn't look like he was gonna bolt though. He had bucked up and was attacking a burger again hungrily, glancing at her a couple times without saying a thing. Alex sighed heavily and rubbed her forehead with a grimace. *I hate absinthe.* She remembered details from earlier now, a little bit anyway. Enough to make her want to kick herself in the ass. Alex settled back into her chair, resigned, and grabbed a bottle of pain killers out of the bag that was hanging off her chair. She took several and then fixed her eyes on Jimmy studiously. "So. You really don't remember anything?" She asked.

He looked at her over his burger, took a long beat to answer—long enough that it seemed like he was maybe trying to hide something. "Not really. Like I said, bits and pieces, weird snippets and stuff."

Alex nodded slowly, not convinced. "Right." Jimmy's gaze flickered away. He didn't look at her like Cas did, but it was every bit as disconcerting. "Why do you think he did that?" She asked. "Left all the sudden?"

Jimmy's chewing slowed and he stared down at the top of his burger bun, frowning a little. "You know, I gotta say, from what I remember, the guy's mind was, like, a constant tug of war. Back and forth, back and forth." He hesitated, thinking hard, clearly taxing himself mentally. "I can't remember why he left. I don't remember anything from today."

"But you remember stuff from other days?" Alex pressed.

His eyes darted up to hers. He seemed guarded. "Yeah, I mean… it's all a blur, okay? I'm exhausted." He drew in a breath, expelled it, cracked a tired grin. "It's just good to be by myself in here again. I was about to go insane." He grinned at her more widely and reached for his cup without looking and misjudged, knocked it over. It spilled and soda flooded the table. They both jumped up from their seats, trying to avoid getting wet.

"Aw crap," Jimmy muttered, brushing himself off then yanking his tie off and jacket, too, already unbuttoning his soda-stained shirt. "Can I borrow one of your brother's shirts?" he asked, pulling off his shirt completely. Alex was staring and didn't answer right away. Underneath the frumpy suit and trench coat, Castiel—no, Jimmy—was extremely and surprisingly toned—Alex was shocked, because the shapeless outfit he wore had hidden it well… the strong arms and shoulders, the smooth strong planes of his chest, the flat abs… the very alluring taper to his hip bones which disappeared beneath the belted slacks he wore. Alex swallowed. The room seemed extremely hot all of the sudden and she was uncomfortable.

He'd asked to borrow a shirt. She tore her eyes away from him, flustered. "Yeah, uh, there… bag's Dean. Uh, er, Dean's bag. Take whatever you want."

If he noticed her fumble, he didn't acknowledge it. Jimmy went to the bed where Dean's duffel sat,
and dug through. He was oblivious to her stare. Alex watched him out of the corner of her eye, unable to help herself. His back was strong and defined, his shoulders broad. The dim light in the room created soft, dark shadows in all the dips and curves of his muscles. On his right shoulder blade, there was a large tattoo of a simple, stylized cross. She was surprised to see that there. She hadn't pictured him as the type for ink. As he turned around he caught her eye he seemed to know she'd been eyeing it. "Got it when I was nineteen," he explained with slight chagrin, pulling a new shirt on and buttoning it up. "Regretted getting it ever since. Craziest thing I ever did."

"A tattoo?" Alex asked, cracking a grin. No way was that true. "A tattoo was the craziest thing you ever did?"

Jimmy shrugged modestly. "Yeah. I'm a straight and narrow kinda guy, I guess." There was a twinge of something in his voice that made intrigue come over Alex.

"Nothing wrong with the pious life, if it's your thing," she said, examining him for a reaction. When she couldn't tell, she prompted him. "Is it?"

Jimmy finished buttoning his shirt and took a moment, thinking, then shook his head uncertainty. "I don't know anymore. All I know is… I've been gone from my family for almost a year." His regretful tone gave Alex somber pause.

She tried not to encourage an angsty environment and grabbed some napkins from out of the bag of burgers and started to sop up the soda from off the table as she watched Jimmy pick his tie back up and put it back on. She glanced at him as she cleaned. "Did your family know? About you and Cas's… living arrangement?"

Jimmy went still. "No. To them I'm sure I just disappeared one night." He looked conflicted and slightly afraid and said nothing more. There was a deep guilt to his words and posture, and fear. A lot of fear. He returned to slowly buttoning his shirt up, but his mind seemed a thousand miles away.

Alex understood why he was worried and freaked. What if he went back and then his family was gone or had moved on? She hadn't really thought about it much before, how the body Castiel had used was a real person with a real life, a man named Jimmy Novak. Maybe she hadn't wanted to think about it either. But now she was being forced to think about it and face it. Honestly she was a little ashamed of herself for forgetting. Castiel wasn't human like her. Jimmy was. And Jimmy wasn't Cas.

"Lemme help. I'm sorry. I'm clumsy." Jimmy had shrugged his jacket back on and started helping get the puddle of soda off the table without being asked. Alex watched Jimmy in a tense sadness. He crouched and dabbed at the spot on the floor where soda had drizzled, oblivious to her strange gaze. Alex wasn't sure what to think. He looked just like Cas, but it wasn't him. His mannerisms, his voice, the way he stood, the way he walked… everything was different. It forced Alex to confront reality: Cas had hijacked some guy's body, used it to walk the earth. Those blue eyes that had sent her stomach flip-flopping around when they'd looked at her with such intense curiosity? Jimmy's. The clothing she'd come to identify as Castiel? Jimmy's. The voice Castiel had used to speak to her with? Jimmy's. She understood all of that but she couldn't quite separate the angel from the man in her mind completely.

Even so, staring at Jimmy as he dabbed napkins at the soda-splattered carpet… she almost felt like she'd lost something. Someone. Alex got angry with herself pretty quickly. She had no right to feel that way. She headed to the trash can beside the door with her dripping napkins and threw them in hard. Right after she did that, the door swung open and Dean and Sam came back in.
"All right Jimbo," Dean said, crossing his arms. "So jury's in. You can't go home."

Jimmy stood up, shock on his face. "What?" He quickly became indignant as he set the wet napkins down. He walked straight up to Dean. "The hell're you talking about, I can't go home?"

Dean shrugged as Sam took a seat at the kitchen table and watched quietly. "There's a good chance you have a bullseye on your back," Dean said. Alex looked at Sam for explanation and her twin just shrugged slightly. *Tell you later*, he seemed to silently communicate to her.

"What?" Jimmy looked and sounded like he'd never heard anything crazier in his life. "From who?"

Dean's mouth hardened a little. "Demons."

"Come on, that's crazy," Jimmy said, almost rolling his eyes. "What do they want with me?"

Dean shook his head. "I don't know, information, maybe?"

Jimmy was obstinate and expressive. His voice rose in pitch. "I don't *know* anything!"

Dean visibly forced himself not to lose his temper but raised his voice a little too. "I know, but—"

"Look, I'm done, okay?" Jimmy was quickly getting agitated. "With demons, angels, Castiel's friggin' endless angst and confusion—all of it! I just wanna go home."

"We understand," Dean started, but was once again cut off.

"I don't think that you *do* understand!" Jimmy's voice was quickening with impassioned certainty. "I've been shot and stabbed and healed; my body's been dragged all over the earth. He *used* me and took me away from my *life*, my family. I thought I wanted this but I don't. By some miracle I'm out… and I am done. I've given enough, okay?"

Sam stood up and kept his voice firm and commanding. "Look, all we're saying is that until we figure this out, the safest place is *with us*."

Jimmy's jaw worked tensely and he cast a glance beside himself as a muscle jerked in his cheek. He was considering it. "How long?" He asked brusquely, glaring at Sam.

Sam hesitated. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Before Sam had even finished speaking, Jimmy shook his head hard, obviously not going for that. He brushed past Dean, heading for the door with fast steps. Sam moved to stop him, blocking his path. "Where you think you're going?" Dean asked mildly, turning around casually, arms crossed.

Jimmy whirled indignantly. "To see my wife and daughter, okay?" He turned and tried to get past Sam, who held him by an arm, forcing him to stay.

"No, you're *not.*" Sam wasn't rough by any means, but there was a warning nature to his stance and tone. "You're just going to put those people in danger."

Jimmy stared at Sam incredulously, then glanced briefly at Alex as if he couldn't believe this. "So, what, now I'm a prisoner?"

Sam was rueful but assertive. "Harsh way to put it."

"How about guest of honor?" Dean quipped from further back in the room where he stood with
crossed arms. He cracked a wiseass little smile. "Just can't stand to see you go."

Jimmy looked at him balefully. "You have no right to keep me here."

Dean chuckled and sauntered forward. "When have rights stopped me? You're staying."

Jimmy looked around, realizing he was outnumbered and outmuscled. As if in a desperate last attempt, he looked at Alex, who had been silently observing from beside the door. "Alex? You're gonna go along with this? It's kidnapping."

That earned a self-deprecating smile from her. "Jimmy… you know who you're talking to, right? We break like ten laws per hour on a good day." Jimmy didn't appreciate her attempt at humor and Alex softened, sympathizing with him. "Call it what you will but they're right." She came to stand beside her twin. "I mean, think about it. You were a vessel for an angel. Is it really so crazy to think demons might wanna get their claws in you or your family?"

Jimmy was highly unhappy and let them all know with the dark look he gave them. "This is jacked up," he said with something close to a scowl as he crossed his arms and pressed his lips down into a hard line. Full of bad attitude, he looked at Dean contemptuously. "Can I at least get some air?"

Dean gave a single little heh sound, obviously thinking it was funny that Jimmy thought they would go for that. "I don't think so," he said, further infuriating Jimmy. "Look, come morning, we'll figure something out. For now… no one leaves this room." Dean swept the room's occupants with a commanding gaze, daring any of them to go against what he said. Satisfied, Dean nodded. "Now. I'm gonna take a shower."

He grabbed his things and shut himself into the bathroom without any further delay.

Jimmy shook his head, surly and bad-tempered as he backed away from Sam, who still blocked the way out. "I need to see them," he said, pacing the room restlessly. "They probably think I'm dead."

He talked using his hands, gesturing erratically and then jamming fingers through his dark hair. "Not yet, Jimmy," Sam said. His tone wasn't exactly rude, but it wasn't the kindest voice he used, either. He sounded sort of inconvenienced. "Just don't think about it."

Jimmy looked like he'd been slapped in the face and he suddenly confronted Sam physically. "Don't think about it?!"

"Hey you two." Alex, over by the table now, gave them both pointed looks, silently telling them to cut it out fast. "Come on." Jimmy took a beat, then stepped away from Sam, looking mad enough to piss. Alex picked up the bag of burgers, trying to distract him maybe. "Want any more of these?"

"No." Jimmy shot her a dark look. "I lost my appetite."

Sam scoffed loudly and rolled his eyes insensitively. Alex gave him a weird look. His temper seemed short for some reason—maybe because he still felt sick?—either way, he really wasn't helping. At all. Jimmy sent Sam an evil eye and Alex attempted to diffuse the situation with humor. She cracked a disarming grin and pulled a face. "Hey, don't pay Samantha any attention. It's his time of the month."

Unexpectedly, Jimmy smiled just slightly at the dig aimed at Sam. He saw the way Alex's face changed when he smiled like that. His expression faded. "What?" He asked, frowning a little.

Alex shook her head, shrugged, hid her true feelings. "Nothing." What was she really thinking? That this man in front of her wasn't Castiel in any way. That she wanted to know where her
guardian angel had gone. That she needed to know why she almost seemed to miss him. It didn't seem fair. They'd just become friends after a rocky start. He was a mystery and he intrigued her, this angel who had given her voice back to her out of compassion. Was it over? Was Cas gone for good? It was weird, too, because even though this was the exact same body Cas had used, she couldn't imagine kissing him. She'd pictured kissing Cas one night, out of nowhere. And she couldn't picture kissing Jimmy.

"So which bed?" Jimmy asked.

"What?" Alex asked, confused as she came out of her far-away thoughts.

"Which bed should I sleep in?"

Oh. Alex looked at the beds—two doubles—and shrugged. "Uh… take your pick," she said, her mind on other things. " Doesn't matter to me."

Jimmy chose randomly, walked over to one of the beds and sat down on it, looked up at Alex and then Sam sadly. "I wish you people would just let me go," he said brokenly. "I need to see them." He looked so stricken and heartbroken that Alex had to look down, guilty for her part in it. She looked to Sam, who usually consoled the Sad People they ran into. But Sam just glanced back at her with a look like what? on his face. He looked like he had a headache or something. Maybe he was just tired. It was the middle of the night.

Either way, she was gonna have to do it. And by it, she meant talking to a Sad Person. Alex cleared her throat and fixed Jimmy with a caring look she'd seen Sam give others. " You need to keep them safe." She paused. " That's what you're doing by staying away, all right?" She stuck her tongue out just a little to wet her lips. Saying the facts had been easy. Now what? How could she get him to lighten up? She decided, a little selfishly, to do a bit of fact-finding. Maybe he would feel better if he went down memory lane, anyway. "Why don't you tell us a little about them?" She asked, hoping it was the right thing to say to him in that moment. " What's your wife's name? Your daughter?"

Jimmy's face changed and he went somewhere very far away in his mind. " Amelia," he said softly. " Amelia's my wife. Claire's my daughter. She'll be twelve now. I missed her birthday."

There was a hollowness to his voice, like he didn't know what to think about himself. He looked down and clasped his hands together between his knees, deeply pensive. " I can't believe I left. I thought… I thought I was doing the right thing, you know?" He laughed softly, a sound without any lightness. " I was no one before this. I… sold ad time on A.M. radio. Married my high school sweetheart. Got a house, a mortgage. Went to church every Sunday. I've never been anything but painfully normal and it used to be okay with me. But the last few years… " he shook his head dejectedly. " Life felt stale, I dunno. I just was at my wit's end when Cas came to me. " His eyes dodged looking at either Sam or Alex. " I guess maybe I wanted to be special like Cas said I could be. But man. It's… special's overrated. I think I ruined my life." He heaved a tired expulsion of breath and put a hand on his face. He looked like he hadn't slept in years.

Alex realized that maybe talking was only going to make things worse and tried a different tactic. " Hey, come on. You need some rest I think." She smiled slightly, feeling how exhausted and hungover she was. " I know I do. Everything'll look better in the morning."

A bittersweet expression crossed Jimmy's face and it looked like he were almost trying to hold back tears. " My wife used to say that. " With that, Jimmy crawled into the bed, shoes and all, and pulled the covers up to his neck, rolled over and went quiet.

Sam came up to stand beside Alex, who silently watched the Jimmy-shaped lump. Her twin looked
over and down at her then motioned to the other bed. "Go ahead. Get some shut eye. Sleep off the
green fairy." His crack about absinthe got a pointed look from her. He aimed a half-hearted little
grim at her.

Alex peered up at her twin, really studying him. He looked paler than normal. His lips weren't their
normal rosy hue. "You sure you're all right, Sam? You look sick."

He dodged her concerned gaze. "Fine." Sam said shortly, seeming faintly annoyed. He motioned at
the bed again. "Go on. Crash. I've got this."

"I need something out of the car," Alex lied decisively, then grabbed her jacket, yanked it on then
headed out into the night as she pulled the jacket around her tightly.

Out in the parking lot she looked around into the surrounding darkness then, with arms around
herself to keep warm, she looked upwards to the stars. "Hey, Cas?" She kept her voice just above a
whisper, and her breath made little white clouds in the cold, sharp air. Underneath the canopy of
night, she was aware of how small she was and how vast the universe. "Where'd you go?" No reply
came and Alex's eyes flickered back and forth over the pinpricks of distant galaxies and stars. She
tried to think of what to say. Could Castiel even hear her wherever he'd gone? It would just be nice
to know why he left and if he was okay. She thought out loud. "I... just don't know why you'd
disappear like that. We're worried." She paused. Were Sam and Dean worried? She corrected
herself: "I'm worried." Hearing how vulnerable she sounded, she toughened her tone and put on a
harder face. "So if you could get your ass back here somehow... that'd be great." She waited a
wasn't the way to end a prayer. A little sullen she tried, "Amen." She didn't like that either and gave
a huffing sigh at herself. "Over and out." She rolled her eyes at herself then slunk back toward the
motel.

When she went back into the warmth of the room, Sam looked at her, observing how she had
nothing with her—his eyes narrowed slightly. "Find what you were looking for?"

Alex was on her way to the empty bed and not in the mood for any more conversation. "No. I
didn't."

She fell into bed without removing her shoes or jacket and turned her face away from Sam. Even
though her mind was spinning with confusion and too many thoughts to number, she quickly
dropped off into an exhausted sleep. She didn't feel when Dean flopped down beside her. Didn't
hear when he started to snore. Didn't wake when Sam slipped out of the room. Didn't hear when
Jimmy snuck out and made his escape, either.

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**Last Year**

"Take the pills." Amelia stood in front of Jimmy in their living room and extended the orange
prescription bottle out to him. It was nearing ten at night.

In a shirt and pajama bottoms, Jimmy sat on the couch, which had become his bed in more recent
times. "I'm not sick."

Amelia thrust the bottle out, spoke a little more intensely. Tears rolled out of her eyes and she
struggled to maintain composure. "Jimmy, take the pills."

"I don't need them, Amelia." He paused and then spoke softly, certainly, holding her gaze the
whole time. "I know that this is hard to understand, but he chose me. I'm not crazy."
Amelia hid her reaction, but not well enough that Jimmy missed it. He saw how she doubted. How she believed he was losing his mind. "Who, Castiel, the angel?" She asked softly. When Jimmy nodded shallowly, his wife's outward calm began to crumble. "Jimmy—he's not real. How many times do we have to go over this? Now just take the pills, please."

Jimmy looked at her sadly. "He's spoken to me now, Ames, a dozen times. Shown me miracles." Amelia struggled, looked upward and dashed her hand across her tear-stained cheek. Jimmy leaned forward a little. "Hey, you believe in God, don't you?"

"What kind of question is that?" She tried smiling through her upset. "Of course, but—"

"And angels?"

"Yes, Jimmy, but I—"

"So, why is it then so hard for you to believe that they're talking to me?" He asked, truly wishing she would have faith in this with him.

Amelia began to pace, using the pill bottle to gesture erratically. Jimmy could see how she was fighting not to lose her temper with him. "B-because… okay, maybe angels are real, but what would they want you for?" The anger came out, as it always did. "Jimmy, you sell ad time for the radio! You can barely keep up with taking care of the house and helping me with Claire, what would angels need you for?"

Her words stung him. "He said that I'm special. It's in my blood."

Wordless for a second, Amelia laughed in a huff of air, her face working oddly. "What does that mean, it's in your blood? Jimmy… do you hear what you're saying to me? Just admit you're having a mid-life crisis and take the damn pills."

He was getting shorter on patience and looked at the pill bottle with contempt. "I don't need pills," he said flatly, trying to make her understand. He looked at her appealingly. "Castiel said that God has chosen me for a higher purpose."

Amelia's voice was strained and her face twisted into an expression of near-disgust. "To do what?"

Jimmy smiled faintly, a slight instance of pride and excitement running over him. "God's will. Not really my place to question it." His wife's face looked sad and empty and Jimmy sighed, scooting back to make a place for her to sit beside him. "Hey, come here," he urged gently, and she did as he asked, sitting beside him and turning a little to face him. He took the pills out of her hands and set them aside so that he could hold her hands gently. "This is a blessing," he told her. "This is the most important thing that ever happened to me."

Amelia's face was unreadable and slack, like she had turned off her emotions. "I thought we were the most important things to ever happen to you." Her soft words struck Jimmy hard and he was momentarily silent. Amelia shook her head and looked around their living room vapidly, her expression strange. "Jimmy, this marriage isn't working anymore," she said faintly, and again, he was hit hard by what he knew they both realized but had never acknowledged. Amelia looked at him with pained eyes. "We barely talk except in passing, we never spend time together anymore." She looked at him with veiled bitterness, her voice lowering into a whisper, in case Claire was in earshot. "And I mean, we haven't had sex in months. Months. I know things have been stale between us for awhile and I know we said we'd try but… is this angel stuff you trying to be the man I've been asking you to be? This isn't what I had in mind."
Her words hurt him deeply. Had she said them to him before Castiel, Jimmy would have been devastated completely. But he had hope because of the angel. "Amelia." He said her name sadly. "Have faith. I know things have been hard for us since you lost the baby last year, but... God works all things to the good of those who love him. I'm not depressed like I was. Castiel is giving me faith." He grasped her hands with renewed fervor, trying to show her how eager he was to see God work in their life. He felt that their marriage, home and faith would be restored. "Our lives will change because of him, Amelia! We can still make this work."

Amelia's hands were slack in his. Unenthusiastic. "I'm just... wondering if I even want to make it work," she admitted quietly.

Jimmy's grip loosened in utter shock as he stared at her in completely caught of guard surprise. "Amelia—we don't believe in divorce," he protested, hurt by her implication and aghast because he would never have imagined she would even imply that she would leave him. Their marriage vows had been forever.

Amelia shook her head, ashamed tears glittering in her eyes. "I know, but... but Jimmy." Her voice dropped to a weak whisper. "You're scaring me. You're scaring your daughter. You are not the man I married."

"Maybe not." Jimmy kept himself gentle and tender with her, clinging to Castiel's promises. All was not lost. "Maybe I'm better than the man you married, or about to be. Don't you see, Amelia? I've been chosen to do God's work! And you're part of it!"

"How?" she asked. She was pulling away from him more and more.

Jimmy thought, and then summoned the first bible verse that he thought would convey himself best to Amelia. A verse that he felt said a wife should trust her husband. "Titus two verse five. 'Wives should submit to their husbands, that the Lord may be honored.'"

Amelia—who had led bible studies and stood by his side in church every Sunday, became cold. She looked at him with dire meaningfulness. "If you won't take your pills and if you won't get help..." she trailed off, swallowing with a dread-filled expression. "Then I'm going to take Claire to my mother's in the morning. Don't quote the bible at me, Jimmy. You're taking this too far. I can't be married to someone who's living in a fantasy world. Please. Just take—the—pills."

She abruptly got up and walked away from him more and more.

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She abruptly got up and walked away from him, going upstairs and leaving Jimmy alone with his thoughts and confusion. Would she really leave him? Would she truly take his daughter away over this? Why wouldn't she believe? He would have to help her believe. Jimmy decided that night it was time to take action. He dressed slowly and methodically in what he always wore to work. Black slacks, a white dress shirt. He picked out a blue tie. The one Claire bought for him for Father's Day, the one she loved to see him wear. He shrugged on a black suit jacket, then over that, he swept on his beige trench coat. It would be cold outside. He gave himself a final look over in the mirror, not knowing how much his life was about to change. And then into the cold winter night he went.

He stood there in front of his house and looked up to the sky, called out to Castiel for help. His breath made vapor in the icy air, and for a moment, there was no reply. And then gentle, warm light shone down on him from up above and Jimmy looked up into it, hearing the rich, melodious voice of the angel Castiel. It was calming, this angel's presence.

Castiel told Jimmy many things. That God would be pleased with his servitude, that Jimmy would be revered among men. That the Novak family would be kept safe and be given rest in paradise when their long lives were finished. But Castiel also said that Jimmy would need to give much and
for a time would be taken from his life. Jimmy didn't understand how long that would be—and he was so enraptured with the thought of serving God in such an important mission that he accepted. Said the word that promised his end. "Yes."

Present Day

Jimmy stared out of the bus window broodingly as the miles passed. He'd escaped from the Winchesters hours and hours ago and now he was just a couple hours away from being home. If Amelia even lived there anymore. What would he find? His stomach twisted itself into sickened knots over and over again. Would Amelia forgive him? How could he even begin to explain it to her… or Claire, for that matter? How was it that his relentless faith had left his life a shattered wreck? He had always thought that God would reward him with good things for his faithfulness. Not… not this.

Seated next to him a small, elderly woman was clasping a rosary and praying quietly. Jimmy looked at her sidelong, pitying her and fearing for her all at once. Which was worse…? An unanswered prayer or an answered one? He didn't know.

He returned his gaze to the window just in time to see a passing church sign that said Seven Days Without Prayer Makes One Weak. Disillusion settled over Jimmy with finality. After the past year, he didn't know who he was anymore. He believed in God and angels but wanted to be very far away from both right now. He had thought it would be different, being the vessel for an angel. He should have known better maybe… after all, he knew the bible and knew how brutal angels were in some passages. Still he'd believed, maybe because of modern myth and art, that angels were creatures of beatitude and kindness, gentleness. And while Jimmy knew from personal experience that Castiel had an inherently gentle and curious spirit, he also had a fierce and vengeful side—the angel was a magnificent blazing light made of ancient things beyond human comprehension. That's why Jimmy was running. It was too much, too much. Oddly enough, all he could think about was the mundane life he'd been so dissatisfied with before.

Jimmy reflected on the moment that Castiel had taken over his body, mind, and soul that winter night a year ago. It came over him like a downpour. The light had blinded Jimmy, and when it was gone, he wasn't himself anymore. His body had been filled with impossible wonder and glory, celestial power and divine purpose. Castiel had looked down and flexed his hand, gazed at it in wonder as he took in the feeling of being in a human body. Jimmy, slowly sinking down into a docile and quiet place somewhere deep inside, had heard a name—the first audible thought he heard from Castiel. Alex. Oh how familiar he would grow with this name and the face that went with it. Jimmy's mind conjured images of bright hazel eyes and the half-hidden smile she so often gave. Castiel had been very curious about her. Was curious the right word?

Alex Winchester… a twenty-something woman with dark hair, youthful features, and eyes that carried a strikingly pensive weight to them. Memories and images of her were what stuck out in Jimmy's mind the most about his time hosting Castiel—perhaps because watching her was what Castiel had done with every moment not dedicated to battle or Heaven. That, and Castiel's guard hadn't been raised as high when he watched her—and this, therefore, allowed Jimmy to see it better.

Castiel had observed this girl in every sense of the word, but he'd done so with a notably childlike innocence and naivety as he endeavored to understand her and the things she did. Things like laundry, cleaning guns, sharpening knives, sitting around doing nothing, arguing with her brothers. Writing in her father's old journal. Absently rubbing the ends of her hair between her fingers. Picking the meatballs out of her spaghetti and the pepperoni off her pizza. Chewing on the inside
of her mouth and wiggling her jaw back and forth without realizing it when she was in deep thought. She was very often in deep thought.

Jimmy was a little uncomfortable thinking about these things because they seemed personal or intimate almost. Not the memories so much—they were nothing scandalous or remarkable—it was the way Castiel felt about the memories and about her. The angel was endeared to the youngest Winchester in a way Jimmy didn't quite know how to explain. He'd never felt the way Castiel felt about Alex toward anyone in his life. It was strong, whatever it was.

Jimmy's eyes flickered upward to the blue mid-day sky. Castiel was out there, somewhere. Gone for reasons unknown. Why? Would he come back, asking Jimmy for more? If he did, the answer would be no.

Jimmy Novak had given enough.

The Winchesters were headed to Illinois, hopefully right on Jimmy's heels—after Sam had 'gone out for a Coke' in the middle of the night and given Jimmy a chance to run, they'd been left little choice but to try and follow him. It wasn't safe for him to go back to his family, which was exactly where he'd go.

In the back seat as usual, Alex was slumped against the window, her cheek pressed against the chilled glass as she stared unseeingly, tiredly, out the window. She was hungover as hell and the aspirin and coffee still wasn't helping. In the front, Dean was quiet and focused, Sam was silent and decidedly bitchy. He still looked sickish but refused medicine and insisted he was fine. Alex pulled the top off her coffee cup to blow on the hot liquid it a little.

Out of thin air, someone abruptly appeared right next to her. "Hey, guys."

At the same time, several things happened. Dean let out an explanation of "Aah jeez!" and swerved the car into the other lane. Sam jerked in the front seat and let out a little sound of surprise. Alex jumped away and coffee flew out all over Anna, who blinked and spit a little of the hot brown liquid out without missing a beat.

"Smooth, guys," she commented wryly, even as a car whizzed by and honked at them.

"You ever try calling ahead?" Dean asked gruffly, gripping the wheel tight and glaring slightly back at her in the rear view.

"I like the element of surprise," the red-headed angel wisecracked. The coffee that had spilled on her was magically gone.

"Surprise?" Alex asked, sticking the lid back on her coffee and thanking her lucky stars that none of it got onto the Impala's upholstery. "You almost gave me a heart attack!"

Anna seemed to have more pressing matters on her mind. "You let Jimmy get away?" She was looking at Dean.

"Talk to ginormo here," Dean said, nodding toward Sam.

Anna leaned forward a little and her expression shifted slightly. "Sam. You seem... different."

Alex's interest was heightened, especially when Sam acted a little too unassuming. "Me? I don't know." He flashed an attempt at an everything's fine smile. "A haircut?"
Anna's expression was unreadable. "That's not what I'm talking about." She let her gaze go to Dean. "So, what'd Jimmy tell you? He remember anything?"

"Why? What's going on?"

"It's Cas," Anna said. "He got sent back home. Well, more like dragged back."

"Dragged?" Alex asked, feeling worried at that word choice of Anna's. "That doesn't sound good."

"It's not," Anna said, looking at Alex with a very tense, meaningful expression. "It's a very bad thing. Painfully, awfully bad. He must have seriously pissed someone off."

"What?" Alex asked, eyes going a little wider. Cas? He pissed someone off and got in trouble? "How?"

Anna's mouth drew into a thin line. "I don't know. The last time I spoke with him, he was struggling badly."

The more Anna said, the lower and lower Alex's stomach sank. "Struggling with what?"

Anna's eyes locked onto Alex's. "Everything."

It was strange… Alex felt her head shaking no hollowly without even realizing she was doing it. He was struggling? Empathy and concern had risen in her like rockets, shooting off silently. She remembered the last time she'd seen Cas he'd been trying to help her (she thought—the details were still a little blurry because of the absinthe). The worst thought that suddenly came to her was what if she had something to do with him being in trouble?

"Listen, Cas said he had something to tell me," Dean said in the front seat, drawing Anna's attention even as Alex stared at the back of Sam's seat unseeingly. "Something important. Jimmy said he didn't know what it was, and Cas never got the chance to tell me before he left."

"Well whatever it is, it's huge," Anna said, her voice commanding and authoritative. "You gotta find out for sure. You shouldn't have let Jimmy go in the first place." She set her face grimly. "He's probably dead already."

"What about Cas?" Alex asked, trying to curb the anxiety out of her voice. "Do you know if he's okay? Will he come back?"

Anna thought deeply for a beat, shaking her head a little, like she didn't know. "Hard to say." She looked up suddenly and without ceremony announced, "I gotta go." And just like she'd appeared, she was gone.

The car fell into silence again. Coffee forgotten, Alex's eyes shot to the back of her oldest brother's head. Her voice was low and soft but urgent. "Drive faster, Dean."

Amelia Novak's life had always been stable and comfortable, predictable. The daughter of a husband-wife dentist team, Amelia been raised as an only child in a traditional household that valued church, family, and helping others. She'd always been reserved and modest, a little on the shy side. Jimmy, the class clown and nice-guy had caught her eye in middle school. He'd been her first love. Her first everything. Her parents hadn't been thrilled when Amelia and Jimmy announced they were going to get married straight out of high school, but at the time the two of them had been in love and too eager for the future to listen to anyone who had anything negative to say.
People whispered that they wouldn’t make it, but nearly fifteen years of marriage proved the naysayers wrong. Until what happened last year. Sure, Amelia had noticed their relationship growing staler and less exciting than it had been. All marriages ended up like that, she’d thought. Jimmy loved her even if they weren’t passionate and close anymore, and she’d been all right with that. He was a good father over all else, and Amelia valued that highly. But then when he’d started showing signs of depression and withdrawal, things had changed. He’d started imagining things—that angels were talking to him, that God wanted him for some kind of work. Amelia had been so scared to see her normally docile and totally predictable husband begin to get zany, believing the delusions he kept spouting. And then came the night when Jimmy disappeared. After searching for him for weeks and realizing he wasn’t coming back, police closed the case and Amelia was forced to go back to work as an office manager. No longer a stay-at-home mom, Amelia had truly been tested by fire—juggling bills, motherhood, taking care of the house and trying to understand what had happened.

And Claire had struggled, too. Began to do things that frightened Amelia. Claire claimed to have seen her father disappear into thin air, claimed she’d seen a bright light over him and how he’d said he wasn’t her father. Sometimes Amelia found drawings Claire made of Jimmy, in a trench coat, glowing with yellow light. Counseling, therapy, medicine… Amelia had made sure Claire got all of it. It had been an impossible year. Night after night Amelia had cried herself to sleep, terrified of the bill coming due the next day, half-crazed from the despair of such a suddenly turbulent life. Her parents had been lifesavers… lending money and time, helping Amelia keep the house and her mind both.

Things were finally beginning to normalize. Amelia was getting a grip on the new normal, and Claire was finally getting good grades again at school. It was beginning to feel do-able. She accepted this new life as a single mother and widower. And then one day, out of nowhere, the doorbell rang. And the person who she opened the door to was a man who, for a moment, she thought was a ghost. On his face, wretched emotions and terrified hope. Amelia had almost passed out to see the husband she thought she’d never see again within arm’s reach. The next few minutes… a total blur.

When Claire came downstairs and peeked around the staircase banister railing, curious to see who that was in the living room with her mother… Amelia regained some clarity. Before the twelve-year-old girl could see that the man her mother was speaking to was her father, Amelia dismissed her with a voice full of motherly command. "Claire. Room. Now."

Jimmy turned his head to see just the back of his daughter's blonde head as she obeyed and went back up the stairs. "Can I see her?" Jimmy asked softly, heartbreak filling his voice. He implored Amelia with his eyes—eyes that shone with tears.

With a tear streaked face, Amelia shook her head. "No. No." She looked down, feeling out of answers. "I don't know yet." They sat in separate chairs. Jimmy was leaned down over his knees with slumped shoulders and tensely clasped hands. The silence was deafening. What was Amelia supposed to even say? "It's been a year, Jimmy."

He nodded, staring at the ground. "I know, I know."

"Where'd you go?" Amelia asked softly, her voice betraying her confused and painful feelings. "I told her you were dead. She thinks you're dead somewhere. She's just now getting back to herself again." There was anger in her voice. Anger that she reigned in and softened. "Don't you think your daughter would have wanted to know you were okay?"

Jimmy looked at her with a strained expression. "I was… I was in a psych clinic. I just wanted to
get myself straight before seeing you."

Bitterness played on Amelia's voice. "And no telephones, or—"

Her husband's face contorted. "No, I know. You're right. I'm—" he drew in a deep breath, let it out heavily, pain making his voice tight and quiet. "I'm so sorry." His apologies couldn't take away the sleepless nights or the things Claire had gone through or the pain and confusion Amelia had lived with the past year. Still, he tried to act like it was going to be all right. Like him being back was the answer. "But it's all—it's all over now. I mean, I'm—I'm really okay."

Really okay? She wasn't sure if she believed him. Not after how he'd acted there near the end. The angel stuff, the sticking his hand in boiling water and open flame, the standing on the edge of their roof and saying he couldn't be hurt... and maybe he was okay now, but she wasn't, and neither was their daughter. "Well that must be nice for you," she said coldly, hating him for not even calling once to let her know he was alive. "You don't know how hard this past year's been. You should have told me where you went. How could you let me think you were dead all this time?"

Jimmy stared back at her, seeming to realize in some small way the damage he'd done. Guilt and shame washed his haggard features. "I was—I was confused, Amelia. I was completely delusional." He seemed at the point of tears and his eyes refused to meet hers. "And I thought—I thought God was calling me to something and I thought that it was important, and I was wrong, I was such an idiot. Heaven, hell... none of that matters." He looked at her then, and Amelia felt her eyes spilling tears again. She wanted to believe him so badly. She wanted the life they'd had before—comfortable, safe, normal. "The only thing that's important to me is you and Claire. And I—I can't undo what I've done." His chin quivered and he looked down, breaking her heart all over again with his sadness. "But I just wanna come home again."

Amelia shut her eyes against tears and struggled not to break down. She opened her eyes again and kept her voice calm, even though she wanted to weep from every raw emotion pummeling her heart at the moment. "I don't know if I can do that," she said quietly. "Not yet. Jimmy, you walked out on us." Her face wavered. "You abandoned us. Hurt isn't even close to what you've done to Claire and I."

Jimmy looked down again, his forehead rigid with stressed lines. "I know. I know." He put his hand on his face in shame. "I'm so sorry. I can never tell you how sorry. All that matters to me is this family."

Cynical and grieved, Amelia shook her head. "I just... I kind of have a hard time believing that."

The words hurt him, like she'd wanted. "Please," Jimmy said. "For Claire. I know you and I might never..." he trailed off and they exchanged a meaningful look, both understanding that their relationship was probably broken beyond repair. "But I'm her father," Jimmy said, his voice growing a little stronger. "She needs me. She needs both of us. And I wanna make it up to her." He tried to reach out to her then, to take hold of her hand. Amelia moved away, not allowing it. Jimmy was wounded, but accepted it and sat there silently for a minute. "Things are gonna be different from now on," he told her faintly, trying to convince her.

"I can't see you break her heart again," Amelia said. Against her better judgement, she was considering it—letting Jimmy back in, even after what he'd done. She believed in forgiveness and second chances, but it had been easier to believe in both before she'd had to be the one giving them.

Jimmy heard it in her voice and small hope showed in his eyes and posture. "I won't. I promise," he said, leaning forward intently, eager to prove himself and meet her demands, do whatever she asked. "We can start small. I mean, whatever you're comfortable with."
Amelia searched his eyes cautiously. "Like what?"

"I don't know." Jimmy chanced an attempt at a smile through the tears in his eyes. "Dinner?"

A considerable silence hung between them. Jimmy looked at Amelia with wretched hope and Amelia felt herself caving, hoping she wasn't making the wrong choice—she wasn't sure if she knew her husband anymore but needed to give him a chance. Mostly for their daughter's sake. "Okay. Dinner," she agreed, then quickly became deadly serious. "But Jimmy… nothing about where you really were. I have to think about what to tell her. How to explain."

Jimmy agreed readily and Amelia went upstairs alone to tell Claire the news. With every step she took, Amelia harrowed her mind for how to say it. How were you supposed to tell your daughter that the dad she thought was gone forever was downstairs waiting to see you again? What reason could she give for why he left? Could Amelia explain that he might not be staying with them forever if things didn't work out? That he might leave again if he wasn't better like he said? Amelia had to stop in the hallway and let herself cry for a moment. Claire was too young for this confusion and heartache… and Amelia had never wanted this for any of them.

Thirty Minutes Later

"There, there," Sam said urgently, tapping on the window of the Impala. Dean slowed the car down and parked in front of the house. They all peered up at the house as the engine cut off. "This is the place, unless the yellow pages are wrong," Sam said, exchanging a tense glance with his brother.

The three Winchesters got out, scoping out the dark, middle-class neighborhood sidewalks as they did. All was calm, quiet. The Novak house was standard and predictable, a two-story family home. The windows were aglow from the lights inside—the place looked homey and warm.

"Bets on how happy Jim-boy's gonna be to see us?" Dean wisecracked, stuffing Ruby's knife into his jacket as they approached the house. Probably not very. As they ascended the front steps quietly, watchful for signs of anything off, they heard the dead giveaway. Inside the house, the sounds of a scuffle—something falling over, a man yelling, then glass shattering.

Sam and Dean looked at each other then wordlessly, Dean kicked the door in as Alex whipped out the florescent green gun she'd prepped during the car ride. The three of them burst into the Novak home and into a chaotic scene. On the floor of the living room, Jimmy was being brutally beaten by a female demon—he was fighting back weakly. Crumpled nearby and stunned was a small woman with strawberry blonde hair. Amelia. She was groaning and whimpering, staring in horror at the other demon—a large male with black eyes who was holding a blonde pre-teen girl at knifepoint. Claire.

The Winchesters skidded to a stop when they saw the hostage situation. "Hey!" Alex thundered, not really thinking it through, just acting. She was pointing her kiddie squirt gun at the demon holding Claire.

The demon turned, tightened his grip on the girl… then took in the sight of Alex and the obviously harmless toy. He relaxed slightly, a wicked smile spreading over his face. On the floor, the demon beating Jimmy stopped, too, and chortled at the sight. A slow, lazy laugh came out of the male demon's mouth. "Nice gun, sweet cheeks."

Next to her, Dean was tensed and ready—he already knew the plan, because it went without saying. Alex smiled facetiously at the demon and then squirted the gun three times. Holy water
sprayed out and sizzled on the demon's face on contact, catching him off guard. He let go of Claire, clawing at his own face and screaming as skin melted off. Dean rushed in and finished him with the knife, plunging the knife into the demon's chest. A shocked look was left on the the dead demon's face. Alex shrugged humbly, twirled the gun for effect. "I know."

Claire was wide-eyed and frozen in shock, staring in both awe and terror as Alex set her sights on the other demon—then was suddenly sent backwards to fly into a glass shelf that shattered on impact. Ughhh—Alex blinked, pushing herself up even as Dean went flying sideways to crash into the television set. Ruby's knife clattered to the floor.

Sam held a hand out and the female demon lurched, stumbled underneath the power he was projecting onto her… then nothing. The demon was smiling slowly, unaffected for the most part. Sam's expression became vastly pained and he groaned loudly in agony, holding his other hand to his head, like he was about to pass out. He re-doubled his efforts and the demon chuckled, began to advance.

Jimmy pushed himself up off the floor and rushed to his daughter, taking hold of her even as Alex was standing up shakily. "Go!" Sam shouted to her. "Get them outta here!"

Alex saw how Dean was recovering, reaching for the knife. So she did what Sam said and darted over to Jimmy and Claire, pushing them along. "Come on, come on!" She roughly maneuvered them out of the house and down into the bitter coldness of the night.

They stopped at the Impala, breathless. "My wife—" Jimmy protested as Claire clutched him tightly. He stared back at his house anxiously.

"Don't worry, Sam and Dean have it handled," Alex said, holding a hand out when he moved forward a little, like he was going to go back in.

"I should have listened to you," Jimmy bemoaned, looking at the house anxiously.

"Yeah, well." Alex spit out some blood, realizing that she'd bitten the inside of her mouth when she fell. Her hands were scraped up from broken glass, too.

"A-are you okay?" Claire asked, noticing even as Alex did. Her big girlish eyes stared at Alex with stark fear, and from her pale color, it suddenly became obvious that the little girl might be going into shock.

"Me?" Alex smiled broadly, acted like it was no big deal. "Oh, I'm good. It's just a couple cuts and scrapes." She set Claire with a kind look, trying to calm her down and keep her from a breakdown or panic attack. "Claire, right? I'm Alex. Those are my brothers Sam and Dean in the house. You don't have to worry. We're gonna keep you safe." Jimmy's arms tightened around his daughter, who nodded, sniffed, whimpered. Alex opened the back door of the Impala, looking back at the house tensely. Any second she expected Sam and Dean to high-tail it out of there. "Let's get in the car, okay?" She asked, smiling tightly at Jimmy and Claire. Even as they did as she suggested, Amelia came running out of a side door of the house with coats clutched to her chest.

Sam and Dean burst out of the front door and Dean gestured urgently as they sprinted across the yard to the car. "Let's go, let's go!"

In an echoing parking deck that was mostly empty, Sam's harsh tone resounded strongly. "I'm gonna tell you once again, you're putting your family in danger," he said to Jimmy. "You have to come with us."
Chastened and convicted, Jimmy looked back at the Impala. The backs of Amelia and Claire's heads were visible through the rear window, and mother was embracing sleeping daughter. Jimmy turned back to the Winchesters and he was conflicted. "How long? And don't give me that 'cross that bridge when we get to it' crap."

Sam's face twisted. "Don't you get it? Forever. The demons will never stop. You can't outrun them, you can't hide, not on your own. You can never be with your family. So you either get as far away from them as possible or you put a bullet in your head." That brusque comment got two surprised looks from his siblings. "And that's how you keep your family safe. But there's no getting out and there's no going home."

"Well, don't sugarcoat it, Sam," Dean said wryly.

Sam shot him a dirty look and his voice stayed just as angry as it had been before. "I'm just telling him the truth, Dean. Someone has to."

Alex gave her twin a lecturing glance. "Well can you at least dial down the douchebag a little bit, or…?"

Sam's expression turned bitchy and he shot his sister a look before setting his jaw grimly and looking at Jimmy intensely, commandingly. His anger was still palatable. "Go tell them Jimmy," he said forcefully. "Tell them goodbye."

Jimmy nodded meekly, seeming shellshocked. He headed for the Impala even as Sam got two very questioning looks from his brother and sister. Alex again tried to offer him help. "Sam, do you need some headache medicine or something—"

"For the last goddamn time, Alex, I'm fine!" He exploded. "Stop asking!" A shocked silence followed and Sam blinked oddly, like he was clearing his vision. "Sorry." He cleared his throat and wet his lips and dodged his brother's expression of confounded disapproval and his sister's wounded what-did-I-do gaze. "Sorry. I'm gonna go find them a car." He brushed past them and headed off into the parking deck to jack a car.

Alex shook her head, watching him go. "Something is wrong with him," she muttered.

A few feet away, Jimmy opened the back door of the Impala and crouched down—Claire was asleep, his trench coat wrapped around her. "Hey," Amelia whispered, trying a smile through her traumatized expression. "So I guess I pretty much owe you the biggest apology ever." She reached out and hesitantly took hold of his hand. He realized that she no longer wore her wedding band or engagement ring.

Jimmy's heart hurt. "No you don't."

Her hand tightened on his a little. "Yes, I do. I'm so sorry, Jimmy. And I will never, ever forgive myself for not believing you. For thinking you were…" her voice dropped to an ashamed whisper, "were crazy."

A sad little smile crossed Jimmy's face and he squeezed her hand. "You did what any rational person would have done. I mean, hell, I thought I was crazy half the time."

Amelia smiled a little, wiped her cheeks with her free hand, glanced sideways at Dean and Alex, who were speaking intensely nearby. "How do you know these people?"

"They knew me when I was him. Castiel."
Amelia was looking at Alex closely. "Her too?" She looked back at her husband. "She's pretty."

Jimmy's hand loosened, then let go of hers completely. "Amelia..." he said her name with a note of hurt and disappointment. He always hated it when she accused him of having a wandering eye. He never had. Ever.

Amelia seemed to feel guilty about her passive-aggressive statement and she dropped the subject, clasping her hands together. "How can all of this be real?" She asked, almost smiling at the lunacy of it. "Angels, demons... I thought I believed before but I don't think I did. Now I do and... and... I'm scared."

"I know." Jimmy contemplated his wife with a pained expression. She had survived without him for a year. She would have to survive without him some more. Maybe even forever.

"Can we...? Can we even go home, or...?" She looked to him for guidance. "What are we gonna do?"

Jimmy's face fell a little. This was the goodbye, and she wasn't going to like it. "They're gonna get you a car, don't ask me how, and you're gonna take Claire to Carl and Sally's as fast as you can."

Amelia faltered, realizing what he meant. "Wait. What about you?" She shook her head. "...No, I'm not going anywhere without you, Jimmy."

"Listen to me. Every moment that I'm with you, you and Claire are in danger."

"I don't care!" She kept her voice to a whisper to keep from waking Claire, but her voice was very forceful. "We are not splitting up again."

Jimmy looked at his wife sadly. "We don't have a choice."

Amelia contemplated him in confusion and frustration and reluctance. "For how long?"

He shook his head, realizing the bitter irony of what he was about to say. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Amelia pressed her lips together to keep from crying, then looked at their daughter, who was innocent and asleep. She turned back to Jimmy and took in a shaking breath, her eyes filling with tears. "We're a family," she protested softly.

It was all he could do not to fall apart. "They will kill you, Amelia, and they'll kill Claire. You just have to get as far away from me as you can. Keep our daughter safe."

Amelia looked quietly terrified. "W-what are you saying to me, Jimmy?" She asked.

"Sometimes I think I might have opened a door I can never close, Amelia," Jimmy confessed brokenly. He'd promised her that things were going to be different and now he had to run to protect them. Wasn't a man's place with his family? And yet here he was, intending to get as far away from them as possible, stay with the Winchesters. With Alex and with all those thoughts of Castiel's that still filled his head, confusing him. Jimmy vowed to make it through this somehow, starting with this moment right here. He had to tell Amelia goodbye. Quite possibly forever. "I'm sorry," he whispered, begging her to believe him. "I'd do things differently if I could."

His wife's eyes were flooding with unshed tears. "Promise me this won't be the last time I see you, Jimmy," she whispered pleadingly. "Promise me."
Jimmy just shook his head. "I… I don't want to promise you something I can't guarantee," he said, and he was surprised when a warm tear spilled onto his cheek. He was crying too. Amelia sobbed softly and leaned to him, embracing him tightly.

Alex and Dean both watched from nearby, somber, unsettled and sad. They both knew that once you were in this life, you were stuck. Jimmy Novak would never be able to go back to a normal apple-pie life. Maybe his girls could, but him? He might as well have been cursed the day that he let Castiel have him.

"He's a devout man. He actually prayed for this."

Alex remembered those words Cas had uttered and she turned away, unable to watch Amelia weeping on her husband or Claire waking up and asking "What's wrong, Daddy?"

Castiel was wrong. No man would pray for this.

The car was silent and the mood was tense as Jimmy and the Winchesters drove away from Amelia and Claire.

Ten miles passed, then Dean pulled over to refuel. As he waited, leaned against the car, Sam got out and walked off about fifty feet to make a phone call. He was distinctly agitated and pissed. What was going on with him? Alex hissed a little as she finished disinfecting the scrapes all over her hands from the broken glass. Glancing sidelong, she took in Jimmy's tense, drawn profile. "You okay over there?" she asked softly. They were in the back seat together and he hadn't said a word since they'd left the parking deck.

His eyes flickered downward, his jaw worked just a little. "Not really."

Of course not. He wouldn't be. Alex sympathized completely. She saw a stark gash on his cheek. "Hey, you have a bad cut. Lemme see."

Grudgingly, Jimmy let her dab an alcohol pad against the cut on his cheek. He kept his eyes down as she did so. Alex turned and as she dug around in the first aid kit for some medical tape to protect the cut, she asked softly. "I never imagined my life would end up this way," she confessed quietly. His voice gave her pause. "Maybe it won't. Maybe we can find some way to…" she trailed off, not even sure what she was going to say.

Jimmy smiled a little cynically, understanding that she, too, saw no way out for him. "I never thought an angel would destroy my life, you know?" He shook his head ruefully even as Alex ripped off a little medical tape and patted it down onto his cheek carefully, using her fingertips and taking care.

She made no comment, because she could think of nothing to say. Did Cas know or understand how he'd all but ruined this man's life? And not just his life, but his wife and daughter's too? She didn't know. Was it the same with the other angels who had vessels, too? Jimmy barely seemed to notice what she was doing. He was staring ahead of himself unseeingly. "I was dead the day I said yes to him."

His words were dour and startling, defeating.

Sam yanked his door open and sat heavily in his seat, cutting off any reply Alex could have made to Jimmy. He withdrew and leaned against the window and when Dean got back into the car and they hit the highway again, Jimmy appeared to be sleeping. When Sam's phone rang a few
moments later and it was Amelia's voice on the other end, a very grim discovery was made: one of the demons that had attacked the Novaks in their home had possessed Amelia and was holding Claire hostage. The Impala made a sharp U-turn and gunned it back the way they'd come.

"They were supposed to be safe because I left them!" Jimmy raged in the back seat.

Dean glanced at him in the rear view mirror as he slowed the car down. "Calm down, Jimbo—you're no use to anyone if you can't keep a handle on yourself."

Jimmy put his head in his hands and breathed in and out loudly. "That demon is gonna kill my daughter."

"No one's killing no one," Dean retorted. "Just stay calm."

Exasperated, Jimmy straightened and looked out the window with an apprehensive expression as Dean parked the car. "This the place?" A decrepit old warehouse was slouched across an expanse of concrete that was littered with trash and rubble. The place was the picture of abandoned Americana—complete with broken windows, gaping holes in the sides of the tin walls, and rusted metal beams that sagged underneath the weight of what they held up.

Dean shrugged. "It's the address that demon bitch gave us, so… yeah." They all got out of the car and Dean tossed Sam Ruby's knife even as Alex dug in the trunk and realized they were all out of squirt guns—she'd dropped the last one back at the Novak house. She tucked a flask of holy water into her belt instead, figuring it wouldn't hurt to have just in case.

"Alright, they're expecting you to come alone," Dean was telling Jimmy, who shrugged on his trench coat. "That's exactly what you're gonna do."

"What?" Jimmy asked, his expression wide-eyed and fearful. "Go in there alone?"

"We'll work our way through the catwalks," Sam explained. "We'll be right behind you."

"All you gotta do is stay calm and stall," Dean added. "Let us do our job."

"How can you ask me to be calm?" Jimmy asked insolently. "This is my family we're talking about!"

Dean pointed a finger at him. "Listen to me, this will work. You understand? Nobody's gonna get hurt."

Jimmy didn't seem convinced. "Yeah, whatever. Gimme a minute, okay?" He sullenly walked off to disappear around the far corner of the warehouse.

Sam, paler than ever and a little clammy—Alex was convinced he had a fever—looked at Dean with an ill expression. "There's no way they're expecting him to come alone. You know this is probably a trap."

"So we do what we always do," Alex interjected.

"What, get our asses handed to us?" Sam asked with a weak little laugh.

Alex just smiled back at him a little and arched an eyebrow. "Spring the trap."

"Castiel, you son of a bitch!" Jimmy shouted at the sky. He'd walked a fair distance from the
Winchesters and was letting loose on every angry, confused feeling he was holding inside. "You promised me my family would be okay! You promised you were gonna take care of them! I gave you everything you asked me to give, I gave you more! This is the thanks I get? This is what you do? This is your heaven?!" He stopped to catch his breath and the indignant fire faded into despair. "Help me, please. You promised, Cas. Just help me." The night was silent and the stars above twinkled, seeming to mock him. Again, Jimmy flew off the handle, "Where are you?!" He shouted with renewed fury. And when there was no response, he shook his head bitterly. "Typical," he muttered.

"Jimmy." He turned, startled. Alex Winchester stood there smiling wincingly with her arms crossed. "Maybe you shouldn't be shouting when we're about to try and sneak in there?"

He swallowed, suddenly a little self-conscious. "You followed me."

"Just wanted to make sure you were okay," she told him, coming forward. It was strange, her looking at him, not Cas. The bright hazel eyes that Castiel had been so fascinated by flickered over him with hooded concern.

"Yeah. I just… I was trying to get Cas," Jimmy explained weakly, out of options. "You wanna try calling him?"

Alex seemed surprised. "Me?"

"Maybe he'll listen to you," Jimmy suggested. "You are his favorite."

Her surprise changed to stark confusion. "His favorite what?"

Was she stupid or did she really not know? Jimmy didn't have time to wonder. "Just try calling him, okay?"

"Uh. Okay. I already did but… all right." She cleared her throat and glanced at Jimmy like she was self-conscious at his gaze. She looked skyward and hesitated. "Uh… Cas? Hello? It's… me, Alex. Winchester. Again. Do you ten-four up there?" They both waited, but nothing happened. Alex stuck her tongue out just a little to wet her lips, and shook her head, looked down, glancing at Jimmy again abashedly. "No one's listening."

"Oh he's listening. He's just not answering." Jimmy shook his head, at a loss. "I don't get it." His voice softened with deep thought. "I thought for sure he'd come for you." He looked at her and saw how surprised she was, how questions filled her eyes at his statement. Amelia was right, he thought faintly. Alex was pretty. She was youthful with old soul eyes, she was willowy and delicate looking but Jimmy knew firsthand that she wasn't someone to mess around with or make assumptions about. She was pretty damn tough and resourceful. Still, there was a vulnerability to her. A quietness. A loneliness.

"What?" She asked at his long gaze.

He tore his gaze away. "Nothing. I just…" He frowned, in thought someplace far away, murmuring almost to himself. "I wonder… if something happened to him." Because it made no sense. He knew full well how obsessed Castiel was with Alex's safety. For a minute, Jimmy worried about Castiel. He didn't hate the guy. He just wished Castiel had picked someone else.

"Hey, let's go save your girls, all right?" Alex asked, nodding toward the doorway into the warehouse nearby.

Jimmy looked at the doorway and panic rose. His heart jumped into his throat and all he could
think of was *I am going to get them killed.* "I can't," he said, voice rising in choked panic. "I can't. I'm not the kind of man who knows how to do this."

Humiliating tears stung his eyes even as Alex looked at him with an intense, peering frown. "What do you mean?"

"I, I don't know how to fight, or, or, negotiate," he stuttered, getting more and more panicked by the second. "I sell ad time! I'm nothing, I'm *no one*; I'm not brave or strong—If I go in there and make a wrong move and they *die*—"

Alex's hands gripped him firm just above his elbows and she made him look at her. "*Jimmy.* You're not nothing. You're not no one. Keep yourself together, all right? Cas picked you for a reason. Listen, take it from me. Being brave isn't a feeling. It's doing the right thing even when you're scared shitless." Her words encouraged him, calmed him. "You are gonna get through this," she insisted without doubt. "You're not alone. I'll be right behind you, and Sam and Dean will be right there, too. Okay?" She seemed so sure and positive, so strong and dependable to him in that moment. Her words had him nodding, seeing hope.

"Okay," he said, nodding more and more, feeling deeply relieved. "Thank you." Impulsively, he reached for her and hugged her as he let out a tensely held breath. He could tell that his sudden move made her feel awkward. Her hand patted his back hesitantly and she was stiff against him. "Thank you," he repeated softer, shutting his eyes for a second and calming himself, pushing his fears away. Her hair smelled like motel shampoo and after a second, she stopped patting him. Just held still, her arms circled around him loosely. A feeling like comfort washed over Jimmy. For a moment, he trusted that everything was going to be all right.

When he pulled away, the two of them looked at each other wordlessly, neither one seeming too sure about what had just happened or why. Their hands were still on each others arms. When they both realized it simultaneously, they stepped back. Alex seemed especially puzzled and flustered. "We should..." she gestured toward the warehouse.

Jimmy nodded, following her gaze. Everything came back to him and his resolve grew. He drew himself up a little bit. "Yeah." He was scared shitless. But he started walking, and Alex stayed in stride with him. When they reached the door, he reached out and took hold of the handle, then tightened his grip on it, but didn't pull.

"Right behind you," Alex reminded him gently, as if he were a child. Jimmy looked at her one more time then gathered his courage and pulled the door open, stepped into the darkness beyond.

It was difficult to see. His footsteps were loud on the metal floor and he followed a hallway down into a bigger, open area where overhead, metal catwalks cross-crossed. He saw no one. He continued inward. And then he saw Claire, sitting tied to a chair. He ran to his little girl, dropped to his knees in front of her, shook her gently. "Claire? Sweetie? It's me, it's Daddy!"

Behind him came Amelia's voice, low and cruel. "Oh hi, honey. You're home." Jimmy shot up and whirled, standing in front of his daughter protectively. Amelia smiled wickedly. "And you brought your little whore friend, too." She held her hand up and made a yanking motion. Alex was suddenly pulled out of the darkness she'd been concealed in and flung sidelong into a tin wall, hard. She fell down to the floor with a sickening thud and let out a horrible low groan of pain.

Jimmy held a hand out, panicking. "Wait—wait. Listen, I'm—I'm begging you here! You do whatever you want with me, but my wife and daughter and Alex, they're just—they're not a part of this."
"Not a part of this? Sweetie." She tutted scoldingly. "They're all a part of it." Amelia suddenly laughed in the face of Jimmy's horror. "You know, it's funny. I never imagined how lucky I'd get today… not just an empty vessel but the Winchester bunch too?"

On the ground, Alex was pushing herself up onto all fours—her mouth was bloody and her expression seemed to say she was done with the bullshit. "Joke's on you, bitch," she spat, "I'm the only one here."

Amelia smiled, narrowed her eyes. "Mm. There it is. The default Winchester mode: lies." She cocked her head to the side, listening. "There are the other two right now."

Two demons dragged Sam and Dean in as if on cue. "Hiya, Mom," Dean greeted the demon possessing Amelia.

She ignored him, spoke to her henchmen. "Got the knife?" One of the demons, a blonde female, held up Ruby's knife.

Alex, standing off to herself gave Amelia a churlish look. "It's not nice to steal."

"Listen, you got us, okay?" Sam asked loudly. "Let these people go."

"I have a better idea." Amelia pulled a gun out of her waistband and turned, shot Jimmy in the stomach. Pain exploded and Jimmy cried out, fell over, shocked. Even moreso when the demon made Amelia hold the gun to her own stomach and shot herself, too. She began to laugh, unaffected by the wound. It wouldn't kill the demon, but it would kill Amelia when she dispossessed her. "Goodbye, Novak family!" Amelia's voice trilled.

Then she turned and set her sights on Claire, began to saunter toward her slowly, leisurely checking her gun, even as Sam and Dean struggled against the grips the demons held them in. Amelia suddenly went flying sideways as Alex tackled her. The gun went off loudly.

On the floor, Jimmy was writhing in pain, a hand pressed to the seeping bullet wound in his stomach. He could hear Alex and Amelia fighting, hear Sam and Dean shouting. But it was all a distant buzzing blur. He stared at the ceiling, at the beautiful, strange pattern of rusty catwalks above. He was dying. This was the end. He blinked a few times, struggling to breathe.

Jimmy.

Castiel?

Jimmy, you're dying. Your wife is dying. Your daughter is about to die. I can help you.

No… Castiel… I know what that means. I can't. Not again. Isn't there another way?

I'm sorry Jimmy. There isn't, unless you'd have me to possess your daughter or your father.

What? No! Not them! If I say yes again, how long will you take me away this time?

Forever, Jimmy.

Forever? So, either way I die. I say yes to you and I die because you take me over. I say no and I bleed out on the floor here.

Agree to this and your wife and daughter will both survive. We can save them. The three of you can die today or the two of them can be healed and live long, good lives.
They need me, Cas. I can't just leave again, they won't understand.

*I leave the choice to you, Jimmy.*

There were tears of pain and fear in Jimmy's eyes and he squeezed his eyes shut, gritted his teeth against horrible pain. A memory came to him out of nowhere. Eight years old and wearing a cape he'd made out of a pillowcase, he'd raced through a grassy field with his favorite toy airplane, making engine sounds. Lost in jubilation, he stopped to spin a circle, delighting in the plane's imagined flight. "I'm gonna fly when I grow up! Planes, helicopters, fighter jets! I'm gonna flyyyyy!"

Jimmy opened his eyes and a tear rolled out the edge of his eye down the side of his face and into his hair. He saw Amelia walking to him on their wedding day, he remembered carrying her across the threshold of their home when love had been bright and hopeful. He saw her in the kitchen, a hand on her growing pregnant belly. He saw Claire when she was a squalling newborn, he felt how his heart had burst inside of him to first hold such a precious gift in his arms. He remembered her first steps and first words. He remembered a good life. And Jimmy let go of it all to save them.

"Yes," he whispered into the echoing space.

A word no one but Castiel heard. A word Jimmy recognized as his last. He turned a little, craning his neck upwards, trying to see Claire one last time before the angel blinded and overpowered him. But his vision was burning white hot as Castiel took over, and he saw nothing and no one.

Alex barreled into the demon possessing Amelia and the gun went off loudly as it clattered onto the floor. *Wham!* The demon's fist connected brutally with Alex's jaw, sending her stumbling back. Sam and Dean were shouting, and it sounded like they were doing the same thing she was. Kicking ass. Or getting their asses kicked. She wasn't sure which.

Amelia grabbed her by the shoulders and Alex hung on tight, using her weight to throw them both sideways where they fell and rolled around on the hard ground, blindly punching each other's faces and grappling roughly. Alex got a foot up between them and kicked Amelia hard in the stomach where the bullet wound gaped. Amelia rolled away from the force of the kick.

"Sam, no, stop! *What are you doing?!*" Dean's shout echoed across the warehouse.

Alex looked up, panting raggedly, on her stomach on the ground. What she saw seemed to stop her heart. Sam was crouched over the blonde demon and he withdrew his mouth from her neck. His lips, teeth, and lower face were covered in bright red. He didn't look recognizable, just ruthless and crazed. His eyes were wild and he stared at Dean silently. He seemed to remember himself—he turned around and stabbed Ruby's knife into the demon he'd just drank from. Blood dripped off his chin to the ground as he stood up. He looked like a *monster.*

Alex suddenly felt herself get grabbed by the back of her hair and to be lifted up with super strength—the cold barrel of a gun was at the side of her neck. She heard the gun cock.

"*Hey!*" Sam roared. His hand reached his hand toward her and his expression was terrifyingly murderous. Alex flinched, then realized. He was exorcising Amelia's demon. The grip slackened then ended. Alex stumbled away from Amelia and stared as black smoke billowed out of her mouth, dissipating as she coughed. Sam looked strong, able, confident, his powers fully working as demon blood dripped out of his mouth and down his chin and neck. Dean and Alex looked at each other in horrified realization.
The last of the black smoke left Amelia, whose face suddenly showed agony and fear as she became herself again. She clutched at her stomach where blood soaked her shirt. "Oh God!" She gasped, falling to her knees, then onto her side. "Aaahh..." she hissed and moaned and whimpered. Jimmy suddenly stood up and went to her, crouched down beside her, touched her stomach.

"Jimmy?" Amelia asked weakly.

"No." His voice was deep and husky, rough. "I am not Jimmy."

Thunderstruck, Alex's mouth dropped open as Castiel healed Amelia's wound. Amelia looked down at his hand on her stomach, eyes wide and afraid with realization. "C-Castiel?!" His eyes met hers. "Where's Jimmy? Where's my husband? What did you do with him?!"

Castiel stood slowly, looked down at Amelia, who was shocked and still half-laying on the floor. "I'm sorry Amelia Novak. Your husband is gone. He exchanged his life for yours, and that of your daughter's."

Amelia's face registered alarmed confusion. "What?"

Everyone looked at Claire at that moment, and noticed what they hadn't. The stray bullet the gun had fired a minute ago had hit Claire in the chest. Ribbons of blood trailed down her chest and she was, by all appearances, dead. Amelia sprang up, screaming her daughter's name. Her hands fluttered in a panic, trying to untie her daughter from the chair she was restrained to even as Castiel came up beside her and touched the ropes—singed to ash, they fell away.

Amelia took her daughter into her arms, crying and wailing, on her knees, rocking Claire's limp form. Castiel crouched beside her. "Amelia." Castiel's voice was rich and low. "Have faith. Your daughter will live."

Castiel placed a hand onto Claire's back and Amelia stared, tears forgotten as Claire stirred, frowned, and looked around. "What happened Mommy?" Claire saw Castiel and smiled in relief. "Daddy!" She threw her arms around his neck. "I thought you left!"

Castiel was frowning sternly and Amelia looked sick. Claire seemed to realize something was wrong and drew back slowly, looking at Castiel closely. Her voice lowered to a whisper. "You're... you're not my daddy."

Castiel stood up. "No. I am not." Claire and Amelia clung to each other and watched with disbelief as the man who had been Jimmy Novak walked away from them.

Beside Dean, Alex stared at Cas, who was approaching them. He didn't look at either of them even once. "Cas, where are you going?" Alex asked as Castiel walked past Dean without a glance.

The angel rounded on them slowly, his expression more emotionless than she could ever remember seeing it. He didn't reply.

"And what were you gonna tell me?" Dean prompted, earning a glance from Cas.

"I learned my lesson while I was away, Dean," he said and the sound of his voice seemed to still the room itself. "I serve Heaven, I don't serve man, and I certainly don't serve you." His eyes darted to Alex and his jaw clenched. She saw how he took in her bloody face and injuries. His voice lowered even more as his expression flickered. "Any of you."

And he turned and walked away, leaving a shellshocked bunch of people behind. Claire's quiet sobs echoed in the large expanse of the warehouse, and Alex turned back, reeling from what had
just happened. Nearby, Sam was wiping the blood off his face with the sleeve of his jacket and Alex looked at Dean questioningly, who shook his head just slightly, as if to tell her 'not now.' Sam went to Amelia and Claire, by all appearances he was his normal kind, caring self again.

"He'll never be back, will he?" Amelia asked Sam, her voice shaking. Her arm was around Claire, who was crying quietly.

"Didn't sound like it," Sam said honestly, sadly. "Let's just get out of here, huh?"

Sam ended up carrying Claire, who was so traumatized that walking was difficult for her. Amelia walked beside them, holding her daughter's hand, seeming too shocked to know what to do.

Dean and Alex followed, but slowed down letting Sam and the girls get out of earshot. Alex looked at her brother and waited—she could tell by instinct that he was far, far more shaken up than he was letting on. She had never seen his expression so deadly, so horrified. And truthfully, that's how she felt, too. "I'm stopping us at a gas station after we leave here," he said in hushed and hurried tones. "You go to the bathroom, call Bobby. Tell him to call us and tell us to come there, to make up some reason—I don't care what—for us to hightail it over. And we'll put Sam in the panic room until we figure out what the hell is going on with him."

Alex nodded, feeling ill. "Okay."

"Do not let Sam know anything is up. We can't let him get away. He has to suspect nothing. You got it?"

It was with a sadness her heart had never felt before that she nodded her understanding. She felt her eyes sting with tears, and Dean held up a commanding, angry finger. "No, Alex, no. Later. Later, you and I will do that crap. Right now, everything's normal, you understand?"

Alex cleared her throat and forced herself to go blank. "Yeah. Got it."

They drove through a rainstorm in silence. In the back seat, Alex could feel the tension building, but refused to be the one to break the silence, to broach the subject. When she'd gone into the gas station bathroom to call Bobby, she had almost lost it completely. She wasn't sure if she could actually keep it together when the time came.

And there wasn't just Sam drinking the demon's blood. She again replayed the moment in her mind. Where Cas had turned and looked at them with such heartlessness. With such utter lack of anything. She didn't understand. What happened? And Amelia, Claire. Would they be all right? And what about Jimmy? It was awful, the things Alex was thinking about.

In the front seat, Sam drew in a deep breath and cleared his throat. "All right, let's hear it," Sam said, and Alex glanced up.

"Hear what?" Dean asked, sounding completely normal.

"Drop the bomb, man," Sam said. "You saw what I did. Come on, stop the car, take a swing."

"I'm not gonna take a swing," Dean replied evenly.

Alex could see Sam's expression scrunch in puzzled suspicion, then he turned and looked at her. "Alex? You don't wanna scream my head off? Rip me a new one?"

Under his questioning gaze, she wanted to squirm. But she shrugged. Dean said Sam couldn't
suspect anything. So she played it cool. "What can I say, Sam." She flicked a fuzzball off her jacket sleeve as if in boredom. "It explains a hell of a lot."

Sam scoffed, looking at Dean again, then Alex, then Dean, totally aghast. "Come on! You guys aren't gonna give me hell about this?"

"I think we're both too tired, Sam," Alex said, which was true. "Too tired and too sad to be angry."

"Okay, well, at least let me explain myself," Sam said.

Dean shook his head. "Don't. I don't care."

"You don't care?" Sam echoed in disbelief.

"What do you want me to say, that I'm disappointed? Yeah, I am. But, mostly, I'm just tired, man. I'm done. I am just done." Alex heard his voice waver just slightly.

In total disbelief, Sam just stared at Dean. Then his cell phone rang. Alex's eyes jumped up, her pulse picked up. "Hey, Bobby," Sam said.

Alex shut her eyes in emotional pain. And so, the trap would be set. She never thought, in a thousand years, that they would be luring her big brother like an animal. Like a monster.

Later That Night
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

"Well, thanks for shaking a tail," Bobby said, leading the Winchesters toward the panic room.

"You got it," Dean said. He still sounded normal. Alex was saying as little as possible.

"Go on inside," Bobby said, motioning for them to go inside, letting Sam take the lead. "I wanna show you something."

Alex's blood thudded in her ears as Sam, without any hesitation or suspicion, stepped inside. Clueless. "So, what's the big demon problem?" he turned to them. His expression was too pleasant, too trusting.

Alex thought she felt her heart literally break as Bobby replied, "You are."

Sam's expression wavered. "This is for your own good," Bobby said, and shut the door with a loud bang.

"Guys? Hey, hey. What's... what are you doing?" his voice was quickly becoming panicked. Bobby closed and latched the window. "This isn't funny. Guys! Hey! GUYS!"

The second the door shut and latched closed, Alex's careful guise of calm indifference was gone, and she leaned against the wall of the panic room, one hand on either side of her head, painful tears falling silently as her shoulders shook. Sam's shouts echoed loudly on the other side of the wall. She felt Dean pull her away and into his arms, tightly. "Come on kids," Bobby said gently. "It's best if we put some space between us and him for right now."

They went upstairs, Dean pulling Alex along by her forearm. She could barely walk. At the top of the stairs, Alex turned to Dean, stricken, while Bobby, ever the intuitive, left them alone. "How did this happen?" Alex asked through tears. "How did we let this happen? Who is that in there? What
happened to Sam?"

Dean's expression was pained, guilty. He didn't know anything more than she did. "I... I don't know."

"How didn't we see this, Dean?" Alex asked, looking for him to answers, desperate for him to set her at ease in any small way.

He was barely able to look at her. His voice was soft and confused. "What, that he was sucking demon blood? I mean, call me crazy but that's not the first conclusion you'd logically jump to." He looked down, putting his face in his hand. "Dammit. I didn't see this coming. I didn't see this coming."

Alex looked down the stairs, into the darkness. Sam's shouts were echoing loudly, and full of panic and confusion. "Dean. He'll never forgive us for this."

Dean looked at her, his expression unreadable. "I don't know if I can ever forgive him."

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Alex threw one last knife, using all the pent up anger and frustration she was holding inside. Thunk. It pummeled into the side of the car easily, and she went and yanked all the knives she'd thrown out, the sound of scraping hurting her ears. She hadn't even thought to see if the car were a junker or not, and had left about twenty holes in it in the past ten minutes. She'd just seen something to throw knives at in the salvage yard, and started throwing. Hopefully Bobby wouldn't be too pissed.

Now she was out of steam and clunked the knives down on the roof of the car, closing her eyes tiredly. Sam was still shouting himself hoarse a couple hours after being locked in, and she couldn't be in the house. She didn't know what to do, what to think.

And then there was Cas. The way he had looked at her so rigidly when he left. The cruel, thoughtless words he had lobbed at them. She remembered the other night, when she swore he was a different person altogether, listening to her drunken rants... touching her hand as if to comfort her. What had happened? Why was he suddenly a stranger again? How could he just take Jimmy's life like that? How did he just walk away from Amelia and Claire without any visible emotion whatsoever? She didn't believe that Cas was really like that. Maybe it was just denial.

She looked up into the night sky, breathing out and watching her breath dissipate in a little cloud. She waited a very long moment, not sure if she wanted to do this or not. In the end, she decided she did. "Cas? Are you there?"

There was a soft sound behind her, and she turned. There he stood, looking at her with a rigid and blank expression. It was startling, how fast he arrived. "What is it, Alex?" He looked to his left and right, assessing the location. "What do you need?"

"To talk to you," she said, coming closer to him and seeing Jimmy Novak all over again. And yet, not a trace of Jimmy seemed to remain. Identical face, totally different person.

Cas remained distant and stony. "If you're not in danger and need nothing substantial from me, I have no business being here."

He turned, as if to walk away. "Wait! Cas!" Alex darted forward and caught him by the shoulder. Even though he had the strength to rip her in half, he stayed and turned a little, meeting her gaze grudgingly after glancing at her hand almost contemptuously.
She let go, confused. "Where'd you go? Why'd you just leave? What happened?"

His jaw tightened with what appeared to be impatience. "It's none of your concern."

"None of my concern?" She repeated. "Fine. Don't tell me what happened. Why you got dragged back to Heaven." Looking at him was pissing her off, because all she could see, still, was Jimmy. "You ruined a man's life," she accused out of the blue, trying to see some kind of empathy in him. "How are you all right with that?"

Castiel's face was terse. "Alex Winchester, I am not afforded the luxury of having an emotional reaction to that."

Her face was slack in surprise at his words and attitude. "You kidding me?"

"He agreed to this. He knew the stakes. It was necessary." His answers were short, precise, and apathetic.

"Necessary my ass!" Alex retorted angrily.

Castiel's eyes held hers unflinchingly. He seemed so cold. "Child, you presume to know the workings of Heaven and righteousness but you are wholly ignorant."

His words, demeanor, and stance—all of it—shocked her. "Wha—?" She narrowed her eyes in a concerned frown, not even offended. He didn't sound like himself, and she was beginning to suspect that something had happened to him. "What did they do to you up there?" She asked intently.

His expression flickered, then became hard and dark again. "I already told you. None of that is any of your concern."

"It is," Alex insisted stubbornly, boldly.

"Why?" he challenged, and there was a short, startled silence.

"Because..." she trailed off, realizing why. "I thought we were... friends." He'd said as much and shit, she'd believed him without even realizing it. And she didn't think he was lying, either. He'd meant it. He'd said that to her after she'd punched him in the face and said awful things to him. Her eyes stung with surprising emotion and her voice softened to accommodate it. "Why are you being like this?"

He saw her shining eyes and Castiel's jaw clenched, his eyes went down, he spoke gruffly. "I have no need of friendship. Not yours, not Dean's, not anyone's."

"But you said..." Alex was unable to hide her wounded expression. She gave a cynical little laugh. "A lot of bullshit, I guess."

"I spoke out of turn to you previously," Castiel said in a low voice. "Now if you need nothing further—"

She grabbed him by the arm, anticipating him trying to run away again. "No. Don't walk away from me."

Their eyes met and his expression was unreadable. "Let go of me, Alex."

Alex scowled at him, losing her temper and getting combative. "Or what? You gonna throw me
across the yard? Knock me out? Handcuff me to a wall?" He stared at her unflinchingly for a long few seconds, and Alex just stared him down, unruffled, demanding of an explanation. "I don't believe that this is you, the way you're acting right now."

"You—do not—know me," he growled. He took his hand and brushed her aside easily, walking a few paces. He stopped and turning his head just slightly so that she could see his profile. "The relationship you and I had is over. I'm not your friend. I am your protector. That's all." He sounded so insistent and harsh.

Silence. Confused, hurt, unsure silence.

Alex stared at his profile tensely. It didn't make sense. She shook her head, at a loss. "I don't understand," she said softly. "I thought..." she trailed off, unable to finish her sentence.

If she could have seen his face, she would have seen him close his eyes wearily, a severely pained expression on his face. He could barely conceal his inner feelings, the feelings that had contributed to the removal from his vessel and subsequent punishment. He couldn't let her hear how much he cared, and he couldn't allow Heaven to see, either. It was lying. He was a liar. Still, he knew what had to be done. He opened his eyes, steeling himself and wiping all emotion from his face and voice. "You thought wrong," he told her without any empathy. And then he was gone.

Alex stared at the spot where he had been, deeply wounded and sorry she had even called him there at all. Sorry that she had thought he would listen to her or share his situation with her. She was once again reminded why she didn't allow people into her life. Because in the end, they all disappointed her, hurt her, or left her. Sometimes, all three. She wanted to be angry and bitter about Castiel, but instead all she could feel was hurt. Deeply, painfully, hurt. She had trusted him and let him in. More than she should have. And this was what she had to show for it. Absolutely nothing. The same as poor, wretched Jimmy Novak.

Maybe it was because of the highly exhausting day she'd had or the emotional roller coaster. She didn't know. But tears filled her eyes and spilled out to roll down her cheeks. Tears about Sam, about Jimmy, about Amelia and Claire, about Castiel. Especially about Castiel.

Castiel stood on a boat loading dock somewhere in New Jersey, leaned over the railing, staring down into the water tensely. He was trying not to reflect on the conversation he'd just had. He was trying to ignore the way his pulse had picked up, the uneasy, upset feeling that had been left in his stomach at her sadness and pleading. There had been tears gathering in her eyes. Were those tears because of him? How could he inspire those in her? He thought of her face, so beaten up by the demon—she'd had a split lip, a bruised cheek and jaw, a black eye, painful-looking cuts on her hands.

He was forbidden to heal her unless it was a fatal wound. It seemed so hypocritical. She was the only one he wasn't allowed to assist in that way. It was a test, and he knew it.

His brethren in Heaven—Raphael and Michael—had given him a final warning. His affections and unnecessary involvement with the Winchesters had to end, or he would be punished severely. They told him he was choosing sides. They told him he was failing. They told him he was becoming weak and faithless. They told him this was his final chance. And Castiel had no choice but to obey. He wanted to obey. He wanted to be a faithful servant of the Lord. But he also wanted to heal Alex, wanted to be her friend.

Why did he have doubt after doubt? And why, when he saw the hurt in Alex's eyes—hurt caused by him—why did he feel so sick inside? It had been difficult to look at her in the eye and be rough
and callous to her. Still, he had done it, knowing he was protecting them both from Heavenly consequences. And she had looked right back at him and in the face of his purposeful insults had expressed concern for him. How had she known that something happened to him? It unsettled him and surprised him that she saw past his front.

He shouldn't think of her. Not the soft way she sighed, not the way her brow furrowed in thought, not the way her eyelashes fanned out darkly when she looked down. He shouldn't think of the fiery glares she'd shot at him in anger or the eye rolls or the crossed arms, the times she'd challenged him and been kind to him alike. He shouldn't dwell on the sound of her laugh, which he hadn't heard enough times.

Castiel shook himself. He knew the right thing to do was to cut ties with her and her brothers. He could forsake his position as Alex's guardian and allow another angel to do the job. As soon as he thought that, he rejected the idea. No. He didn't want that.

Want. The word was a bitter thing lodged in him. Inescapable. Castiel knew that he'd been walking a dangerous line for some time now and was letting his feelings and newfound emotions sway him. The word 'want' had never applied to him before. He had never used it or felt it before her.

He looked over the dark, shimmering water that laid before him lit by moonlight. He didn't know how to stop caring. And he wasn't sure if he truly wanted to.

Her face came to mind again, so hurt by what he'd said to her tonight.

He bowed his head deeply, recognizing that what he was feeling in that moment was sadness.
Two Roads Diverged

"So light the fire, walk away. There's nothing left to say."
- Bullet for My Valentine

Sam stared up at the ceiling fan that was surrounded by the familiar design of a devil's trap. The blades went around and around in a slow, heavy rhythm that lulled him to a sick, docile place for now.

He had lost track of the hours and days. No one answered when he called.

He was settling into a crazy routine where first he paced the room and banged on the walls. Then he gave up and sat in the corner and wept with shame then he'd grow angry and would hurl himself against the walls, trying to hurt himself. He'd then collapse down and get depressed, then start the process all over again with renewed fervor.

Sam knew he was in bad shape in the moments of clarity he had between blackouts of insanity. He was beginning to see things and people. Alastair, his mom, himself when he was fourteen. He was so confused and tired, and all he could think about was getting some demon blood, quenching the maddening thirst that pervasively controlled his entire body and mind. He needed to free himself from this hell he'd built in himself, he needed them to understand that he had only drank demon blood to get strong enough to kill Lilith.

He heard a soft sound beside him and sat up quickly from where he'd been laying on the cot. His twin sister stood there in the shadows at the edge of the room.

"Alex! How did you get in here?!!"

Her face was obscured by strange shadows and her arms were crossed. He could literally feel the disdain emanating off of her. She ignored his question. "Unbelievable. Look at you, Sam. So far from what you're supposed to be." She came closer, sneering at him in disgust. "Not even human anymore, are you?"

"I'm… I'm still human…" he protested weakly, tiredly. "I'm still me. Please, believe me. You've got to help me."

She just smirked and started to circle him, watching him hawkishly. "You know, I think you're past help. You disgust me, the dark things that crawl around inside you... the things you keep secret from me..." Sam flinched away from her, horrified. "But, it's okay, Sammy. Me and Dean? We've got this. We don't need you, especially not now." She stopped and leaned forward, gripping him by his shoulders with crushing force. Her fingernails were like spikes, digging in painfully and he flinched, whimpered, cowered. "You're the family curse, Sam," she hissed. "It's been you all along, dragging us down, polluting the air we breathed..." her head tilted to the side, and a strange, condescending smile was on her lips. "You're just some unholy, blood sucking, demon screwing little bastard."

Sam felt like he had been struck. "No, Alex," he protested, tears in his eyes. "It wasn't like that, I just, I needed—" she slapped him across the face, her expression like stone. It stung so badly.

"Shut up. I'm tired of listening to your shit," she said and walked off.

He closed his eyes, miserably listened to the sound of her footsteps echoing. And when he opened
his eyes back up, he saw that someone else was there now. A girl, around age twelve. She had a plain, open face, wide eyes, full lips. Two messy braids and an old jean jacket... "Alex..." he said, recognizing her. His twin sister, when she was a kid. She just stared at him, her huge eyes full of hurt, betrayal, disappointment. The other Alex, the older one, came to the younger one, put her arm around the girl protectively. "Don't. You hurt her. You disappointed her. You let her down. She doesn't want you to talk to her." Alex's voice lowered a little bit. "She knows how dark you are inside. How dark you've always been."

Sam choked on his words, standing up, desperate for his twelve-year-old sister to stop looking at him like that. She only turned away, hid her face from him. Older Alex just looked at Sam with a superior expression, as if to say, 'see?'

Sam was getting desperate, breathless, riled up. "Alex, please! Help me! Stop just looking at me like I'm a freak show and do something!" He was grasping at straws. "If you can just, just convince Dean... I just need some time, some help... if you guys... can just help me! Why won't you help me?!"

Alex laughed a little, put a hand on her hip and leaned forward as she smirked patronizingly. "You know what, Sammy? It's kinda cute. You think we actually still love you. Think we actually want to save you. Ah Sam. You sick, crawling little excuse for a man. You're not a man." Sam's sadness retreated like a wave on the beach as she kept laying on insult after insult. She came forward, her face inches from his. Her voice lowered into a harsh whisper. "You're a monster." The words were like another slap to the face and were making his blood boil like acid. "A monster."

"No!" He shouted in rage, lunging for her. "I am not a MONSTER!" With an unintelligible bellow, he lunged for his sister, angry enough to kill.

Outside the panic room, peeking in through the latch, the real Alex couldn't watch any more when Sam ran into the wall, his arms and hands swinging around wildly, as if he were fighting and grappling with someone. He had totally lost it.

She shut the latch quietly and shuffled through the basement, too numb to know how she should react. She felt like she'd failed Sam somehow. It never should have gotten to this point. She should have seen this somehow, recognized that something was wrong, helped her brother. Now it might be too late.

Upstairs in the study, Dean was absentely whittling a piece of wood with a hunting knife, his expression rocky and absent. Bobby was nowhere to be seen. "Same?" Dean asked her tersely, not looking at her as she leaned against the door frame beside him, arms crossed.

"Worse." She admitted then let out a heavy breath, shut her eyes for a second. When she opened her eyes again, Dean had stopped whittling and was staring ahead of himself unseeingly. "What are we gonna do, Dean?" Alex asked. Dean always knew what to do. When he said nothing, she shook her head ruefully, looking down at the floor unseeingly. "This is happening at the worst time possible."

A humorless smile turned her brother's mouth upward as he returned his attention to his knife and shaved more wood off the block in his hand. "Yeah. You said it."

Alex tried not to get angry at his nonchalance, but she was. She was angry and she was scared. She came to stand in front of him, demanding his attention. "He might not live through this, Dean. You get that, right?"

He met her eyes with a little hostility. "Yeah. I get that." He returned to the work of his hands,
ignoring her.

Not exactly thrilled with his attitude, Alex took a second, wetting her lips briefly. Nervously. "Listen. I've been thinking," He wasn't gonna like this. "Maybe I should go get some demon blood."

Dean looked at her sharply, stilled. "What the hell for?"

"You know what for," she said. "Cold turkey is making Sam nuts. I mean, with some drugs, if you stop using, you die from withdrawal, and... and what if that happens here?" Alex used her hands weakly, gesturing emptily. "I just think, maybe, we can just give him some, work him off of it slowly—"

Dean stood up, tossed the wood and knife aside. He was clearly enraged she would even think of what she was suggesting. "No. You hear me? No! Alex!"

"I want him to live!" Alex protested, almost in a shout, then let the silence hang in disbelief. "And so should you," she accused, her voice cracking with disbelief. "So why the hell do you have a problem with that?"

"You want him to live? The way he is now?" Dean looked beside himself. "Drinking demon blood, palling around with demons, exorcising all that is unholy with his freaky mind powers?"

The reminders quieted her. "Well, no, not like that, but..." she trailed off, realizing what Dean was saying, but she didn't want to believe it. Her head shook vapidly, a silent no. "You're prepared to let him die?" She asked, hardly able to believe she even had to ask.

"Yeah, I am, okay?" Dean replied gruffly, his voice rising in defensive anger, in hopelessness. "At least he would die a human!"

Alex was shocked into momentary silence. She was at a complete loss, and her voice betrayed her inner turmoil when she spoke in a soft, stunned tone. "I can't believe you. This is our brother. Your brother. This is Sam."

A muscle jumped in her brother's jaw. He didn't yell, he didn't rage, he didn't melt down. He shut his eyes for a second, his expression twisted in pain. He couldn't look at her when he opened his eyes. "I can't let him live like that, Al. I just can't. Like a... like..."

"A monster?" she asked faintly. He just met her gaze, expression unreadable. Alex looked down. She couldn't believe it had come to this. That Sam had done this to himself. That right now, Dean was prepared to let Sam die.

There was a tense silence, then Dean set his mouth in a thin line, looking grim. "There might be one other option."

"What?" she asked, desperate for a way out, an escape from this mess. But the answer was not what she wanted to hear.

"The angels." Alex felt her expression drop, and Dean let our a frustrated huff, getting physically agitated. "Well what else can I do?" He demanded, seeming to already know that she wouldn't agree with his idea. He paced a few steps in front of her. "I'm backed into a friggin' corner here! What the hell else is left?!"

"I don't know!" she replied, exasperated, matching his elevated volume and emotion. "But we can't trust the angels, you know that!" She thought of Castiel and was filled with bitterness. It showed on
"I don't like it anymore than you do," Dean said bluntly, "but I'm kind of out of options, in case you hadn't noticed." He looked at her intently, his eyes narrowing as if he'd just seen something. "What aren't you telling me?" He'd noticed how she was thinking of Cas.

"Nothing." Alex looked at him guardedly. "Just, if you're thinking Cas will help... he won't. Not like he used to." She thought back to the other night, the way he had been so clearly done with her. She felt a pang of despair and her gaze faltered downward. "He's changed."

"Everyone's changing around here, for the worst," Dean muttered. He rubbed the palm of his hand down across his mouth and chin, by all appearances scraping the bottom of his emotional and mental barrel. Nothing else was said.

They could hear Sam shouting again, a muffled, panicked sound down in the basement.

Alex became more upset by the second at the thought of Sam down there, sick and possibly dying, and Dean up here just letting it happen. She brushed past Dean, throwing an "I'll be outside," over her shoulder.

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**That Night**

How was it that this was the work of angels?

Castiel stood in the shadows of Bobby Singer's basement, his hand outstretched, freeing Sam Winchester step by step from the panic room. Just as he'd been commanded.

The angel ignored his instincts, reminding himself of what had been drilled into him: *obedience is what is valued. Not feelings, not emotions.* His job was not to contemplate outcomes or to give credence to the doubt he felt. It was to obey. So he obeyed, but not without the growing feeling of self-awareness, of self-loathing. Obeying used to give him assurance and certainty. But today, obeying these orders—it gave him nothing but a store of dread and the feeling that he was doing the wrong thing. But how could it be wrong if it were the Will of Heaven? A troubling thought that wouldn't leave his mind.

Castiel broke Sam's bonds, but his stomach clenched. He unlocked the door of the panic room, but he swallowed deeply with a feeling of anxiety. Giving Sam this freedom would allow the final seal to be broken and then Lucifer would walk free, just as Heaven and the archangels wanted. Castiel felt dizzying amounts of negative emotion and conviction flood him; spirit, mind, and body. Was this right? Sam would probably die in this process, and not just Sam. Millions of people in the apocalypse that would follow with Lucifer's return to earth. And yet Castiel had been told this was necessary. Right. Still, a single question kept thumping through his veins to the rhythm of his sickened heartbeat: Was it right? Was it?

Sam came out of the panic room just as predicted. He looked physically drained, sweaty, and sallow, jumpy. He stole up the stairs quietly, his expression showing that he barely believed what was happening, that he couldn't believe his luck. Castiel, invisible and silent, followed without moving, watching Sam sneak through the dark house. It was his job to ensure that Sam Winchester escaped, as ludicrous as it seemed.

Sam passed through the study, pausing to look at Bobby, who was asleep with his head on the desk. Nearby, Dean and Alex were deeply asleep on the small couch there. Dean had fallen asleep sitting up and an ancient looking book was opened and propped, forgotten, on one of his upper
legs. His head lolled down onto his shoulder, his arm stretched across the top of the couch lazily. Alex was tucked beside her brother, a book under her head as a pillow. Her feet were tucked underneath her brother’s leg. They had clearly fallen asleep trying to research something. Probably something to do with Sam, who continued out of the house after looking at his family with a somber gaze. The front door clicked closed softly as Sam made his escape without raising a single alert.

Castiel remained, having done his job. Now he was left to look at the two Winchesters who he had tried so hard in particular not to want to help, not to like. Dean let out a soft snore. Alex shifted a little, let out a soft sleeping sigh, her mouth open slightly. Bruises and cuts remained, marring her face and attesting to physical pain and violence. Bruises and cuts he was forbidden to touch a hand of healing to. An increasingly familiar feeling of guilt came over Castiel.

Castiel felt as though he had betrayed them somehow. Had he? He thought if Alex knew what he was doing, she would say what she had said to him several times now. You know better than this. Something’s wrong. This isn’t you.

She was wrong. This was him. He was nothing and no one, just another in a number of the Holy Host; a creation of God purposed to carry out his will and plans. He wasn't who Alex Winchester imagined him to be, unfortunately. But one thing was certain: walking the earth in the body of a man was slowly tempting Castiel away from everything he'd held fast to before. He thought of what Anna had said to him, about how he could choose free will. The thought terrified Castiel, who had made his own decisions a few times recently and had been punished because of them.

Still… could he stand by and allow this to happen?

He shouldn't even be asking that question.

But the small and nagging voice in the back of his mind wouldn't leave him alone, wouldn't stop whispering to him. This is wrong, it said. This is wrong, and you know it. An even stranger thought came to Castiel and struck him with quiet terror. Perhaps this wasn't him—perhaps he did know better. Perhaps this was wrong. But if those things were true, he truly didn't know who he was anymore—or what Heaven had become, either.

Full of denial on both counts, Castiel took leave of Bobby Singer's home. Even though his physical location changed, his questions and doubts followed him, hounded him… threatening to remain with him to the ends of the earth itself.

Almost Two Days Later

The Impala pulled up to the Saint Regis hotel, a swanky looking high rise hotel. Not the kind of place the Winchesters stayed… ever.

"There it is," Dean said, nodding toward the white Escalade with huge rims parked nearby. "Yup. Just like I said. He's here. Little bitch thought he could throw me off his trail. Well, I know him better than he thinks." Dean was unbuckling. "I'm gonna go in there and talk some sense into him. I bet you a million bucks Ruby's in there, too. And I'm ganking her once and for all."

Alex unbuckled too, reached for the door handle.

"No."

Alex froze, confused, looking at her brother with a hard frown. "No what?"
"You wait here," he said, leaving no room for disagreement. "If I'm not back in ten… then you come in." She opened her mouth to argue, not sure why he was being like that, but he held up a hand, seeming to be too done to even hear her out. "Just, shut it. Okay? This is something I have to do." He stared out the car windshield with a stony face. "Trust me. Stay here." He hefted the demon blade in his hand, and grimly exited the car with just a brief glance at her.

Unhappy, Alex complied and slumped down into her seat churlishly. She kept a watchful if sullen eye on Dean as he entered the hotel through the grand entrance—a large glass revolving door. When Dean got all my car my rules on her, she was never too thrilled. And why the hell would he go in alone to confront Sam? What if he needed backup? A few minutes passed, in which Alex became increasingly nerve-wracked, staring at the hotel. It had been almost ten minutes, hadn't it? She couldn't wait much longer. This was insane, him going in there by himself—prick.

A flash of movement at one of the smaller, side doors caught her attention. Alex started, sat up straight when she saw a familiar figure dart out. Ruby ducked around the corner of the building after throwing a suspicious backward glance out over her shoulder. She disappeared from sight there, but Alex was already getting out of the car.

Sprinting toward the corner Ruby had disappeared behind, Alex reached it and edged up the building to peek around the corner cautiously. Ruby was walking fast toward the back of the hotel, as if she were making a quiet escape. No Dean or Sam followed after Ruby, but Alex wasn't pausing to consider why. She was seeing red, and pure, enraged murder was coursing through her veins. That unholy bitch was the one who had done this to Sam and she was as good as dead.

Alex dashed across the maybe thirty feet between her and the unaware demon, her pulse pounding. As she closed in, Ruby heard her and turned halfway, but not in time. Alex was already there, ruthlessly grabbing Ruby by the hair and smashing her head with brutal force into the brick wall of the hotel, bruising and scraping her own knuckles in the assault. The demon was caught off guard, but not for long at all. Grunting, Ruby grabbed onto Alex. Her grip was like a vice, and she pushed, smashing Alex shoulder-first into the wall before backhanding Alex across the face. Too high on adrenaline to feel the pain yet Alex was already reeling her fist back, returning the favor and punching Ruby in the throat, hard. The demon stumbled back a little, dazed, and using the temporary lull Alex snatched up a loose, fist-sized piece of brick in her hand. She practically roared as she struck Ruby across the face with it, once, twice, three times.

Grabbing blindly, Ruby managed to get two fistfuls of Alex's shirt and then threw her down onto the pavement, but Alex hung onto Ruby, dragging her down too. There was a loud thud as the girls hit the ground, rolling. Alex still had the brick, and smashed Ruby in the side of the head with it, using the momentum of the scuffle to dominate Ruby and gain the upper hand. Alex straddled her, stared down, out of breath, murder in her eyes. Ruby laughed, showing the blood in her teeth. One of her eyes was already swelling up. "You don't have the knife, dumbass," Ruby taunted. "What are you gonna do, beat my face in all day?"

"I don't need a knife, you bitch." Alex snarled, dropping the brick and yanking Ruby forward by her shirt she began to shout an exorcism. "Exorcizamus te omnis—" Ruby's eyes went wide, and her hands shot up, yanking Alex down by the back of her neck, clapping the other hand across her mouth, trying to silence her, yanking her along into another roll, so that Alex was now the one on the ground with Ruby on top. Alex bit down on one of Ruby's fingers hard, drawing blood and Ruby yowled, letting go for a second. "Immundus spiritus; omnis satanica—" Alex continued, and Ruby, eyes going even wider in genuine fear, clamped both of her hands down on Alex's throat with devastating, crushing force, making it impossible for Alex to speak, breathe, or make a sound. Struggling for air, Alex weakly grabbed her knife—a regular hunting knife—out of her belt loop, and with desperate, last-ditch effort she stabbed it into the side of Ruby's neck and yanked the
blade forward, leaving a gaping wound in Ruby's throat.

Bleeding profusely out of the huge gash in her neck, Ruby stumbled back and stood shakily, her expression horrified, her hand on her neck. "You crazy bitch!" she shrieked. Alex opened her mouth to continue the incantation, but nothing came out. Her throat was killing her and her voice was only a whisper. She stood up, panting, Ruby's blood dripping down her jaw, her neck. With her clothes ripped, her face and hands scraped up and bruised, her dagger glare, her iron-like grip on her knife, she must have looked truly fearful—Ruby was withering under Alex's stare, stepping back a little. The demon bled heavily from her neck, even though she held a hand against it. There was a gash in her cheek, her eye was swelling, and she had a huge scrape down the other side of her face too. She was barely recognizable, and no longer looked sure, in fact, she looked afraid. Alex took a single step toward her… and Ruby turned around and fled, leaving Alex standing there.

Alex thought about giving chase. But without the demon blade and without a voice to exorcise, it was a bad idea. *Dammit.* She stumbled into the hotel through a side service entrance, dodging curious eyes as she searched for the honeymoon suite where Dean had said Sam would be. She found the room quickly, a little lightheaded and feeling woozy, but pushing past it out of terror that Ruby had done something to Sam and Dean both.

The door of the honeymoon suite was half open and there was shattered glass on the floor, the room partition had been ripped in half, various other smashed and broken stuff littered the place. And there, on the floor by the bed, a sight that would never leave Alex's memories. Dean was on the ground, turning blue with Sam over him, his hands crushed down on Dean's neck. "Sam, stop!" Alex rasped in total horrified shock, and what would have been a shout was a sand-papery whisper. She ran over and tried to pull Sam off of Dean, grabbing his shoulder and pulling hard. He was too big, and too heavy. When she grabbed at him, he shoved her away, carelessly. She staggered backwards, but was already fumbling back forward, grabbing the first thing she could—a fancy blown glass lamp—and smashing it over her twin's head, one thing in mind: *save Dean's life.* The shattered glass went flying in all directions and Sam was standing up, staring her down with absolute hatred. He seemed so much taller than she ever remembered him being, so powerful and dark and his eyes flashed at her menacingly. She almost didn't recognize him and she shrank away, abruptly stricken with fear. On the floor, Dean was groaning and wheezing, clutching his neck and gasping for air as he recovered.

"You shouldn't have done that, Alex," Sam said, his voice filled with disdain as he bore down on her fast and hard, shocking her completely. It happened so fast. He grabbed her by the shoulder and backhanded her ruthlessly across the face then threw her down onto the ground with no remorse. She fell face first, her chin colliding with the hard floor with a painful crack, her hands not fast enough to break the crashing fall she took. She was stunned, tasting her own blood as her face stung from his assault. With her hands flat against the floor, she could only turn and stare up at Sam in shocked terror, disbelief, breathless pain. Sam's expression changed. He was breathing hard as he looked down at her, hands limp at his sides. Horror flashed over his features, as if he hadn't known what he'd done, and he took a single, stumbling step back from her.

"Sam! Wh—what have you done?!" Dean asked, his voice broken and high with disbelief. He'd rolled over onto his side, supporting himself on an arm. He was staring at Sam in gaping shock, with horrified wide eyes.

Sam looked back at Dean, and for a moment, his expression was pained, confused, lost. And then, it changed, grew cold and dark. "You don't know me. You never did. And you never will." Sam looked at Alex, his expression chilling over, his eyes dark, cruel, cold again. She stared up at him in terror as he stood over her, and for a minute she wondered if he was going to try and kill her, too.
And then wordlessly, he turned, heading for the door.

Dean's voice, shaking, stopped him. "You walk out that door, don't you ever come back. You hear me?"

Sam paused, his back to them. "Yeah," he said cynically. Without looking back at them he left; the sound of his heavy footsteps against the carpeted hallway fading out.

Alex stared after her twin with blurry vision. What had just happened? Sam—how could you? She heard Dean crawling over to her. He was wincing and his face was scraped up bad, bleeding in places. But he was just looking at her, stricken with worry. "Lemme see, sweetheart," he said gently, and she almost lost it then, at the gentle way he touched her chin, her jawline. She couldn't look at him as he examined her face. "You okay?" he asked, and he sounded close to a breakdown.

She groaned against the pain and bitterly spat out a mouthful blood. Her heart was so very heavy. She was losing her composure fast. "No. No, I'm not." she rasped out. Her oldest brother pulled her into a tight hug and she clutched him with every ounce of strength she had left as she lost her emotional strength. She began to weep like she'd lost a brother, because she was pretty sure she just had. Dean tried to comfort her, but he was every bit as ruined by grief in that moment, too.

Invisible to the stunned and wounded siblings, two angels watched. Zachariah still had an arm out in front of Castiel who had been about to intervene, about to stop Sam from hitting his sister. His hands were clenched at his sides and his face showed an expression of conflict and disapproval and clear upset.

"This has gone too far," Castiel said lowly, watching as brother and sister embraced in mutual misery—both of them cried. Her loud and hiccuping. Him all but silent.

Zachariah clapped his hand onto Cas's shoulder, not concerned at all. "Let it ride, Castiel," he said breezily, giving Castiel a playfully pointed look. "This thing just has to run its course."

Castiel only glanced balefully at his brother. He was truly beginning to disagree.

The more that happened, the closer Sam got to doing his part to raise Lucifer… the more Castiel despaired.

This wasn't right. None of it.

The Next Day

Alex laid still in the bedroom, the one she'd stayed in last year when she'd lived here with Bobby. She could hear Bobby and Dean arguing. Again. Bobby was insisting that they needed to go after Sam, talk him down. But Bobby hadn't seen what Sam did, he hadn't seen. The look in Sam's eye, the merciless, monstrous way he'd attacked his own blood. Alex hadn't slept at all last night after all that. Instead she'd walked miles and miles down the road in pitch darkness, not even going anywhere, just needing to move, to try and leave some pain behind. She'd smoked cigarette after cigarette as she tried to understand what had happened. When Dean had realized she was missing and called her phone in a panic, he'd torn down the road in his car to come get her. But once he'd found her (eleven miles from Bobby's house), they'd sat on the hood together and said next to nothing. Just watched the sunrise on the side of the road somewhere, maybe trying to act like it was a normal day for them, like their brother wasn't a homicidal demon-blood addicted psychopath.

They were back at the Singer residence now and the reality remained. Sam was gone and she and
Alex sat up, caught sight of herself in the mirror of the bureau and was given somber pause. With a puffy eye, a scraped, violet-bruised chin, a split lip, she looked like a battered woman, like a punching bag. A dark bruise discolored her cheek—the place where Sam had hit her. The memory of it replayed and her throat closed up in sadness. Her chin was a scabbing mess from where he'd thrown her down and Alex ran fingers across the wound, wincing. It was still killing her, and her entire jaw ached. Whatever. Pain was nothing new. It would all heal eventually. Her eyes lowered to traverse the dark bruises all along her neck and throat from where Ruby had tried to choke her to death. Alex's voice was still barely there, a sad whispery rasping sound. Maybe in a few days when her windpipe healed a little better she'd regain her voice's strength. For now, she sounded like she had laryngitis.

Overall, she found her appearance to be depressing. She looked hopeless and defeated. She felt those things, too, and bowed her head down, swung her legs over the side of the bed, not wanting to see herself anymore. How could they ever come back from this? Honestly, she felt that this was the end. The end of her, Sam, and Dean. Maybe the end of everything. It was hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel on this one.

Alex looked down at her feet, sighed hollowly through her nose, feeling tired and sick to her bones. And then without warning her feet were no longer on the wood flooring of Bobby's house, but on a shining marble floor. She jumped up in shock and realized she'd just jumped out of a chair, not her bed. Looking around she quickly became totally confused. She was in a lavishly decorated room that was trimmed with gold. The walls were accented with austere paintings, marble statues, crown moulding, expensive and ornate solid oak furniture.

Dean was suddenly there, too, appearing in front of her without warning. His mouth dropped open in confusion.

"Hello, Dean. Hello, Alex." In unison, the disoriented Winchesters whirled to see Castiel standing at the other end of the room. "It's almost time," he announced.

"Time for what?" Dean asked. But Castiel disappeared without another word. Dean let out a low growl of frustration and marched toward the door, tried to open it—but it wouldn't budge. Great, they were locked in. Prisoners, then? That didn't make sense.

Alex looked around sharply, assessing the room. "What did he mean, 'it's time'? And where the hell are we?" Her voice rasped weakly. Her veins were racing with adrenaline at the sudden change in location.

Dean stopped rattling the door and turned around, looked remorseful, contrite. He lost his fire and seemed to understand. "What?" Alex asked, feeling mildly panicked at the look on his face.

"I gave myself to the angels, okay?" He looked at her with a hard, defensive expression as she stared at him speechlessly, eyes gone wide. "I thought..." he trailed off pitifully and pinched the bridge of his nose briefly. 'I dunno what I thought."

Alex leveled Dean with an expression that was baleful. "What, you don't ask me for advice anymore? Dean—! This is serious shit you're in to!" More than angry, she was freaked out.

"I know, I know," he muttered, dodging her incensed stare.

"What does that even mean, you 'gave yourself to the angels'?” She demanded, her strained voice cracking. "What are they gonna do with you?!"
"I dunno. Apparently not HELP US!" He shouted the words 'help us' at the ceiling balefully, but no angels showed up.

Alex clenched her jaw tightly and looked up. She wasn't going to sit around and wait. "Castiel, get your little winged ass back in here right now," she all but growled. Not the most polite way of asking him to come back, but she didn't care about being polite to him anymore. Not after he'd been such an asshole after the Jimmy incident. Two could play at that game.

Castiel appeared behind them, alerting them to his presence with a question. "What is it?"

Alex turned around and marched right over to him. His face was stoic and rigid, set hard and seemingly apathetic. "Let us outta here," she demanded evenly, keeping her anger on the down low.

"I'm afraid I can't do that," he replied robotically.

Alex's eyebrows rose up challengingly. "Can't or won't?" He made no answer and Alex wet her lips, getting ready to hand his ass to him verbally. She raised a lecturing finger at him. "Listen here you—" he disappeared rudely and Alex stopped speaking mid-sentence and stared at the empty space in front of herself.

"Good job," Dean commented sarcastically. "You really told him how it is."

Alex shot her brother a dark look. "Bite me." She looked at the painting next to her—it was huge and depicted an angel in flowing robes, extending a benevolent hand out over a child. What a crock of shit. She picked up a fancy blown glass vase that was on the table next to her and she threw it at the painting, hitting the angel right in the face. Glass flew everywhere and the angel in the painting remained smiling, peaceful.

Dean was mildly amused at her useless action. "That helped."

"Fuck off." Alex plopped down into a plush chair and put her head in her hands, groaned. This was a nightmare. A nightmare. She rubbed her forehead, trying to make the headache go away.

"Hello, Dean, you're looking fit!"

Alex shot back up to her feet at the new voice. A tall, balding man with an oddly perky smile was standing there. He was dressed in a suit. Behind him, Castiel stood with a blank face. Dean came forward quickly to stand near his sister—as if his physical presence could protect her against an angel.

The balding man looked from Dean to Alex. "And, Alexandra, is it? So nice to finally put a face with the name!" He chuckled, by all appearances friendly and pleasant. Too friendly, too pleasant. "I, am Zachariah," he said, indicating himself with a flourish. "You might have heard of me?"

Yes. She had, and she immediately felt apprehension. "Pleasure, I'm sure," she rasped flatly. Next to her, Dean tensed. Something was going down, but what was it? Behind Zachariah, Castiel came forward to Alex and then lightly gripped her by the arm.

"Hey! What—" she protested, even as Dean stepped forward, as if to yank Castiel off of her.

But then she and Cas were suddenly in a different room, completely alone. This one was a soft mauve color, with black gilded furniture and amber accents. It was dimmer in this room. "What the hell, Cas?" Alex demanded in her strained voice, freaking out at the abrupt separation from her brother. "What's going on? Is Dean in danger?"
Cas had let go of her and was standing in front of her, his eyebrows knit together. "No. Of course not. Zachariah merely wants to discuss things with your brother. Private things."

Alex glared at him for a second, then looked around the room again. There were no doors and she didn't like it. "Where are we?" She demanded. This was insane. "Why are Dean and I here?"

"For your safety," he said, and looked down purposefully, as if trying to hide something. "The final seal will be broken soon."

Alex's pulse rocketed upwards in alarm. "Then what the hell are we doing here?! We need to stop it!"

"No," Castiel said, shocking her. He sounded conflicted and looked down again. "We will not stop it."

Alex looked at him in incredulous confusion. "Why?"

She didn't miss the flicker of doubt there in his expression, the way his eyes took in her bruised and battered face, but his voice held steady. He delivered his statement blankly, forcefully. "It has been commanded," he replied. "Lucifer will rise."

For a minute she thought he was going to have a good explanation, but when he said that, she felt like she'd been hit by a ton of bricks. "Son of bitch," she breathed, feeling herself go slack-jawed as she realized what was happening. She wasn't sure whether to be pissed off or terrified. "All this time you've been telling us how much we don't want Lucifer to come to town and now…?" She searched for words as she quickly got riled up. "Now you're making sure he does?!!" Castiel said nothing. Alex looked at him like he was stark raving mad. "You're insane. Insane, all of you, you winged freaks!"

She turned away from him and took a couple stunned steps, lost in abject disbelief, mind racing to put the pieces together. It felt like the rug had been yanked out from underneath her feet. "I'm sorry that you're upset," Castiel's deep voice said from somewhere behind her.

She whirled, disgusted with his act. "Right. You care so much don't you?" She snapped, then started in on him, letting her righteous anger propel her forward to him. "You know, I don't know what your deal is, but I mean, really? Pretending to be my friend? Pretending to care? Getting me to trust you? You're such a fucking liar!" She tried to shove him, but he was immovable. Her anger was making her emotional, and tears of frustration sprang to her eyes. She hated herself for believing him and thought all his talk of compassion was an act—had the angels assigned Cas to her and told him to earn her trust, get her to fall for him, believe he was a nice guy? Was him healing her voice a way to do that? She was crushed thinking these things. "Have you ever said anything true to me, ever?" She asked, trying to remain hard and angry, not bitter and tearful. But she sounded hurt and vulnerable.

Castiel's expression changed at her question, showed stunned disbelief. "Yes, of course I have," he said, and was that offended hurt resting in his eyes? Was that soft vulnerability lilting in his voice?

Alex was shocked at his display of emotion but toughened herself. "I'm having a hard time believing that."

Again his features were swept by disbelief and confusion, as if he couldn't believe that she would accuse him of lying to her. His eyes went down and moved back and forth quickly in distressed thought. And then what he said next floored her. "I… I was going to tell Dean about the angel's plans to bring forth Satan." He looked at her directly. "It's why I was torn out of Jimmy Novak."
"What?" She asked softly, because if that were true, her negative assumptions about Cas were wrong, at least partially.

"It seemed wrong to me, the plan to allow Lucifer to rise. At the time I was... I was confused." He was still confused, and it showed. Confused and contrite. The way he was looking at her seemed pleading. "I never wanted to misguide you. I never wanted..." he trailed off and his face showed apprehensiveness and conflict. He glanced around the room, as if for eavesdroppers or onlookers. He set his jaw, seeming to revert to the harder exterior he preferred to display. "I shouldn't even be telling you this."

She could see it—just faintly—how Castiel wanted to help, was willing in some deep part of himself, but couldn't quite get there. The smallest instance of hope took hold of Alex, who stepped forward to him and spoke in intense, hushed tones, urging him to action. "Cas, if you knew this was wrong back then—if you were gonna tell Dean about it—why don't you do something now?! It's not right. We both know that!"

He shook his head no gravely, clinging onto whatever had been indoctrinated into him. "Try to understand," he said, but his voice lacked the conviction that had been there just a moment ago. "There's a bigger picture here."

"Is that what they're telling you?" Alex asked, and grabbed him gently by the arms, imploring him, trying to get him to really look at her. "Cas, the apocalypse—it'll kill so many people. Aren't you supposed to protect people?"

Her words made him hesitate. "I'm supposed to carry out God's will," he said. But it looked like he was questioning himself internally.

"How can this be his will?" Alex asked. "Have you stood in front of him and heard him say with his own voice that this is what he wants?" Cas said nothing, just met her waiting gaze with eyes that were intensely uncertain. Alex wanted to shake sense into him—why wouldn't he listen to reason? "You know this is wrong, I know you do!" She exclaimed, getting frustrated to the point of wanting to punch a wall. "I can see it when I look at your stupid face!" She let go of him, shoving again to no effect.

Castiel stood therein wretched silence, his arms hanging at his sides uselessly. "What I feel is not important," he said hollowly, eyes low and glazed over in dejection.

Losing her fire, Alex went quiet and still, felt her shoulders slump in fatigued defeat. Maybe Cas wanted to help somewhere deep inside, but he apparently couldn't get there. He was too brainwashed, too afraid. And Alex shook her head, set her mouth in a thin line to keep from losing composure. "You know what... I just wanna leave," she said, needing to see her oldest brother, be within the safety and familiarity of his presence. "Take me back to Dean."

Castiel was reluctant to answer her. "Not yet."

She crossed her arms, looked at him with a faintly challenging expression. "What, are you holding me hostage or something?"

His ever-constant frown deepened. "No, of course not."

"Then let me leave." Her weak, sandpapery voice trembled with a fearful and demanding quality.

"I can't," he told her softly, and he had the audacity to look sad about it. She saw how he looked over her beat-up face again—saw his eyes sweep over the bruises, the swollen eye, the scraped up
"Are you in very much pain?" He asked quietly, startling her because of the tone in his voice. Alex tried to look stony in response to his caring question. "Don't try and change the subject."

Castiel seemed to be vexed, puzzled, and empathetic all at once as his eyes continued to study her beaten appearance. "Sam shouldn't have done this to you," he said in surprisingly softness, and his deeply husky voice was filled a sadness that Alex found offensive. "I am... truly sorry," he said, sounding as though he were admitting some big secret.

"Sorry for what?" She asked, pissed off at everything and not liking how he was looking at her or making her feel.

A muscle jerked in his cheek. "I could have stopped it."

His words paused her. "...So why didn't you?"

He thought about it for a moment as his face tilted down in somberness. He sounded ashamed of himself. "They told me not to."

What a damn pushover. Alex reacted by scoffing and rolling her eyes at him. "Aren't you supposed to be my guardian angel?" She asked rudely, giving him an ugly look. "Great job." Her words appeared to hit him hard, and chastened and ashamed of himself, Castiel looked down in contrition. It would have been better if he'd gotten angry at her—that's what she'd expected and wanted. His downcast eyes made her feel badly and she softened a great deal helplessly. "I didn't mean..." she trailed off, not sure what to say. How did he keep having this effect on her? She wanted to be furious with him for being so obstinate and stuck in his beliefs... but all she felt was the urge to help him and to see him act like an individual, use his mind, do the right thing. So she tried again.

"Look. Anna said you've been struggling." She abruptly gave a little laugh that was equal parts helpless and cynical. "And I think it's because Heaven is full of shit and you know it!" Castiel didn't join her in finding the statement amusing in the least and her tense little smile faded into a pleading expression. It was a hard hit to her pride, but she chanced it anyway, believing maybe he would listen to her. "You could help us Cas. It's not too late. Are you just gonna take orders even when you know they're wrong?" He said nothing, but he was thinking about what she was saying. She pressed. "Are you just gonna stand by when you could do something?"

His eyebrows were drawn closely together and he shook his head slowly, his face working hard as he struggled to answer her. "It's not my place t—"

"It is your place," she cut him off vehemently. "You have a mind, so use it!"

His bright blue eyes met hers wretchedly and she saw how he was so resistant to what she was saying, how torn up he was inside. "I am an angel. I'm not allowed free will. I'm not like you."

He frustrated her to the core and she wanted to give up. "God you're a coward," she muttered angrily, then threw a hand out and let her voice get loud again—it rasped pathetically, screeching almost. "So what if it's not allowed?! If it's the right thing to do, you should do it!"

Cas was quiet for a moment, considering her words with a physically ill expression. "You make it sound simple."

"It is simple," she retorted in vast frustration then promptly sat down onto the nearby velvet chaise in exhausted defeat. She was done with this pointless conversation. She could tell that he wanted, in some tiny place inside, to be on her side and to help. But apparently his angel-nature was too ingrained and he couldn't overcome it. Maybe it was wrong of her to ask him to risk everything for
her and her family, but that didn't stop her—she decided to try one last time. Clasping her hands between her knees and running her eyes over the scrapes there, she shook her head and swallowed thickly.

"Listen. Sam is my brother." Her cracked voice was just a whisper. She had lost her anger, and in its place was a sort of hopeless despair. "I love him. No matter what. And I wanna save him—more than anything. You can't understand that. You can't. Because if you did... you'd let Dean and I go save him from Lilith. You'd give us that chance. You'd help us." Dejected, she balanced an elbow on her knee and bowed her face into her hand. The tender, bruised skin made her wince and then make the softest little sound of pained protest. Son of a bitch her whole face was like a war zone. It hurt so bad. Honestly, she wanted to cry from hopeless frustration and the physical pain too. But she held it in, refusing to succumb.

Cas came and stood in front of her, shocking her when he knelt down in front of her, right in front of her. Hand falling away from her face, senses suddenly shocked into overdrive—what is he doing?—she stared at him even as he looked up into her eyes with a soft, vulnerable expression. He was so close, definitely in her personal space, and she felt backed into a corner, susceptible to him. It shocked her further when his hand came to the side of her face, an entirely unexpected action that Alex briefly misinterpreted as affection. She flinched, confused—then realized he was healing her.

The familiar bright warm light reached from his large hand to inside of her, under her skin, leaving her feeling warm, comforted. His eyes held hers the entire time and Alex felt her face twisting into a questioning, almost fearful expression. Why was he doing this? His physical closeness left her nerve-wracked. No one in the world had ever looked at her as intensely as he did, like his gaze pierced into her soul itself, like he saw all of who she was. Her body was stiff as a board of wood all over and she realized she was holding her breath as she thought about how powerful and capable he was. He seemed so lost and unsure of himself sometimes that she just forgot. But right then, at that moment, she knew how magnificent and strong he was and she was awed by him all over again. His hand came away from her face—which no longer hurt, and in a daze she touched her cheek then her chin, finding smooth skin there.

Disconcerted, Alex gazed at Cas guardedly. His expression was pensive almost and drew her in, made her wonder about him. He confused her completely. Was he trying to get her to stop bitching at him right now? Was he trying to help? Why the hell did he keep looking at her like that? "I... I thought you weren't supposed to do that," she said softly. Her voice had returned to normal and was no longer rasping or broken.

Her words broke the moment and his expression grew a little more grim. "I'm not." His jaw clenched, barely perceptibly, and then he was abruptly just gone with a burst of wind, shocking her all over again.

She stood, looking around with a slack jaw. "Cas?" She waited a second. "Cas."

He didn't return.

Alex was left to wonder and worry about what the hell was happening. She was left with questions and confusion, as usual.
some higher power was looking out for her and her family. However, that bigger power had a name (Castiel) and a face (that she hated), and was an asshole. Maybe. She sighed and put a hand over her face. Maybe not.

What was he? Really? She thought of the first time she saw him. She'd been terrified of this new, powerful creature who looked like an average man. Then as time had crept onward, she'd learned that he was a stern and dedicated angel, a soldier come to earth from Heaven. At first she'd thought him emotionless and weird and more than a little annoying. He hadn't been someone to trust. But glimpses of an entirely different Castiel had peeked through. A Castiel who was gentler and curious, compassionate. A Castiel who wanted to do the right thing and wanted the best for humanity. A Castiel who had wanted her friendship. That's why right now she was so puzzled. Could he really stand by and let Lucifer rise? Let the apocalypse happen? If he cared, shouldn't that move him to action?

She thought about how he'd said he was about to tell Dean about the Lucifer situation and how he'd been ripped out of his vessel to prevent that. That was a pretty big move, wasn't it? She remembered the ripped up manufacturing plant they'd found Jimmy in, the place from which Cas had been forcibly, violently dragged back to Heaven. The more she thought about it, it was a wonder they hadn't killed or imprisoned Castiel forever for planning to tell them everything—wasn't that treason, basically? To go against Heaven and the angels or whatever like that? He'd come back from Heaven even more robotic than she ever remembered him being… he'd acted cold and brushed her off, by all appearances done being her friend and helper. And yet here she sat today, healed by his hand even though she'd heard Uriel tell him, point-blank, he wasn't allowed to.

He cared. All of it pointed her to that thought over and over again.

Suddenly, as if knowing she were thinking of him, Castiel appeared to stand a few paces in front of her. Startled, she stood up, her guard coming up immediately. He was reaching out to her. "It's time to return to Dean," he said, not explaining why he'd been gone or what was happening. Only holding his hand out, indicating that she take it. She hesitated, then did as he said. The instant her hand slipped into his, she felt them moving. But she was looking at their hands, noticing how much smaller her hand seemed in his bigger one.

When she looked up, they were standing in the beautiful room that Dean was in. With his back to them, Alex's brother was holding his phone in the air, as if he were trying to get a signal. The angel and the hunter let go of each other's hands at the same instant.

"You can't reach him, Dean," Castiel said, announcing their presence. "You're outside your coverage zone." Alex looked at the angel oddly, given pause. Was that... a joke?

Dean turned, and upon seeing Alex, relief washed over his features. Then, a perplexed frown. "You're... all better." His eyes went to Cas, appraisingly, then back to Alex, who was coming to him. "You okay?" he asked intensely, grabbing her by both shoulders, forcing her to look at him as he inspected her.

"Yeah, fine," she replied in a short tone. Satisfied, Dean let her go and proceeded to stare down Castiel. He was mad, that much was clear. He started in on the angel, sauntering slowly, a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Okay, first of all? Take her from me again and I'll kill you," Dean threatened casually. He gave a short little derisive chuckle. "You halos are really starting to piss me off," he said. "Zachariah's been in here talking my ear off about your big plans for good old Lucifer... am I right to assume you knew about all that this whole time?"
Castiel said nothing, but Dean seemed to get confirmation from the expression on the angel's face. Alex frowned a little. Why didn't Cas tell Dean about how he'd been about to tell them? He remained silent. "Yeah, good, right," Dean said, scoffing. "That's just great. Wonderful. So, what are you gonna do to Sam?"

Meeting his gaze, Cas lifted his chin slightly, appearing almost sad about what he was about to say. "Nothing. He's going to do it to himself."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dean asked, and Castiel just looked away, silent. "Oh, right, right," Dean said scornfully. "Got to toe the company line." He chuckled, a humorless sound, then let the smile fall away. He stared at the angel balefully, lowering his voice to a soft, baleful tone. "Why are you here Cas?"

Cas looked at Alex, then Dean, his expression drawn with a sense of finality. "We've been through much together, haven't we?" His words, said with a wistfulness that spoke of a goodbye, stilled both Dean and Alex. Castiel held Dean's gaze pensively. "I consider having known you as a privilege." He looked at Alex more hesitantly. "An honor. And before I leave, I just wanted to say that I'm sorry it ended like this."

So he was really going to go through with it. Screw them over then ditch out and leave them in the wind, without help. Alex shook her head, silently and helplessly cursing him, this room, her entire life.

Dean wasn't silent like she was. "Sorry?" He asked quietly as anger flashed in his eyes. Without warning, he drew back and punched Castiel in the face... who wasn't affected in the least.

Dean stifled a groan as he cradled his hand to himself. Alex gave her brother a look. "Yeah. Hurts like a bitch, doesn't it?" She muttered, letting a dark glance go Cas's way.

"You screwed us over, Cas," Dean said loudly. "You need need a bigger word than sorry!"

Castiel's voice rose too, and his features worked emphatically. "Try to understand—this is long foretold," he said, using his hands in emphasis like a human would. "This is your—"

"Destiny?" Dean interrupted. His anger wasn't his normal anger. It was desperate and scared and shaken. "Don't give me that 'holy' crap! Destiny, God's plan... it's all a bunch of lies, you poor, stupid son of a bitch! It's just a way for your bosses to keep me and keep you in line!" Castiel's expression was unreadable, but Alex almost thought he looked offended. "You know what's real?"

Dean was becoming almost emotional now. "People. Families—that's real. And you're gonna watch them all burn?" Dean swept his arm out, suddenly indicating Alex, who stood by the table in the middle of the room. "You're gonna let her burn?" He jabbed a finger to his own chest. "Me burn? After you saved us both?"

Dean had touched a nerve and Castiel looked startled, unsure of how to respond, completely rattled. "I—I'm trying to tell you," he said, fumbling a little, like he was trying to call to mind what he was supposed to say—not what he wanted to say. "Much must be lost so that there may be everlasting peace for us all."

"That what they drill into you at bible camp?" Dean retorted sharply. Castiel's gaze faltered away tellingly. "Yeah, you can take your peace..." Dean growled, "and shove it up your lily-white ass!" Cas's eyes narrowed in confusion as he looked at Dean once again. "'Cause I'll take this miserable existence called life—with all its craziness and pain and guilt and drama; I'll even take Sam as is! It's a lot better than being some Stepford bitch in paradise."
Dean's voice raised to a gravelly shout. "This is simple, Cas!" At this point, Castiel turned away, fed up or maybe unable to take it. But Dean didn't stop, continued to berate the back of Cas's head. "No more crap about being a good soldier. There is a right and there is a wrong here, and you know it." From where Alex stood, she could see the side of Cas's face. He looked conflicted and at that moment he glanced at her, maybe thinking about how she'd told him pretty much the same. That he knew better.

"Look at me!" Dean demanded as he grabbed the angel's shoulder roughly, turning Cas back to him. "You were gonna help me once, weren't you?" At that question, Cas looked away from Dean quickly. "You were gonna warn us about all this, before they dragged you back to bible land." Dean swallowed, his tone becoming pleading and desperate. "So… help me—now. Please. Help us."

Castiel's shoulders were stiff and his face was pinched. He looked at Alex for a long beat, considering. And then he looked at Dean. "What would you have me do?"

"Take us to Sam!" Dean exclaimed urgently. "We can stop this before it's too late!"

The angel's voice grew more urgent, too. "I do that, we will all be hunted—we'll all be killed." He looked at Alex meaningfully, maybe in an attempt to appeal to Dean's protective nature. Alex was drifting closer, drawn in by the rising tensions and how clear it was that Cas was really, really thinking about helping them.

Dean shook his head earnestly. "If there is anything worth dying for… this is it."

Slowly, Castiel began to shake his head no, hesitating. And hope was crushed for Alex and Dean in that moment as Cas lost his courage and looked down in denial. "I can't," he said gravelly.

Dean's face went cold in anger. "You… spineless… soulless son of a bitch." He walked a few steps off toward Alex, then past her. She could tell he was at the point where he was seeing red. "What do you care about dying, anyway?" Dean muttered. "You're already dead."

"Dean—" Cas appealed.

Dean just barked "I'm done!" and kept his back to the angel.

Castiel was now looking at Alex in a mixture of hopefulness and fear. As if he wanted forgiveness, as if he wanted one of them to pat him on the back. He approached her, his expression intense. "You must understand. I cannot assist you. I must obey."

She shrugged, over trying to convince him. "Yeah. Whatever. That's your decision to make," she replied cynically.

"Again?" Alex looked at him for a few seconds and she was sad, didn't bother to hide it. "I already did. Or do you not remember?" She threw an errant hand out, let it slap down against her leg. "You shouldn't need to be convinced, Cas. You should look at this situation and know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you're playing on the wrong team. That you're not serving God, you're serving some power-tripped out angels who have their own sick agenda. It's a mess." She used a hand as emphasis. "It's a mess. Hope you're happy." He looked almost disillusioned, like he expected her to go crazy, shout, cuss him out. But she was too tired for all that, and didn't want to waste the energy. "Cas, I won't stand here and beg you." She gave him a pointed look and folded her arms defensively. "I know how that ends." She was bitter and let her face twist up into a mean.
expression. "So… have a nice day. It's been real. Thanks for fucking up our lives."

His mouth was open softly, his eyebrows knit closely together. He had some nerve looking so hurt, trying to play the victim. "Alex—"

"No." She gritted her teeth and looked away from him and at a random spot on the wall beside her. He wasn't going to make her feel bad for him again—she wouldn't allow it. "If you're not gonna help us… just go away. Leave us alone."

Castiel looked at Dean, whose back was still turned to him, then at Alex, who wouldn't look at him. And without another choice, he left with the softest sound of wings against air. Alex's eyes shifted to the spot he'd been and her hard expression fell. She shut her eyes bitterly as her tightly-held shoulders slumped down. "He's gone," she told her brother softly.

Dean turned around, expression rigid. "There's no way out of here. I tried."

"Yeah, I know," she said, having tried in the other room she'd been stuck in. "This is bullshit." All but defeated, Alex sank down onto the love seat, leaning over her knees, exhausted from emotional duress. "So. What now?"

Dean was pacing in front of her. But unlike a minute ago, there wasn't angry fire in his steps. "The apocalypse. The end of the world, I guess." He paused, his eyes downcast. He looked as done as she was with the whole thing. Just, tired, exhausted, over it. Like her.

Alex let out a heavy, bated sigh. "We tried, Dean."

He sat beside her. "Not hard enough," he said softly. In that moment, he looked so much older than he was.

Alex looked at him, attempting a small, pained smile. "At least we're together?" He looked at her, his attempt at a smile as pained as hers was. He put his arm around her, she leaned her head down onto his shoulder, and they stayed like that for a long time, mourning the loss of Sam in silence.

Dean paced the length of the room yet again, having become a nervous wreck of angry energy. Alex didn't miss the fact that he was eyeing the burgers on the table as he passed by it over and over again. He paused suddenly, reached for one. Alex sat up straighter. "Hey. Don't eat that."

He turned and looked back at her grumpily. "I'm starving," he protested. "We've been here for hours."

"Just don't," she said. He threw the burger down angrily.

Suddenly Castiel appeared behind Dean, grabbed him by the shoulder, and shoved him up against the wall, pressing a hand against his mouth. Alex jumped to her feet in alarm at the sudden appearance and action. "What are you doing?!"

Castiel looked at her, his expression deer-in-the-headlights but determined. "The right thing."

_Oh my god_-her heart burst in amazed hope as she realized he was going to help them. Stunned, Alex watched as he drew Ruby's knife out of his coat. He looked back at Dean, who nodded. Castiel let go of him and slashed his own arm open with the knife. Blood flowed out, and Castiel began smearing it onto the wall. Alex, who had come to stand beside Dean, watched in a mixture of rising hope…and also fear. Castiel was working fast, and he looked afraid. And when an all-powerful angel was afraid, it didn't seem right to not feel a little scared, too.
"Castiel!" Came a loud shout. It was Zachariah, and he barreled across the room at them, livid. "Would you mind explaining just what the hell you're doing?"

Castiel made a final stroke onto the sigil he had drawn and slammed his hand into the center of it. In a violent, blinding flash of white light, Zachariah vanished, leaving the Winchesters stunned. "He won't be gone long." Castiel said, his voice tinged with urgency. "We have to find Sam now."

"Where is he?" Dean asked.

"I don't know—but I know who does. We have to stop him, Dean, from killing Lilith."

At that, the Winchesters both glanced at each other in confusion. "But Lilith's gonna break the final seal," Dean protested, his tone accusing.

"Lilith is the final seal!" Castiel exclaimed, blowing their minds. "She dies, the end begins."

Dean and Alex stared at him in horror, trying to process the information as he grabbed each of them around the wrist. "Now, hold on."

Instead of the beautiful room, the three of them were now in the dim interior of an untidy house. Alex recognized the disorderly home as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, even before she saw Chuck, who was on the phone and oblivious to their arrival.

"Okay, well I'll take twenty girls for the whole night," the author said, pacing away from them. There was a pause and he chuckled. "Lady, sometimes you got to live like there's no tomorrow—" he turned around and saw that he wasn't alone. His cheeky grin fell into a shocked expression. "Whoa whoa!" He protested, looking at the three of them with wide eyes as the phone drifted down away from his ear. "Wait. T-this isn't supposed to happen!" He lifted the phone back to his ear, speaking in to it again. "No, lady, this is definitely supposed to happen, but I…" he gulped, looking at the new arrivals awkwardly. "I just gotta call you back."

Chuck ended the call and smiled sheepishly at Alex, Dean, and Castiel. "I… he started, even as Alex swooped in and snatched the phone from him, tossed it away.

"The world's ending and you're ordering hookers, Chuck?" She asked.

Chuck shrank underneath her gaze. "I uh—look, t-that's not important," he said, chuckling self-consciously and dodging the question. "What are you guys doing here? You're not supposed—"

"Where is Sam right now, Chuck?" Dean asked, crowding Chuck.

Chuck was nervous at Dean's physical intimidation and began to back up toward the kitchen. "Well, he's uh, he's—"

"Where Chuck?!" Dean demanded impatiently, grabbing Chuck by the front of his bathrobe roughly, forcing him to stay put.

"Saint Mary's, Saint Mary's, Jesus Christ Dean!" Chuck exclaimed, then looked at Cas with a worried expression. "N-no offense, Cas."

A sternly confused look was on the angel's face, who had followed Alex and Dean in backing Chuck up into his own kitchen. "None… taken."

"Saint Mary's? What is that, a convent?" Dean asked urgently. Every spare second could stand
between them saving Sam and being too late altogether.

"Yeah, it's a convent, but you guys aren't supposed to be there," Chuck insisted. "You're not in this story."

"Yeah, well..." Castiel stood a little taller, even though his expression showed trepidation. "We're making it up as we go."

Both Dean and Alex looked at him in surprise when he said that, but for Alex, she wasn't just looking at Castiel. She was seeing him in new light—really seeing him and feeling a sense of pride and amazement. He felt her gaze and he turned his head to look at her as she stood beside him. Who are you? Alex wondered, more intrigued than ever as she studied this angel who walked the earth in the body of a man... this angel who had just gone against all of Heaven for her family. This angel who had just proved that he was more than she'd dared to hope—braver, kinder, more selfless. He was jumping ship to risk everything with them. He'd said that he was her friend once. She believed him now, and she was his friend, too. Wordlessly, she patted him twice on the back of the arm, approving of him, telling him silently that he was okay with her.

And that was when they heard a strange rumbling. Outside the dark window, a light suddenly beamed, bright as the sun, even as a ringing sound that could shatter glass began to pierce the air. Alex clapped hands over both of her ears in response to the deafening sound, made a sound of pained protest as the sound only got louder and louder. The ground began to tremble violently and the entire house began to vibrate like it was about to come down completely. The kitchen cabinets fell open and plates and mugs began to tumble out, shattering on the floor that was increasingly hard to stand on. Chuck was holding onto the kitchen counter, Dean took a huge stumble backward. Alex lurched sideways and felt Cas grab her by the arm, steadying her, keeping her from falling. "It's the archangel!" He roared.

Dean stumbled toward Cas, confusion and fear filling his face, and Alex grabbed for her brother, helping him stand, even as Cas held her in place too. "I'll hold him off!" Castiel shouted over the crashing dinnerware. "I'll hold them all off! Just stop Sam!" He abruptly clapped a hand on Dean's forehead and shoved, then Dean disappeared completely from in front of Alex's eyes.

Shocked, she looked up at Cas, who was the only anchor keeping her from falling over as the house shook. The light was growing even brighter and the sound was absolutely deafening—Chuck was freaking out somewhere behind Alex even as Cas let go of her arm. His eyes met hers for just a second, and it was like he already knew he was dead, the way he looked at her—and even as the word wait tried to form in her mouth, he hit two fingers to her forehead, sending her away to join Dean.
Speak of the Devil

"It's almost like your heaven's trying everything to break me down."
- Five Finger Death Punch

The Next Day

Alex took another drag from her cigarette and blew, watching the smoke flutter off into the cold midday air. It was a quiet, overcast day, which didn't seem fitting. Where was the smoke, the fire, the devil and his forked tongue, his horns and tail? Sitting there on top of the motel roof, she watched the city below. None of those people had any idea about what a complete and utter shit storm was headed their way. Must be nice. Her feet dangled off the edge of the building—about an eight story drop. She took another drag on her cigarette. She was exhausted, feeling queasy from low blood sugar. She hadn't eaten since yesterday at least, if not longer. She honestly couldn't remember. It was hard to want to eat when you had failed to stop the devil from rising.

When she and Dean had arrived at the convent, they had been too late to stop Sam. It was almost laughable how they had walked into the whole thing, how Ruby had used and tricked Sam—he had realized, but it was too late. Alex remembered that final scuffle—she and Dean had bursting into the room to see Sam and Ruby struggling, Lilith dead, her blood running down onto the floor, spiraling in a circle in toward itself. Dean and Sam had killed Ruby as Alex had dived to the ground, in a desperate last-ditch effort to stop the blood from touching in the centermost point with her bare hands. But it was too late. With no choice to run, they tried to escape, only to become trapped in the convent, in the room where Lucifer's white hot, burning presence began to seep out of the hole opening up in the floor. The three Winchesters had clutched each other in terror, the brothers sandwiching their sister completely, maybe trying to shield her from what was about to happen. It was the end, and they all knew it.

And then, suddenly, it wasn't. Without explanation they were safely in an airplane over the city, alive, well, and confused. Add that little miracle to the list of unexplained phenomenon that dominated her whole life.

And Cas. Alex stilled, her hand in midair, cigarette forgotten. When Chuck told them that the angel was dead… there had been this feeling, this sensation like being hit in the gut with a hammer. All Alex could think was no, with every part of who she was. Not Cas. He was supposed to survive. He was supposed to be invincible. He wasn't supposed to die for them. For me. She thought of the angel who had showed up out of nowhere, screwed her life up completely. The guy that never made any sense, the one who made her mad as hell.

A silent tear spilled onto her cheek and slid down her face and she wiped it away angrily with the palm of her hand. Stupid, stupid Castiel, giving in and helping them… Lucifer had still risen despite their attempts to stop him, and now they'd lost Cas in the crossfire and it was her fault. She and Dean had guilt-tripped the poor bastard into helping them, and what did they have to show for it? Failure—absolute, complete failure. He died in vain, and she would carry that with her for the rest of her life, add him to the forever-lengthening list of people who she'd cared about and lost.

She thought of Cas as she remembered him best—the wild hair and clear blue eyes, the odd expressiveness his face had taken on in some moments, giving her glimpses of his truest self. She thought of how he was the one who gave her the ability to speak again and her sorrow increased tenfold. There was so much more to him than she'd seen and she wished she could have known him better, protected him better somehow. He was so much braver than she had given him credit for, so
much more selfless. She thought about how he had always healed her—that last time, especially, knelt down in front of her and touching her in a way that seemed almost tender.

For the millionth time she thought of his response to Chuck, when the writer had protested "but you're not part of this story!" For a minute there, when Castiel had told Chuck, "we're making it up as we go," Alex had looked at him and felt so much that she wanted to burst. In that moment, she'd seen a bravery and courage in him that left her speechless. There, beside her, an angel who was willing to defy Heaven, to disobey everything he knew... all to try and do, as he said, "the right thing." He'd made a choice and committed to it with his life on the line as collateral. And now he was gone. Just gone. Alex flicked her cigarette off the roof and onto the street below and again wiped her cheeks.

Add to the loss of their only ally in Heaven the sad state of the Winchester family... Sam wallowing in guilt, shame, and hopelessness, Dean too fed up to deal with any of it, Alex stuck in the middle and mourning her guardian angel. The pain, the fear, the unknown future all bore down on her relentlessly and Alex thought about what it would be like to be someone else. Just a regular Joe who had no idea about this supernatural Heaven and Hell crap. Every day the burden got heavier on the shoulders of the family, and their backs were threatening to break. Every time she thought she knew how bad it could be, it got worse.

She looked up at the heavy gray sky above and said a silent I'm sorry to Castiel, who shouldn't have died like he did. Who shouldn't have died at all.

"Sad we need these, man," Dean said, eyeing the hex bag in his hand. "Who would ever have thought we'd wanna hide from angels, huh? They were supposed to be the good guys."

"Yeah," Sam agreed half-heartedly, and put the other hex bag at the opposite end of the motel room.

Dean watched his younger brother unenthusiastically, then took the hex bag in his hand and stuck it on top of the TV. He paused to consider the irony of what he was doing. This was really a whole new brand of crazy. Angels had allowed the apocalypse to take place just so that they could get their rocks off killing Lucifer themselves? They didn't get how insane they were. Or how stupid they were for thinking he was on their side. Zachariah's words to him earlier bothered him—the douchebag actually had the nerve to tell him that he needed their help to defeat Lucifer. No thanks. Angels weren't invincible, and they could be killed. Dean already knew that much.

However, he wasn't sure how of how to go about it. How exactly do you hunt down a fallen angel; and more importantly than that, where could they get their hands on an angel blade? And would that work on Lucifer? Even if they figured all those little details out, Dean knew it wouldn't work if he and his siblings couldn't hold it together. His family was ripping at the seams. There was Sam, messed up on demon blood and acting like a simpering, guilty idiot. There was Alex, depressed and withdrawn as hell for reasons Dean wasn't sure of, but he had a few guesses—an apocalypse both your brothers started probably didn't exactly leave her jumping for joy.

Dean could feel Sam staring at the back of his head. Annoyed, he turned around and looked at Sam, gauging his brother carefully. Sam looked relatively normal, which was what didn't make sense. Unlike when he'd been locked up in the panic room, Sam was now completely lucid, alert, and sober. Dean had to tell himself to cool down. He was still mad as hell about everything that had happened—Ruby, the demon blood, Sam trying to choke him to death... and who could forget Sam hitting and throwing Alex across a room? That's what bothered him the most. He remembered the tenderness and fierce devotion that the twins had for each other in childhood. The way they defended each other to no end, stuck up for each other even when the other was definitely wrong,
cried when the other one was upset. Fast forward about fifteen years and Sam had done the unthinkable, had done something he couldn't come back from. Dean told himself to calm down. He could feel himself getting pissed. Sam was still staring at him ruefully.

Dean cleared his throat, attempting a conversational tone. "So, uh, how you doing? You jonesing for another hit of bitch blood or what?"

Sam shook his head, his expression earnest and expressive. "I-It's weird. Uh, tell you the truth, I'm fine. No shakes, no fever. It's like whoever… put me on that plane cleaned me right up."

Dean wasn't sure what to make of that, but was careful to respond neutrally. "So, supernatural methadone."

"Yeah, I guess." Sam tried a smile, paused, growing slightly trepidatious. "Dean—"

"Sam." Dean cut him off, and fast, turning around and walking back to the motel table, avoiding looking at his brother. "It's okay, you don't have to say anything."

"Well, that's good," Sam said softly. "Because what can I even say? 'I'm sorry'? 'I screwed up'?' He laughed softly, awkwardly which only made Dean's blood boil further. "Doesn't really do it justice, you know?" Sam asked. "Look, there's nothing I can do or say that will ever make this right—"

Dean was unable to hold it in any longer. "So then why do you keep bringing it up?!" he snapped, his careful facade of indifference gone. He leveled Sam with a deadly gaze, breathing heavily, walking forward a few steps and pointing a threatening finger. "Look, all I got to say to you right now is if you ever—ever hurt our sister like that again… you're done, man. You touch her, you even threaten her—we are gone, and you are dead to me." Sam looked stunned as Dean continued, his voice a low, angry rumble. "I'm serious, Sam. You crossed a line. After everything you've done… I don't know why I even let you come here with us!"

Sam's jaw clenched, he looked down, clearly emotional. "Yeah, no. I get that." When he looked back up again, he could barely met Dean's eyes. "Trust me. It won't ever happen again, Dean. It... it shouldn't have happened at all." Sam breathed in shakily, shutting his eyes for a second, as if in pain. "I... hate myself for what I did." His eyes opened again, beseeching Dean. "To both of you, and with Ruby, and… everything. It scares me, Dean..."

Dean turned around. "Yeah, well, me too."

"I didn't know what I was doing at the time," Sam said. He sounded like he was making a plea for his case.

Dean turned back around challengingly. "And that makes it okay?"

Fumbling, Sam wet his lips. "No, of course it doesn't, but—"

Dean held up a hand for silence, reaching the end of his anger. "Look, all I'm saying is, why do we have to put this under a microscope?" Dean asked. "Let's just move on. I said my peace, you said yours, now let it go. I can't talk about this anymore."

Sam took a beat and then nodded. Dean could tell that his little brother had a lot more to say… but Dean didn't care right now. He was too pissed, too tired, too messed up to even think about all this crap at the moment. He sat back down at the flimsy motel table and resumed cleaning his gun sullenly.

"So uh, where is Alex, anyway?" Sam asked hesitantly.
"Said she needed some air." Dean paused and looked up at Sam. "I wouldn't get your hopes up, Sam."

"About what?" Sam asked, perplexed.

"What do you think?" Dean asked, meeting Sam's gaze evenly. "I doubt she'll ever be able to trust you after that. I'm sure as hell not sure if I can." He looked away and back to the chamber of the gun, shoving the cloth down in there to get the residue out.

Sam shifted slightly at the edge of Dean's vision. Dean didn't even have to look. He could hear the heartbreak in Sam's tone. "Right."

"We have more important things to worry about right now anyway," Dean said, ignoring Sam's emotional distress. "Like hunting down the friggin' devil."

Sam took in a deep breath and nodded, clearly forcing himself to push aside his feelings. "Yeah. Okay." He came closer and sat down at the table. "So where do we start?"

Dean paused. "Yeah… uh… about that. I'm not entirely sure."

When it started drizzling, Alex finally left her spot on the roof and made her way back to the room, hugging her jacket around herself tightly against the dropping temperature. She reached the room and opened the door to a very unexpected sight. Her brothers were both standing in the middle of the room with a sort of small, mousy woman. She was touching Sam's chest, practically nestling there. Alex froze in the door frame, not sure what was happening. "What's... going on?"

Dean gave her a look, and Sam attempted a smile in the woman's direction—it looked more like a grimace. "Can you, uh, stop touching me Becky?" Sam asked, apparently too polite to physically step back.

"No..." the girl, apparently named Becky whimpered, and leaned closer, her hand rubbing over Sam's pectorals.

Alex looked at Dean in lost confusion. "Who the hell is this chick?" Then her expression changed to disbelief. "Dean! You promised no more hookers!"

At that, Alex finally had Becky's attention. The woman's jaw was practically on the floor, and she'd frozen completely, offended. Sam took the opportunity to back up from her. "I'm not a hooker—I'm... Becky. Mr. Edlund—Chuck—sent me, to deliver a message. To Sam and Dean." At the mention of them, she forgot her offense and smiled breathlessly up at Sam, who looked highly uncomfortable.

Becky seemed to think of something and looked at Alex again. "Ohhh..." she nodded slowly, eyes narrowing in understanding. "So you must be Alex. Huh." She looked Alex up and down appraisingly. She didn't seem to know what to think. She looked mildly disappointed or disapproving. It was hard to tell which. Alex, completely puzzled, looked to her brothers for an explanation.

"Becky, uh, read the books about us," Sam said, to which Becky turned and beamed up at him.

"Every single one," she all but gushed.

"Great. Good for you...?" Alex said, not impressed. She glanced at Dean, who rolled his eyes, exasperated. She looked back at Becky, who was now staring at Sam's chest, entranced. This was
bizarre, so bizarre it was beginning to get funny. Alex tilted her head to the side, totally mystified by Becky's strange behavior.

Sam looked like he was screaming internally for assistance, and glanced at Dean, then Alex, his eyes saying 'help me!' but when his two baffled siblings did nothing, he was forced to take matters into his own hands. "Uh, listen, Becky. Thanks for the message. But, we gotta, uh, get back to…” he went blank for a second. "Uh, hunter stuff."

"Oh wow!" Becky squealed, sounding completely starstruck… but she didn't take the hint, just stood there and smiled widely, breathing through her mouth, gazing at Sam like he were the most amazing thing she'd ever seen.

Alex cleared her throat and put a firm hand on Becky's shoulder, used her other hand to jerk a thumb at the door. "In other words, you gotta leave."

"Oh Oh." Becky's face got kind of sad. "Okay, yeah. Sam… so good to meet you." Becky walked sideways out of the door, her eyes never leaving Sam (who was clearly scared out of his mind behind his attempt at a polite smile). Alex shut the door on Becky without ceremony and turned around, then clasped her hands together and leveled Sam with dramatic goo goo eyes.

"Oh Saaaaam," she mocked, earning a soft, embarrassed laugh from Sam.

Dean grinned. "You're so fiiiiiirm," he purred dramatically, his expression an hilarious mix of flirtatious suggestiveness and slightly sinister intent.

That did it. All three of them burst into laughter, and for a minute, they forgot. They forgot the stigma and the tension, they forgot they were angry with each other, that the world was falling apart, that nothing was okay. They just giggled at each other and at Becky's antics. And then, even before it began, it was over. Sam's smile faded into a conflicted expression, and with the loss of his smile, Dean and Alex's faded too as they remembered everything they had briefly forgotten. There was a slight hesitation.

"So," Dean said, clearing his throat and looking at Alex. "Sam's number one fan had a message from Chuck. 'The Michael sword is on earth. The angels lost it.'"

"The what sword?" Alex asked.

"No clue. That's why I'm calling Bobby. I'll be back." Dean stepped out, leaving the twins in the silent motel room.

Alex looked at Sam sidelong, considering trying to talk to him. But she wasn't sure how to. He was looking at her in the same way, like he wanted to say something but couldn't. He took a deep breath, hesitated, opened his mouth, shut it again, cleared his throat, then left in a rush, muttering something about "back later" before the door shut.

Alex watched him go, disappointed, the familiar sadness returning. She curled up in one of the beds, shoes and all, and stared at the wall. The silence in the room was deafening.

Dean shook Alex awake when Bobby showed up, which must have been several hours later. She should have felt rested from the nap she didn't even mean to take, but she only felt more tired, and with a killer headache to boot. Bobby shared with them some findings on Michael's sword as Alex hung back, tuned out, sitting cross-legged on one of the beds. She picked at the chipped red nail polish that was still on her fingernails. She was really getting frustrated.
"Sam, stop it," Dean thundered, and Alex looked up, confused—what had she missed? Bobby was staring at Sam angrily.

"No, Dean. Bobby, it was me who broke the final seal," Sam said, his voice unsteady and full of pained remorse. "I killed Lilith, and I set Lucifer free."

"You what?" Bobby asked in disbelief.

"You guys warned me about Ruby, the demon blood, but I didn't listen. I brought this on." Sam might as well have been in front of a firing squad.

Bobby stood up, his expression so full of fury that he was barely recognizable. "You're damn right you didn't listen. You were reckless and selfish and arrogant!"

Sam shook his head hollowly. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, yeah? You're sorry you started armageddon?" Bobby was practically snarling now. "This kind of thing don't get forgiven, boy. If, by some miracle, we pull this off… I want you to lose my number. You understand me?"

Sam, heartbroken, nodded, even as Alex's mouth hung open. "Bobby!" She exclaimed, her tone decidedly admonishing—that wasn't like him to be so harsh. She received a wrathful glare from Bobby. Confused, Alex looked at Dean, who didn't say a damn thing in Sam's defense. Yeah, the guy had messed up, but this was just cruel, wasn't it?

Sam swallowed, struggling, his eyes downcast. "There's… there's an old church nearby. Maybe I'll go read some of the lore books there."

"Yeah," Bobby retorted sharply. "You do that."

Sam was no longer able to maintain any eye contact at all, and still nodding, as if in shock or a daze, turned and left, shutting the door softly behind him. About two seconds of stunned silence on Alex's part passed and then she hopped off the bed, grabbing her jacket from where she had tossed it earlier. "Where the hell are you going?" Dean asked, frowning.

At the door, with her hand on the knob, Alex turned and looked at him unflinchingly. "With Sam."

Bobby's face scrunched in something like disgust. "With Sam? He jump started the end of the world, and you wanna hold his hand?"

Alex scoffed. "Bobby, what the hell has gotten into you?" She glanced at Dean. "Both of you." She turned and walked out, slamming the door behind her.

Sam walked down the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets, eyes on the ground in front of him. He had really, really messed up this time. Everything they had said about him was true. Every dark suspicion he'd had about himself was true: he was a monster inside. He had been blinded and controlled by his addictions, his fears, his insecurities. He couldn't do anything right—that had been his worst fear growing up, and yesterday, that fear had been confirmed once and for all. The faces of the people he'd let down flooded his mind. Dean, superior, disappointed, unforgiving. Bobby, enraged and hateful. Alex, hurt and distant. Dad, always disappointed, always unsatisfied. Jess, who never had a chance. Not with him in her life. Maybe he was poison. Maybe everything and everyone he touched was doomed to be destroyed and messed up by him. He looked up, sniffed loudly, trying to ignore the pain. He blinked fast, because his eyes were threatening to flood.
A shout behind him startled him out of his thoughts. "Sam, wait up!" He turned to see that Alex was jogging to catch up to him. He stopped walking, his heart clenching in pain at the sight of her. Had he forgotten something, or was she about to chew him out, finally, too?

"What is it?" he asked cautiously, preparing himself to be attacked again.

She had reached him now, and looked up at him with an open expression. With a light shrug she stuck her hands into her jacket pockets. "I'm coming with."

"What, they sent you to babysit me?" he asked, defeated.

"Uh, no," she said, her tone him suggesting that was ridiculous, but funny. She smiled at him—and in that moment, after everything that had happened the past twenty-four hours, that simple act meant everything to him. She nodded her head in the direction of the church and bumped him in the arm with her elbow. "Come on, this lore isn't gonna read itself."

"Got anything?" Sam asked.

Alex looked up at her twin from the huge book she'd been leafing through for the past hour. "Nothing about the Michael sword being an actual physical object, if that's what you mean."

"Me either." Sam let out a very tired, very frustrated sigh.

They were sitting across from each other in the church study. It was a pretty fancy room, with a few religious paintings on the walls and many thick books lining the shelves. Above Sam's head and on the wall behind him, there was a huge watercolor of an angel holding a scroll. Every time Alex looked up, she stared at it. The angel was barefoot, wearing flowing robes and had fluffy white wings and a dreamy expression. Every time Alex looked at it, she got a little more perturbed. Angels did not look like that. They looked like handsome businessmen with confused, stern scowls forever etched onto their features. She looked away from the painting, and at Sam.

With his hands resting on either side of the book and his eyes not seeing the space in front of him he looked totally lost and alone. His jaw was working weirdly, the muscles flexing and clenching, as if he were at war within himself. Without any warning, he looked up, his expression agonized and vulnerable. "I just want you to know I'm sorry. So, so sorry. If you never forgive me, I'll understand."

A little surprised at his sudden, out of place confession, Alex opened her mouth to reply, but he was already talking again. "How can you even look at me? After what—what I've done?" He had brought one of his hands to cover his face, his voice beginning to rise and speed up. "God, I just... what happened? These things inside me Alex, I thought I could outrun them—but—but..." his face twisted up in pain, "I don't belong anywhere near you, near anyone I love."

"I'm cursed!" he was getting out of breath in his earnest, emotional rant and Alex was getting freaked. "Stop. Just stop. That's not true, everything you just said..." she looked at him intently. "Stop. Just stop. That's not true, everything you just said..." she looked at him hesitantly, putting herself out there vulnerably, trying to soothe him. "Look, I love you, okay?" She didn't say those words ever, basically, and it was hard to say them, even if she felt them. He seemed stunned to hear them, too. "You're not cursed. You're—you're gonna be all right."
His expression showed stunned disbelief. "You... don't wanna lose my number?"

Alex's heart hurt at that question. "No." She tightened her grip on his hand, so sad to see how torn up he was. "I get it. You're upset about what Bobby said. But he didn't mean it, I know he didn't. It's not like him to say that kind of stuff."

Her brother looked like he could barely believe what she was saying, but was dying to accept it as truth. He looked at her hand there on his and frowned, took his hand away, looking disturbed and distracted. His voice dropped in volume, he swallowed, his eyebrows seemed to wobble towards each other. "You—you don't think I deserved that?"

Alex shook her head earnestly. "No."

Sam's expression broke as his composure cracked. "I'm sorry," he confessed through a sudden onslaught of pained tears. "So, so sorry."

Alex was already knocking her chair back and halfway around the table, wrapping her arms around Sam's massive shoulders, hugging him tight.

He tensed for a minute, not accepting the embrace at first—then his arms gingerly circled her as she rested her chin on the top of his head. He wept bitterly but quietly, his body shaking violently. Alex just stayed there with him, swallowing tears herself. She really couldn't stand to see him in so much pain, so much internal agony. She thought of how brutally he had hit her, but told herself... that wasn't Sammy. That was the demon blood. She decided right then and there to forgive and forget it this one time. If it happened again, by God, there would be hell to pay. But today, she was putting it in the past.

After a minute, Sam let out a few shaky breaths and drew back, pulling himself together. He looked up at her, kind of embarrassed, awkward. Alex's mouth quirked up on one side in a crooked smile, and she tapped him affectionately under his chin with her index finger—something she'd done since she could remember; since they were pre-schoolers. At that familiar, fond gesture—one that hadn't been shown in what felt like forever—a small, real smile pulled Sam's lips upward. His face relaxed. The smile reached his eyes.

"Let's get outta here, Moose," Alex suggested, using one of Dean's favorite nicknames for their brother. She was already reaching for her jacket. "I don't think we're gonna find anything here."

Sam stood up, towering over her, looking more himself—clear-headed and calm, if a little red-faced from the tears. He ruffled her hair affectionately, earning a good-natured protest of "heeeey!" from Alex, who ducked away, laughing, really laughing and surprised at herself. He hadn't done that in forever.

They were okay the whole walk back, talking about things that didn't matter: why gas station sandwiches were literally the worst things in the world, their conflicting opinions on which character on 21 Jumpstreet was the best, and how they would kill for another chance to taste Crystal Pepsi. Maybe it was a truce or just them trying really hard to gloss over what happened two days ago, but it felt good. It felt nice.

As with their life, the temporary happiness, the lull in tragedy, was doomed to be short-lived. Sam and Alex got back to the motel and found Bobby, stabbed and dying on the floor, Meg the demon trying to kill Dean. Naturally, they'd taken care of the demons pretty quickly, but Meg had escaped. Another demon bitch they'd have to kill another day.
As they raced a dying, bleeding Bobby to the emergency room, Dean told them Bobby had been possessed the whole time, the demon inside him trying to find the Michael sword before they did. He insisted that they had to go to some place in upstate New York, a place called Castle Storage, where the sword was packed away, and now. They had to leave Bobby behind to undergo emergency surgery while they made a frenzied five hour car drive in a desperate bid to beat the demons. The entire way was tense. They were all worried about Bobby, all wondering what this sword of Michael would do in the wrong hands.

It was a few hours before sunrise when they pulled into the empty parking lot of Castle Storage. Dean jerked the car into a parking space and they were out of the car, grabbing their weapons out of the trunk. "Looks like we beat 'em," Dean said, casting glances around—the place was quiet and still. Alex cocked her shotgun with a satisfying click-click.

"Stay close together, just in case," Dean said and led the way to the storage unit. They entered, shotguns held to their shoulders… and then… stopped, mystified. Dead bodies littered the floor. Demons.

"What the…” Sam trailed off.

"I see you told the demons where the sword is," came a voice from behind them. The Winchesters whirled around to see Zachariah, smiling patronizingly at them, two other angels with him.

"Oh, thank god," Dean said sarcastically, recovering from the surprise. "The angels are here."

"And to think… they could have grabbed the sword any time they wanted." Zachariah raised one of his hands, and the metal door slammed closed, trapping them inside the small storage unite. Sam inched a little closer to Alex, protectively. "It was right in front of them all along." Zachariah shook his head, chuckling.

"What do you mean?" Dean demanded, eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Well, while we may have planted that particular piece of prophecy inside Chuck's skull, but it happened to be true. We did lose the Michael sword. We truly couldn't find it. Until now. You've just hand-delivered it to us."

"We don't have anything," Dean said coolly.

Zachariah blinked a couple times, almost rolled his eyes. "It's you, chucklehead. You're the Michael sword."

There was a confused silence. "Come again?" Dean asked.

"Yup, interesting, huh?" Zachariah asked, his voice exceedingly bright and bubbly. "What, you thought you could actually kill Lucifer? You simpering wad of insecurity and self-loathing." At the insults, Alex made a face. It made sense now. That's where Uriel had gotten his people skills from, apparently. Zachariah came closer to them, a superior smile on his face. "You're just a human—Dean. And not much of one."

"Hey," Sam shot darkly, earning a cursory glance from Zachariah.

"What do you mean, I'm the sword?" Dean asked, ignoring the insult.

Zachariah smiled, as if in excitement. "You're Michael's vessel."

Dean shook his head, as if there had clearly been a mistake. "What? No… why—why me?"
"Because you're chosen! It's a great honor, Dean."

"Oh, yeah," Dean said, his tone full of sardonic enthusiasm. "Yeah, life as an angel condom. That's real fun. I think I'll pass, thanks."

Zachariah shook his head, his expression disappointed and a little offended. "Joking. Always joking. Well... no more jokes." He raised his hand, his fingers like a gun, and pointed at Dean—then shifted and pointed at Sam. "Bang."

There was an audible crunch, and Sam fell, a sound of agony ripping from his throat. Even before Sam had hit the ground, Zachariah pointed to Alex, and repeated, "Bang."

Alex's knees both exploded in pain, and she screamed, collapsing, the pain blinding. "You son of a bitch!" Dean shouted, and Zachariah leveled him with a grim stare.

"Keep mouthing off, I'll break more than their legs. I am completely and utterly through screwing around. The war has begun. We don't have our general. That's bad. Now, Michael is going to take his vessel and lead the final charge against the adversary. You understand me?"

On the ground behind Dean, Sam and Alex were both writhing in agony. He was shaking at this point. "Yeah? And how many humans die in the crossfire, huh? A million? Five, ten?"

"Probably more. If Lucifer goes unchecked, you know how many die? All of them. He'll roast the planet alive."

Dean paused, thinking fast. "There's a reason you're telling me this instead of just nabbing me. You need my consent. Michael needs my say-so to ride around in my skin."

"Unfortunately, yes. There is no other way. There must be a battle. Michael must defeat the serpent. It is written."

"Yeah, maybe," Dean said, almost sounding like he was considering it. "But, on the other hand... eat me." Zachariah's face fell as Dean raised an eyebrow. "The answer's no."

"Okay. How about this? Your friend Bobby—we know he's gravely injured. Say yes, and we'll heal him. Say no... he'll never walk again."

Sam and Alex looked up at Dean, whose expression was resolute and unyielding. They looked at each other. There was no way he was going to say yes, and they both knew it.

"No," Dean repeated through gritted teeth.

Zachariah nodded, then countered again. "Then how about we heal you from... hmm... stage four stomach cancer?"

Dean frowned, then suddenly doubled over, coughing and gagging, falling over onto all fours. He spit blood into his palm, then looked up at Zachariah defiantly. "No."

"Boy. You sure drive a hard bargain!" Zachariah commented with false enthusiasm. "Let's get really creative. Uh, let's see how... Sam does without his lungs."

Sam suddenly went silent, his mouth open and closing as if he were gasping for air.

"Are we having fun yet?" He looked at Alex and made a face like he'd just noticed something. "Oh and look, Alex is suffering from stage four throat cancer. Tragic."
Alex, who was holding onto her dying twin tight, felt her entire body convulse, and she coughed up blood in a sudden, violent fit, her breathing ragged and shallow. Dean looked between his siblings in alarm, and Zachariah came to him, grabbed his chin, forced him to look him in the eye. "You're going to say yes, Dean," Zachariah said balefully.

"Just kill us," Dean fired back.

"Kill you?" Zachariah stood up and let go of Dean. "Oh, no. I'm just getting started."

Alex gagged again, choking on huge chunks of blood in her throat. Beside her, Sam was bucking, gasping for air. She could barely concentrate, barely breathe, barely move from the pain that seized her body. And then, a bright light and fierce wind filled the room. Zachariah turned, Alex squinted and looked away. Her eyes couldn't take the unyielding, blinding light. The light faded and she looked up again, groaning against the pain—and she almost fell over when she realized what she was seeing.

Castiel stabbed one of Zachariah's henchmen in the neck and threw the angel to the ground, his trench coat whirling around him as he turned and slammed his fist into the other angel's stomach, raising the knife high. The other angel struggled, holding Cas off for only a second. The angel blade flashed in the light, and the two of them smashed into a pile of boxes, sending everything flying.

Beside Alex, Sam quaked and Alex grabbed his shoulders. "Hang on, just hang on Sammy!" she begged, gagging on more blood, almost drowning inside of herself. Nearby, Dean was on the ground, groaning and coughing.

With brutal finality Cas slammed his opponent face-first up against a wall and stabbed him with the blade, then let the body fall lifeless to the ground. He drew back, at his full height, his face radiant with energy, with power, with confidence. He stared down at Zachariah, his face furious, intense, fiery.

Beneath Alex's hands, Sam had stopped moving. She stared down at him, alarmed and choking on her own blood. Oh god, Sammy!

"How are you…?" Zachariah asked, clearly in shock.

"Alive?" Cas replied in his deep, familiar voice. "That's a good question. How did these three end up on that airplane?" He motioned at the Winchesters, his eyes briefly meeting Alex's before returning to Zachariah—he saw her physical anguish and his voice picked up speed and became harder, more assertive. "Another good question. Because the angels didn't do it. I think we both know the answer, don't we?"

"No," Zachariah said softly, hollowly. "That's not possible."

"It scares you as well it should." Castiel's voice darkened with a threatening, commanding quality. "Now, put these boys and their sister back together and go." His face was almost a snarl. "I won't ask twice."

Zachariah disappeared, and Alex jumped, startled, when Sam suddenly shot up, looking around in alarm and confusion, breathing heavily. Confused, Alex suddenly realized her knees were fine, her throat was fine. She wiped blood away from the edges of her mouth as Sam stood and pulled her to her feet, too. She was shaken up—had Sam just died, or what? And Cas standing there, alive and well—had she hit her head? Was this real? "You three need to be more careful," Castiel said, approaching them as his gaze skimmed over them, checking their conditions.
"Yeah, I'm starting to get that," Dean said as he stood back up and dusted his hands off on his upper legs. "Your frat brothers are bigger dicks than I thought."

"I don't mean the angels," Castiel said impatiently. "Lucifer is circling his vessel. And once he takes it, those hex bags won't be enough to protect you." He came even closer, and raised both hands, roughly putting one on each of Sam and Dean's chests. Alex, who was standing behind them and between them, jumped a little as her brothers both jolted and gasped.

"What the hell was that?" Dean asked, a hand on his chest as he flinched back.

"An Enochian sigil," Castiel said. "It'll hide you from every angel in creation, including Lucifer."

"What, did you just brand us with it?" Dean asked.

"No. I carved it into your ribs," Cas said, as if, naturally, they should have known that. He looked directly at Alex and lowered his chin slightly, made a 'come here' motion with his hand, indicating that it was her turn. "Alex."

Dean and Sam stepped aside so that she could move forward, which she did, a little apprehensively, still not entirely sure she could believe he was actually alive. But, there was was, flesh and blood, right in front of her, his eyes locked onto hers. "Hi, Cas," she said in a breathless and quiet voice. She was in a little bit of a dazed trance after everything that had just happened.

His rigid expression softened a shade at her greeting. "Hello, Alex." His hand, warm and a little rough came to rest against the bare skin of her chest, right below and to the side of the dip of her collarbone, the bottom of his palm brushing up against he edge of where the low scoop of her tank top started. The sensation of the touch startled her into stillness. She didn't have time to think about it any more, as suddenly there was a scraping, burning sensation all over the inside of her torso. It wasn't pleasant. Before she could fully process the strange feeling, it was gone altogether.

Castiel stepped back with a hooded glance at Alex, and then looked over the Winchesters again, apparently satisfied with his handiwork. "H-how are you alive, Cas?" Alex asked, asking what they all wanted to know.

He looked at her with a strange expression. "That remains to be seen," he said cryptically and then disappeared without a word, leaving three very confused Winchesters behind.

Dean gave a huge sigh. "Dammit. Same old Cas." He sounded kind of fond though and smiled lightly, clearly relieved that they were all in one piece and alive. He went to the door and yanked it up and open. "Well, this has been a fun night."

"Fun?" Sam repeated as he pushed the door up far enough where he could walk under. "Yeah, being lungless is a blast, Dean."

"Hey, I'll try anything once," Dean quipped, in amazing spirits for having just been dying on the floor a minute ago. Sam rolled his eyes and mumbled something like yeah right.

Alex paused before she followed her brothers back to the car. She was frowning deeply, staring back at where Cas had been standing a minute ago. How was he just alive again? And why the quick exit? She breathed in deeply, then out again, mind spinning. She had a thousand questions but he was alive... and that, for now, would have to be enough.

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**Three Days Later**
Alex sat across from Bobby, who was in his wheelchair, staring out the window listlessly, just as he had been for the last few days. "Bobby." He didn't acknowledge her at all, and she tried moving her face closer into his line of sight. "Bobby." No reply. "Three days of nothing from you… come on. Gimme something to work with here."

He only glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, then looked back out the window. He was upset, and understandably so. His knife wound hadn't killed him—however it had paralyzed his legs. He wouldn't say a word to any of them. Not even her. But that didn't stop her from trying to get a reaction. Alex pulled one of her knees into her chest, the other leg dangling. "This reminds me of the time Dad was so mad at me that he gave me the silent treatment for a week." Bobby looked at her, his expression fuzzy, like he didn't know what she was talking about. She shrugged humbly, an impish sort of smile on her face as she attempted to jog his memory. "When I dropped out of high school by forging his signature on all the paperwork? Don't tell me you forgot about that."

Bobby, remembering, smiled slightly, but quickly scoffed, covering it up with a frown, and he looked away, still refusing to reply. Alex rolled her eyes and sighed fondly. He was pouting and silent, kind of like a mad five-year-old. He crossed his arms, only serving to make him look even more like a sassy, petulant child. Alex shook her head good naturedly and looked up, hearing Dean's voice.

"Since when do angels need a cell phone to reach out and touch someone?" He asked, coming into view. With him—Sam and Castiel. Alex stood in surprise at the unexpected appearance of the angel.

"You're hidden from angels now—all angels," he said. "I won't be able to simply—"

Beside Alex, the sound of Bobby's gruff voice startled her. "Enough foreplay." The guys all looked their way. "Get over here and lay your damn hands on."

Castiel's lips thinned into a line. "I can't."

Bobby turned his chair on Cas, his expression deadly cold. "Say again?"

"I'm cut off from Heaven and much of Heaven's power," Castiel explained, walking into the room. Alex watched him in somewhat stunned silence—his unexpected appearances should be common place by now, shouldn't they? She should be used to him popping up with warning. "Certain things I can do," Cas was saying. He acknowledged Alex with a brief glance. "Certain things I can't."

"You're tellin' me you lost your mojo just in time to get me stuck in this trap the rest of my life?" Bobby asked, his voice rising, especially toward the end.

"I'm sorry," Castiel said.

In reply, Bobby glared and turned his chair back ground. "Shove it up your ass."

"At least he's talking now," Dean muttered.

"I heard that," Bobby grumbled.

Cas turned away, expression hard to read. "I don't have much time," he said, speaking in hushed tones, forcing the Winchesters to come closer to hear. "We need to talk. About your plan to kill Lucifer."

"Yeah?" Dean asked, looking mildly enthused. "You wanna to help?"
"No," Cas replied without missing a beat. "It's foolish. It can't be done."

Sam and Alex exchanged puzzled frowns. "Oh, well thanks for the support," Dean said with a disingenuous smile.

"Why not?" Alex asked. "Isn't Lucifer just another angel with some, you know, special features and bonus material?"

Cas shook his head no shallowly. "No. He's more powerful than any angel or any demon. He cannot be killed." He looked at Dean, then Sam. "But I believe I have the solution. There is someone besides Michael strong enough to take on Lucifer. Strong enough to stop the apocalypse."

"Who's that?" Sam asked.

"The one who resurrected me and put you on that airplane," Castiel said, and from the way he was speaking—a little faster than usual, a little more emphatic—it was easy to tell he really believed in whatever plan he was brewing. "The one who began everything. God." There was a short, startled silence. The Winchesters exchanged a long, skeptical glance. Castiel was breathing in deeply, looking resolute. "I'm gonna find God."

At that, Dean turned and closed the door of the room and repeated "God?"

"Yes," Castiel replied simply.

Dean made a face. "God."

"Yes!" Cas replied, getting exasperated. "He isn't in Heaven. He has to be somewhere."

"Try New Mexico," Dean said, a little smirk playing on his lips. "I hear he's on a tortilla."

Castiel's expression showed zero understanding of the joke. He shook his head, befuddled, taking Dean literally. "No... he's not on any flatbread."

Sam paced in the corner near Bobby, and Alex had taken a seat on the bed. At the flatbread comment, she gave Cas a weird, amused look.

"Listen, Chuckles," Dean talked down to Cas, "even if there is a God, he's either dead—and that's the generous theory—"

"He is out there, Dean," Castiel insisted, his tone taking a decidedly aggressive edge.

"Oh come on! Look around you, man," Dean ranted, throwing his hands in the air. "The world's in the toilet. We're literally at the end of days here and he's off somewhere drinking booze out of a coconut all right?"

"Enough," Castiel said, glaring. "This is not a theological issue. It's strategic." He came closer to Dean, his expression fierce. "With God's help, we can win."

"It's a pipe dream, Cas," Dean said in dismissal. That seemed to touch a nerve.

"I killed two angels this week," Castiel breathed, his expression twisted in genuine anger. "My brothers. I'm hunted. I rebelled. And I did it, all of it, for you, and you failed. You, your sister, your brother destroyed the world—" Sam looked down, Alex's head swiveled to the side in an indignant, open-mouthed look as Cas continued, "—and I lost everything, for nothing. So keep your opinions to yourself."
Dean made no reply, clearly stunned into guilty silence, but Alex stood up, eyes narrowed, arms crossing, her mouth opening to correct him. "We destroyed the world? Are you serious right now?" Everyone in the room looked at her, but she was only looking at Cas, who was scowling at her, daring her to continue. She smiled facetiously, tightly, not sure what he was smoking or what was wrong with him, but she was about to set his ass straight. "Okay. Yes, Castiel, Dean and I did fail to stop Sam. And yeah, Sam made the biggest mistake of his life and played a role starting the apocalypse… but don't you dare imply that this is entirely our fault. That you're some kind of victim here." She shook her head in disgusted disbelief. "I mean, do you have amnesia? You told us that the angels were trying to save the world… and the whole time you and those two-faced sons of bitches were planning to let it all happen, to set Lucifer free, to make sure the apocalypse would happen—you lied to our faces. Did you forget that little detail? Cuz to be honest, I'm kinda stuck on it!" She was in his face now, her voice low. "Don't think your last minute change of heart and a few sacrifices makes you the hero in all of this and us the bad guys," she ranted. "My family is not responsible for the apocalypse and you know it, so cut the shit and sack up." His mouth was open slightly, but she wasn't done. She gave him one, final, sarcastic face. "You keep your self-righteous hypocrisy to yourself." The room went silent, tense.

Castiel blinked three times, apparently speechless.

"Damn." Dean commented, saying what everyone else in the room was thinking.

Alex, suddenly unable to handle all the stares and Castiel's stunned, hurt expression, left the room, blood boiling and heart racing, briefly wondering how she could be mourning Cas one day and then wanting to bash his head in the next. All of the men watched her go—Dean, Sam, and Bobby, impressed—Castiel looking more like he had been run over by a train.

That night, Alex stood on the roof of the hospital and tried to relieve some stress by smoking a cigarette in secret. The air was chilly and the stars overhead were plenty, beautiful, and calming. Standing at the edge of the building, she had an elbow on the stone half-wall there and alternated between watching traffic idly and stargazing as she smoked lazily.

Bobby was going to be discharged in the morning which was good news, but Alex was dwelling on the whole Castiel thing and left unsettled by it. Was she too hard on him? His whole I'm-the-victim-here mindset had been ludicrous and she'd let her temper dictate her response to him. But the more she thought about it, she thought maybe he was just freaking out because he was suddenly on his own and banking everything on finding God… and maybe she shouldn't have been so bitchy in the way she'd gone about setting him straight. Maybe God had brought him back—who else could have? Wait. Did she even believe in God? She didn't know, but she hadn't believed in angels until recently...

Behind her, she heard footsteps approaching, and she recognized Dean's gait—and subsequently went into high alert. Oh shit. Busted. She threw her cigarette down and tried to crush and hide it underneath the heel of her shoe quickly, like a teenage kid afraid of the wrath of their father.

"Dean, look, before y—" she said as she turned around. She stopped mid-sentence, surprise overtaking her face. "Oh."

Castiel stood there, not Dean. "Hello Alex."

She swallowed, abruptly nervous from being so caught off guard. "Hi." What was he doing here? An uncomfortable smile came over her lips—her way of trying not to acknowledge how confrontational she'd been earlier. "Taking a break from finding God?" She asked conversationally, trying to look casual and unsurprised. "It's been, what…" she glanced at her watch briefly. "Six
hours. Don't tell me you found him already."

"No," Cas said in a low, somber voice. "I haven't."

He said nothing else, and it made for an extremely awkward silence. Alex waited, looked at him expectantly, then prompted him when he still said nothing else. "Okay. So-ooo…" she looked at him with even more expectancy and he frowned, not seeming to get it. "Any specific reason you're up here, or…?"

There it was. Understanding came over his features. "What you said to me earlier," he explained, deeply thoughtful. "I haven't been able to stop thinking of it." Alex's stomach flip-flopped slightly. "I accept that we all have some fault in what happened. But I think you're correct. I… stood by idly and allowed your family to be manipulated. I see now how wrong it was of me to say what I said. To imply what happened was your family's fault."

Eyebrows up high and mouth open slightly, Alex faltered. "Is this… an apology?"

"Yes," he answered plainly. He looked overly-guilty and he didn't need to be.

Alex's face relaxed into a soft little smile. "Well, for what it's worth... I think you did the right thing, even if it took you awhile."

Her words seemed to surprise him and humble him. "Thank you."

"I... should probably say sorry, too," Alex admitted, fidgeting a little and not fully able to look at him. "Kinda lost my temper on you back there." She cleared her throat and ran a hand through her hair self-consciously before crossing her arms and putting on an inscrutable expression. "I was a little harsher than I should have been."

Castiel again seemed surprised and even a little touched by her words. "It's forgotten," he said, and his face was so soft that he might have been smiling, almost.

Alex smiled crookedly at him, stuck her hand out for a handshake. "Truce?"

His eyes lowered to her hand and he looked at her questioningly, then slowly put his hand into hers, obviously unsure if he were doing it right. Alex tightened her grip and gave him a firm handshake. She was about to let go, then her inner prankster suddenly had an idea. And without changing her face at all, she just kept shaking his hand, waiting to see if he'd realize the handshake was going on too long. After about ten seconds, Castiel's eyes narrowed to little squinting slits but he said nothing, just let her keep shaking and shaking—but he definitely looked suspicious. Twenty seconds later and the lunacy of it was threatening to send Alex into a fit of laughter but she managed to keep a straight face for about three seconds more. And then she couldn't do it anymore. She snorted and then a huge peal of laughter burst out of her as she doubled over, laughing hard, hands braced against her thighs.

"Is… everything all right?" Cas asked, vastly confused, his head tilted to the side as he hunched over slightly, peering at her face.

Recovering, Alex straightened up, realizing how insane she probably looked to him. "Yeah," she said, face soft from laughter, a breathy grin still on her face. His worried expression was so damn cute. "I think it is." She pulled a face. "I mean, there's the whole Lucifer thing, but…" she sobered a little, remembering reality.

Cas however was apparently trying to solve another problem. "I don't understand what you found to be amusing just then," he said, clearly trying hard to figure it out. And that made Alex smile again.
"Nothing. It was dumb." She shrugged, shook her head, let her gaze linger on him. "Hey. I'm glad you're okay, Cas," she said, speaking earnestly, thinking about everything he'd done for them. Was he perfect? No. Was he doing the best he could? Yes. She thought so. She thumped him twice on the side of the shoulder encouragingly. "You're a good friend for helping us."

His eyes slid to his shoulder questioningly. "Thank you." His gaze traveled back to her eyes and a short silence spanned between didn't think he missed that she'd referred to him as her friend in earnest. "I... should return to my work," he said, sounding mildly reluctant. "I'll be in touch."

Alex nodded once. "Be careful out there."

Cas's eyes went down to the ground, looking directly at the cigarette she'd stomped on a few minutes ago. His eyes came to hers meaningfully. "You should know… smoking cigarettes is a bad habit."

Alex's eyebrows raised as a surprised smile came over her face. "So is telling me what to do."

Oddly enough, her playful comment seemed to almost amuse him. "So I've gathered." He paused, then mimicked what she'd done a moment ago—thumped her on the shoulder twice—but awkwardly, and after he did it, he gave her a silent look that seemed to ask did I do that correctly?

Thoroughly amused at him, Alex shook her head, eyebrows pulled together even as she smiled, trying to figure him out. "You are something else, Castiel," she remarked slowly, head still shaking, smile still holding.

His eyes crimped suspiciously. "Something other than what?"

The question had her laughing again—and his confusion tripled. Alex made herself chill on the laughter, explain to him. "It's, it's a saying," she said, a stupid grin on her face. It started to fade as she explained. "Means... you're something special. Something different than everything else." He was doing it again—looking at her so intensely that she felt cornered and suddenly nervous, sort of vulnerable. She tried not to feel those things and thrust her chin out once, nodding off to the side, trying to look okay and unruffled. "Now enough with the twenty questions. Go find God."

Did he see how saying he was special had made her feel weird? His eyes scrutinized her closely for a minute more, then nodded, said he'd be in touch, and disappeared, leaving her alone under the stars once again.
Daddy Issues

"And I hate myself for being human. What good are hearts if you can't use them?"
- God or Julie

Two Weeks Later

Alex and Dean entered their motel room and threw their stuff down, exhausted and covered in vampire blood. Alex plopped down onto one of the beds, yanking off her boots one by one which stuck damply to her feet.

A week ago, Sam left. Hitched a ride to wherever, just like that. It happened after the three of them had worked a job in Colorado—they'd caught up with a few old hunting buddies: Rufus, Jo, Ellen. The town had been a disaster. A newcomer on the scene, War, as mentioned in Revelation, had turned the entire town against one another. After they cut War's ring of influence from his hand, Sam had split, saying he needed a break and that he didn't trust himself.

Dean hadn't stopped their brother or even tried to talk to him about it. He'd been disturbingly okay with it. Practically sent their brother off with a shove as he walked out the door. Alex had begged Sam to change his mind, to just give it some time, but he'd left anyway. Dean had been avoiding the subject ever since. The past few days he'd put everything into finding a job and had ignoring her down to a fine art. But now that the job they'd found was taken care of, Alex wasn't going to stay quiet any longer. She looked up at her brother from where she was been sitting and decided now was as good a time as any. "Hey. We gotta talk."

He turned around and from the look he gave her, she could tell he had been expecting this. He had an unfriendly, sarcastic kind of smile on his face. "Look, I already know you've just been waiting wanna bitch me out about Sam," he said rudely, "so go ahead. I'm all ears."

Typical Dean. It pissed her off. "Why do you have to be like that?" Alex asked irritably. "You don't even know what I was gonna say."

He took a couple ambling steps toward her, giving off the air of superiority. "Lemme guess: you were gonna say that we shouldn't have split up, I should have made him to stay, he shouldn't be alone right now, some kind crap like that."

Alex's mouth went into a thin line, irritated that he got it right, and even more irritated that he didn't see the problem. "Well… yeah?" Dean almost rolled his eyes and Alex looked similar to an angered bull. "Don't you think should be helping him through it, not putting more miles between us?" she demanded indignantly. "He's our brother."

"Yeah, our brother who likes demon juice." Dean swaggered over, jabbing his finger at the ground. "This right here? The family business? We got no room for that bleeding heart, wishy washy crap. We don't have time for issues, we just gotta kill or be killed."

Alex pulled a face. "Right, because you don't have any issues."

"Oh, and you're just Miss America, aren't you?" he retorted.

She felt so flustered by his attitude that she couldn't think of any of the things she'd thought of or rehearsed internally. Flabbergasted, she felt herself turning red. "Why can't you just admit you're wrong about this?!” she demanded, wishing just once he'd drop the know-it-all, asshole attitude.
"Because I'm not wrong," Dean said forcefully, and he obviously believed his own delusion. "I didn't make Sam leave. He wanted out—end of story, Alex!" His volume was nearing a shout now. "I don't have time for this today! I'm the oldest and it's my car, my house, my rules, so if you don't like it, feel free to shove off like you did before!" Ouch. Alex was stung. Dean paused, taking a deep breath and visibly cooling off a little as guilt flashed across his face. "I didn't mean that," he muttered, then his expression became pissy again. "But if you wanna be with Sammy so bad, the door's right there. I'm sure as hell not keeping you here."

"Stop putting me in the middle!" Alex exclaimed, throwing her hands up in frustration. "I shouldn't have to choose a side! You're acting like an asshole!"

Dean took in a tired, aggravated breath, looked at his angry sister for a long moment. "Come on, Al, we've done this before. Sam was gone for four friggin' years and you didn't care then, so what's different this time?"

That simple comment hurt the worst out of all of them. She really hated Dean sometimes and his stupid, selfish, judgmental attitude. She turned away, yanked her hair out of the ponytail it'd been in. "Whatever Dean, nevermind," she muttered sullenly. "I need to get this damn blood off of me."

Alex disappeared with a hearty door slam into the bathroom, leaving Dean to roll his eyes and begin cleaning the blood off his jacket. This motel had a sink and mirror in the main room, while the shower and toilet were in a separate bathroom across the room. He heard the water start in the bathroom and grumbled to himself for a few minutes, then began to wash up in the sink out here. His headstrong, opinionated sister wasn't right, about any of it. At least, that's what he told himself. It had been Sam's choice, and it had been the right thing for the family. Sam's demon blood issue was just too much. Too much. He glanced up in the mirror, and jumped at what he saw in the reflection. Castiel was standing right behind him, staring silently—and creepily. "Oh my god." Dean thumped the sink to channel the shock that had jolted through his heart. "Don't do that!"

"Hello, Dean," Cas greeted plainly.

Dean turned around, finding Castiel in his face, only inches away. He sighed and gave the angel a damning look. "Cas, we've talked about this. Personal space?"

Brief understanding flickered across Cas's face. "My apologies." Cas stepped back, and Dean set him with a questioning, probing frown.

"How'd you find me? I thought I was flying below the angel radar."

"You are," Cas replied. "Bobby told me where you were." He looked around, eyes squinting further. "Where's Sam?"

Dean smiled thinly. "Me and Sam are taking separate vacations for a while."

There was a short pause and then Cas's unspeakably intense gaze came back to Dean. "And Alex?" the angel asked. His tone was a little different when he asked about her. But Dean was too annoyed to analyze it much.

"What's with the twenty questions? In the shower, man," Dean replied impatiently. "You find God yet? More importantly, can I have my damn necklace back, please?"

Cas's expression was unhappy. "No, I haven't found him. That's why I'm here. I need your help."

Castiel opened his mouth to reply, but a blood-curdling scream and loud crash cut him off. It was hard to tell who was moving first, Dean or Cas. Without even pausing to see if the door were locked or not, Dean broke the bathroom door down, barging in, ready to murder someone. "What is it?!" he demanded, the demon blade in his hand, his body tense, poised to attack, Cas right behind him, arms at his sides, an intense frown on his face. Alex was backed up against the far wall of the tiny bathroom, staring at the shower with huge eyes, clutching a motel towel to her dripping wet body. She looked terrified. "What, Alex? Where?!!" Dean demanded, looking all around and not seeing anything. He was getting rattled, fast.

"A spider! A huge, fucking, spider!" she screeched, looking at her brother with wide, crazed eyes.

Dean's alarm immediately lapsed into disbelieving annoyance, and the blade, which had been raised high, thumped to his side as he threw his other arm out in disbelief. "Oh my God, Al, really?" He looked entirely pissed, staring down his frightened sister. "Dammit! Seriously? Again? You're killin' me."

Castiel, puzzled, looked from Dean to Alex, trying to understand.

"It crawled on me!" Alex protested emphatically, as if such horrors had never fallen anyone else in the world. She looked at Dean, frozen in fear, clearly waiting for him to make a move, begging him with her eyes. "Dean! Kill it!"

Dean chuckled airily, shook his head, gave her a 'sorry, not sorry' kind of expression. "You know what? I'm done killing spiders and roaches for you. You can gank a vamp, a zombie, a demon… you can definitely handle a little spider. Man up, Al. Grow some balls and squish that tiny little arachnid."

Alex's expression stilled in complete and utter betrayal—as if he had just signed her death warrant. Then she put on her best pleading doe-eyes. "Dean..." she pleaded whiningly, but he just shook his head and crossed his arms, giving her a challenging look.

Alex looked to Cas, who of course she had noticed but hadn't really acknowledged yet—and frowned—Cas was… what was he staring at? His eyes jumped up from—what had he been looking at? Her legs? He met her gaze his face set like stone, his chin raised. He looked intense. "Where is this spider? I will destroy it."

"T-the shower," she replied feebly, and he stepped forward, his hand raised, his face deadly.

There was a sickening squelch sound somewhere inside the shower and Dean, grimacing, peeked his head over into the stall. "Eugh. You're a real hero, Cas," he commented even as he smirked at Alex. "Dude that thing was big," he added in with an impressed face. She gave him a baleful look.

Cas, however, had straightened, turned, and was looking at her in honest confusion. "Why does an arachnid strike such fear into you?"

Dean gave a short little laugh at the angel's question. "Because she's the biggest damn baby on earth when it comes to spiders, man. No reason why. Drives me crazy." He suddenly, finally seemed to realize the extent of Alex's undress and an awkward expression passed over his face. He grabbed Cas by his shoulders, pushing him out. "Move along, Cas, nothing to see here." He then chuckled, as if he'd said something extremely funny—apparently the joke was either that his sister was not appealing enough to warrant attention, or that Cas was asexual. Either way, Alex wasn't laughing, she was just scowling.

Cas, perplexed as usual, was looking at Alex over his shoulder as Dean pushed him out of the
bathroom and past the door that was barely hanging onto the frame by its cracked hinge. Alex timidly dared a peek into the shower, where she saw the dark splat on the tiled wall. Her face wrinkled up into a disgusted expression. *Ugh. Spiders.*

Dressed and decent, Alex joined Cas and Dean in the main room. Her hair was quickly air-drying into its normal state of unkempt, wavy disarray. Cas and Dean looked like they were ready to go somewhere, like they had been waiting around for her. "What's going on?" she asked, adjusting her tank top a little bit, not entirely sure where Cas had come from this time or what he wanted. His presence, as normal, set her on a bit of an edge she didn't really recognize.

Dean had a smug little smile on his face. "Cas here says Raphael can help us find *God.*"

Uh... okay. Alex looked at the angel for explanation. "And... who's Raphael? A ninja turtle?"

Castiel looked completely baffled. "A... what?" he glanced at Dean who was, of course, not going to help him out in the least. "No, he's not some kind of... warrior turtle. He's the archangel who killed me."

Alex's eyebrows shot up. "Whoa, and you wanna go... *find* him?" She made puzzled a face, worry pitting in her stomach. "Don't you, y'know..." she gave a nervous stupid little laugh, "like being alive?"

He didn't answer her question. "We need information, which Raphael possesses," he said intensely, not responding to her humorous tone. "We will trap and interrogate him, and he will tell us where God is."

*Okaaay...* that sounded crazy. Alex rubbed her forehead briefly. "Okay, aside from the fact that that's a long shot..." she turned and looked at her brother, "Dean, you're actually down for this suicide mission?"

"Yeah, why not," he said, grinning with that ever-present sarcastic attitude. "Sounds like a good time." At her bitchy expression, he grudgingly dropped the act. "Look, it can't hurt to see if this guy knows something—anything—about all this Michael's vessel, God crap."

Point taken. But there was something else Alex didn't understand. She turned back to Cas. "Okay, but why do you need *us* for this, Cas?"

"To find Raphael..." he said slowly, grimly, as if preparing to reveal some dark truth, "I'll have to... talk. To people."

Alex's head tilted to the side, a hesitant little smile on her face as her eyebrows rose slowly—she hadn't expected him to say *that.* It was almost cute, the obvious dread and anxiety the angel was feeling. This was the guy who had shattered all the lights in a room when she saw him the first time. The one who could smite demons with a single touch, the one who dragged her brother out of the mouth of Hell, the one who had given her a voice, the ability to speak. Basically, one of the most powerful beings she could think of. And yet, there he stood, basically implying that talking to people was the most unthinkably difficult thing in the world. She remembered their conversation on the hospital roof—how he'd kind of struggled to keep up with the ebb and flow of things. It made her feel a little more fond about him immediately to know he was nervous about conversations with people. It made him feel more human, more relatable.

Dean was chuckling and opening the door to the motel. "Come on, kids. Let's blow this popsicle stand," he said, his keys jingling.
Alex paused, glanced at Cas. "What, aren't we gonna take the angel railway?" It'd be faster...

"Dean refuses. He cited chronic constipation," Castiel replied in monotone.

Alex blinked twice. "Wha…?" she asked, looking at her brother weirdly. What did that even mean?

"Last time he zapped me somewhere, I didn't poop for a week!" Dean grumbled. Alex had to work hard not to laugh out loud at his misfortune.

They walked out to the car together, Cas drifting after the Winchesters somewhat uncertainly. Dean tossed the keys at his sister without warning, and unprepared, she barely stopped them from hitting her in the face. "Listen, I'm tired as crap," he said. "Alex, you're driving."

She tried to remember the last time she had driven the Impala and looked at Dean in disbelief. "Serious?"

Annoyed by her, he yanked open the back door and sent her a brief little grumpy glare. "I need a friggin' nap, okay?"

"Uh, yeah. Okay." She paused at the driver's side. Cas stared at her with his usual, stern expression over the top of the car. Her heart caught and fluttered and she looked away fast, uncomfortable and really needing to fill the suddenly embarrassing silence. "Um, so, w... where are we going, anyway?" she asked, trying to look really certain and at ease.

His eyes were so blue—she was staring into them again. "Waterville, Maine," Castiel said, never looking out of her gaze. "Where a deputy officer laid eyes on the archangel."

The car ride was quiet in the beginning. Music played on the radio, Alex mostly kept her eyes on the road, driving with one hand... but she glanced at Castiel every minute or so. The windows were cracked slightly, ruffling her loose hair a little in the breeze. Dean snored lightly, sprawled awkwardly across the back seat with an arm over his eyes to keep out the sunlight.

Castiel found it difficult to believe this monotonous mode of transportation was how the Winchester family always traveled. It was taking far too long, and they had only been traveling for about an hour. But Dean had insisted. And Castiel had thought better of trying to talk the fiercely headstrong man out of it.

On the radio, a man was singing, or at least, that's what Castiel knew that was what the sound was supposed to be. However, it was more like a shouting, grunting shriek combined with growling. Finished with my woman 'cause she couldn't help me with my mind, people think I'm insane because I am frowning all the time! Castiel was perplexed, not able to follow the message of the words. The loud, repeating sound of a gritty, distorted instrument combined with the man's screeching voice was not pleasant. In fact, it was beginning to grate on his nerves. As if reading his mind, Alex reached for a knob on the dashboard and turned the music down almost all the way.

"You all right over there, space case?" she asked, her voice breaking the long silence. Castiel turned his head toward her slightly, appraisingly. He forgot to answer her question in favor of just looking at her. She grew uncertain. "Uh... you look kinda… glazed over," she said hesitantly. "You tired or something?"

Staring was considered rude in Western culture. Castiel peeled his gaze away, trying to be polite and acceptable. It was all so much to think about and remember. "I don't get tired," he told her factually. "I... found the sound of that music grating."
She smiled when he said that. "Come on Cas, don't knock Black Sabbath," she said in a tone he thought was supposed to be teasing. He didn't understand what she was saying to him—'knock black sabbath'? What was the meaning of that phrase? He repeated the words in his mind, trying to understand, but he found no comprehension. She and Dean had very strange ways of speaking. She was chuckling. "I bet you're a Beethoven kind of guy, huh."

At the mention of the famous composer, Castiel smiled very softly, surprising himself as he remembered a dark echoing hall and beautiful piano music that filled it, the man who'd been deaf and unable to hear music and had felt it instead. "I watched him compose Moonlight Sonata."

A stunned, shocked silence followed. "...You watched Beethoven compose Moonlight Sonata?" Alex appeared to be starstruck and impressed. "Wow. That's… that's friggin' awesome!" She was grinning, suddenly very animated and eager. Cas was caught off guard by her enthusiastic reaction but intrigued. She seemed to like this information. So, he shared more.

"He had insomnia when he wrote it," Castiel recalled, and he could hear the piano movement in his mind, the somber and beautiful striking of the piano keys as Beethoven had written the song. Ludwig von Beethoven had been a gentle, simple man. A fascinating one.

Castiel's simple recollection seemed to completely entrance Alex—perhaps she hadn't realized how Cas had been in existence for so long, watching humanity. But she knew now, and was biting her lip in thought as she contemplated the road ahead. "Okay," she said in a voice that was bordering on excited, "so—I gotta know. In everything you've ever seen… what's your favorite moment in history? The first pyramid? Noah's ark?"

He hesitated abruptly at her question, looked away, a slight shiver of nervousness overtaking him. "It... would be difficult to pick," he said, dodging. His instincts told him that the truth was far too revealing of himself. The best thing he had ever seen? His favorite moment? The first time the one he was sitting next to right now had laughed out loud with the voice he'd given to her…

Unaware of his thoughts, Alex just looked at him sidelong, a quieting, contemplative look on her face. She recognized that he was hedging, he realized. But she didn't press him. Just let it go, and continued to drive, her expression becoming thoughtful and far away. He studied her profile for a moment, wondering what was to become of himself. So much had changed for him in recent times. He was now on a path with an unforeseeable destination. All he could do was hope that he was doing the right thing. But with these people at his side… Alex and Dean… he felt optimistic. He was glad they were assisting him right now.

Cas looked straight ahead of himself again, going deep into his own mind, thinking hard. He truly believed that Heaven was misled by the angels who had lost sight of the way. Castiel had to make everything right again and hope his actions would prove to be right in the end. He had resolved to find God, who could cleanse the heavens of the unfaithful angels who would seek their own gain. And then he would finally be rewarded for his long-suffering faith and devotion, for his loyalty despite the turmoil engulfing Heaven. He would see and be seen, he would stand in the presence of his divine Father's love that he longed so completely for. And then he would hear, from the mouth of God himself: Well done, Good and Faithful servant. Then, and only then, would he be free from the transgressions he had committed.

He'd lost sight of his role and purpose in recent times, and as a result he felt unsure of himself, as if he were standing on shaking ground. Still, he realized that while all of Heaven was after him for treason, he wasn't completely alone or on his own. He had these people. The Winchesters. Alex had even called him her friend. He recalled that night, two weeks ago, when she'd spoken to him with kindness, apologizing for her harsh words to him. She surprised him, constantly.
Castiel remembered the night Alex had been intoxicated as her half-brother Adam had burned nearby—that had been the tipping point for him. She had voluntarily spilled out her private thoughts and pains to him, he had listened, not entirely understanding why she was trying to hurt herself further, only understanding that the things she told him were somehow connected to why she was trying to drink herself to death. He had intervened, taking the alcohol from her, a snap decision. He hadn't even thought, he had just reacted out of a feeling of concern. He'd resolved shortly thereafter to tell the Winchesters of the angels' plans to allow Lucifer to rise, after realizing he did not like the idea of Alex dying or being harmed—two things an apocalypse guaranteed.

Castiel had tangibly felt Heaven closing in on him in those moments leading up to when he would be taken from his vessel. Feeling cornered, convinced, even a little desperate… he tried to warn Dean before it was too late. To tell him and his family about the angels' plans to bring on the apocalypse. Because above all else, Castiel felt that was wrong, this plan to allow the apocalypse to take place. Maybe it wasn't his place to question it, but he hadn't been able not to question it. But before he could warn the Winchesters, he was yanked out of his vessel, punished painfully, warned severely. They said they knew how he had continually gone to Alex for no specific reasons given of Heaven, for reasons serving his own purposes—and that was unacceptable, dangerous, forbidden.

They wouldn't warn him again, they said—they would kill him next time. So Castiel accepted the lies they told him despite his intuitions and his doubts that said otherwise. He hadn't known what else to do. There was nothing else for him except his existence as an angel. What other choice did he have? Well… he could have abandoned Heaven right then and there, rebelled before it had been too late. But like a coward, he had clung onto what he was familiar with, knowing it was wrong even as he did so. Like a fool he'd fought doing the right thing. Fear had held him back and dictated his actions until it had nearly been too late.

Even though he had taken action in the end, maybe it had been too late, Lucifer had risen. That was why Castiel was now so eager to find God and have him correct this situation, undo the damage caused. Castiel now realized that Heaven was in shambles, no longer governed by God, but by angels. Mere angels. Castiel had been so blind and lost, for so long, so desperate to believe that God was truly in control. And that had been another lie on an ever-lengthening list.

These thoughts left him disconsolate and quiet in a way that transcended everything.

"Hey, Cas?" Alex asked, drawing Cas out of the thoughts he was so bogged down in. She was glancing between him and the road repeatedly. "You okay over there?"

Cas looked down at his knees, vexed at her concern. He didn't want to burden her with his thoughts or turmoils. "Fine, thank you."

Alex didn't look fully convinced, but accepted his answer, let another short silence hang before she chanced another question. "Listen… I've been wondering. Is he still… you know… still in there somewhere?" She paused, then clarified. "Jimmy, I mean."

A defensive feeling arose. Jimmy. Naming the man who Castiel was using brought a strange sensation to him. The slightest instance of guilt. He knew full well that the body he inhabited wasn't truly his and that in order to possess Jimmy Novak he was essentially cutting the man off from his life. From any life. But this was the only way, and as unfortunate as it may have been… it was necessary.

There were problems with Jimmy's vessel though, and Castiel was suddenly thinking of earlier that day when he'd noticed malfunctions and strange sensations. He remembered the sight of Alex, wrapped only in a small towel. It had made the vessel behave oddly to see her like that: dark hair
dripping wet, beads of water flecked all over her bare arms, legs, neck. He remembered a few little rivulets of water running down the space between the hollow dip of her collarbone and the soft, shadowed space made where her breasts met and pressed softly together... Cas swallowed hard, suddenly aware that his body—his vessel—was malfunctioning again. He looked down at his lap, slightly worried, not sure what was happening to him.

He realized and remembered how Alex had asked him if Jimmy was still in him somewhere and the long, questioning silence suddenly made him flustered. "Why is that a concern of yours?" He asked her a little louder than necessary, trying to act as though everything were fine, like nothing strange was happening to him. He had an instinct he didn't understand that urged him not to let her see what was happening to him.

Alex glanced at him with a skeptical, no-nonsense expression on her face. "You know why."

Yes, he supposed he did. Castiel's worries about the vessel faded. His mind turned to that night when Jimmy had given himself over to Castiel for what would be the final time. He remembered Alex calling him afterward. She'd been angry with him and he'd been cold and distant purposefully, trying to dissuade him from himself, trying to protect both her and himself from the consequences. She'd accused him of ruining Jimmy Novak's life. And he supposed he truly had, hadn't he?

"He seemed like a pretty nice guy, you know?" Alex asked after Cas made no reply. "He loved his wife and kid, just wanted to go back to his normal life..." she sounded pensive, mournful, confused. Sad for Jimmy and his loss. "I liked him. It's... sad what happened."

Castiel did understand what she meant, knew that what she was saying was true. "I suppose it is regrettable," he admitted reluctantly, wearily. And it was regrettable, especially now that Jimmy was the vessel for a fallen angel who had been cut off from Heaven. "But Jimmy's sacrifice will not be unrewarded."

Alex shrugged a shoulder up slightly, her thoughtful eyes out on the road ahead. "Maybe not, but there's a woman and a kid out there who lost a husband and dad," she said quietly, her eyes sliding to him sidelong. "And you're him. Kinda."

Castiel heard what she was saying. He had taken a man from his family. Cas shook his head slowly, not sure how to respond. "No. I'm not him. I only look like him." Jimmy was gone, essentially. Because of him. Alex looked at him again briefly, her expression tense and unsure. A silence spanned and Castiel thought, trying to give her a more definitive answer, trying to explain what had happened to the man in question. "There is a small part of this vessel that retains what made Jimmy Novak, Jimmy Novak. Memories. Opinions. Experiences. I can see everything he was. But all of those things are overpowered and dwarfed by the sheer, uninhibited power of my magnificent celestial presence inside this vessel."

She made a face that conveyed both confusion and chagrinned amusement. "Okay. Magnificent celestial presence." She chuckled slightly, rueful.

Castiel didn't understand. "Why does that amuse you?"

She grinned helplessly, kind of lopsidedly. How could a smile be sad and happy at the same time? He didn't know, but that was the kind of smile on her face right then. She shrugged, and he watched the way her shoulders moved. "Just... the way you say things sometimes."

She found him to be less than satisfactory, he decided. "I often don't understand social contexts." Castiel offered plainly, understanding that she was telling him that she found his confusion on the matter to be amusing.
"Really?" Alex asked, the tone of her voice different than it had been before.

"Yes, re—" he paused, then stopped. Wait. He shut his mouth then looked out at the road again, the smallest smile on his lips as he realized that he understood what she had just done. "That was sarcasm."

She looked sidelong at him, mildly impressed. "Not bad, Cas." She smiled a little as she watched the road ahead. "But, listen," she said abruptly, smile giving way to a studious frown. "About Jimmy. Will you ever... leave again? Is he gonna come back? Is that possible?" He heard worry in her voice.

"You're worried about his wife and daughter," Castiel said softly. Her empathy was commendable and appealing, but sadly, Castiel had to tell her the heavy truth. "Unfortunately, Jimmy Novak is not going to return. If I ever leave this vessel again... I think he would be burned from the inside out. I think he would be brain-dead or worse." A heavy, shocked silence followed his words.

"Magnificent celestial presence," Alex murmured, understanding. This time she didn't sound amused.

"Yes," Castiel replied heavily. He was quiet for a moment. Again, he tried to make her understand what even he had a difficult time with. "Without Jimmy, I couldn't be here with you right now."

Her words seemed to surprise her, then make her uncomfortable. She was left quiet for a long pause as she avoided looking at him. "I know," she said in a soft, low voice. The tone in her voice was indescribable and vulnerable sounding and made him feel... somehow protective. Fiercely so. Why? She shook her head and shrugged again—she seemed to do that when she was having a hard time knowing what to say or do. "Hey, can't always have your cake and eat it too, can you?" she asked in a louder, surer voice. She sounded both resigned and bittersweet at the same moment.

Cas, however, wasn't sure what baked goods had to do with anything. "...Cake?"

With that single word, he somehow managed to inspire Alex to give a sudden snort of repressed laughter and a grin, a noisy sigh. "Oh Cas," she commented and he felt that fierce feeling again. He thought she said his name with fondness, and whatever funny thing he'd said, he was glad he'd said it and was interested in the effect it'd had on her. She looked at him sidelong with a little smile that rested both on her lips and in her eyes, a smile that seemed to say she found him agreeable.

He'd seen her smile, but never so completely at him. It startled him, then quickly made him uncomfortable and nervous and he looked away, uncertain if he was overstepping bounds in pursuing a friendship with her. It wasn't wrong, he didn't think, even though Heaven had said it was. He didn't think the Winchesters had corrupted him. In fact, he thought perhaps they had moved him toward greatness. Or at least toward self-awareness. And even though it was a strange new place for him... he found himself liking it cautiously. He wanted to look at her again, but he made himself not.

Another moment of silence passed before Alex spoke again. "So, if this Raphael guy we're looking for's an archangel, what kind are you?" she asked, then paused. "If that's not too personal."

Castiel glanced at her sidelong, her question startling him, her implication of curiosity about him somehow pleasing and stressful at the same time. She waited for an answer, and he frowned slightly, considering his answer. "Well... in the beginning, when I was first established, I was a Seraph. A Watcher. I was tasked with the honor of bearing witness to the events which unfolded in this universe." He remembered those years with a burst of pride, of fondness. He had known his role, and he had carried it out. It was simple; it was pure, he had never faltered or failed. The good
feelings faded as he remembered how everything changed and fell apart. It had all started with her, too. That fateful day when he'd been tasked as guardian angel over one Alex Winchester. He looked down. "More recently..." he trailed off, realizing it was true, what he was about to say. "I don't know what I am."

"Huh," she commented softly, noticing how heavily he spoke, how conflicted he sounded. "Well I don't think you're so bad, whatever you are." She smiled at him a little again before returning her eyes to the road.

Castiel looked at her profile for a few seconds, then shifted in his seat, looked away, processing her words, feeling a warmth in his chest at her encouraging comment and tone. His lips were upturning a little in a smile. "Thank you." It was humbling how she was slowly softening toward him, extending acts of friendship and good will toward him. For a time, he had considered that she would possibly always mistrust and suspect him. More silence passed, and after a minute, Castiel sighed through his nose, restless again. "Traveling this way is truly cumbersome."

Alex gave him an unsympathetic glance. "Try almost thirty years of it, then complain to me about it." She glanced down at the car display in front of the steering wheel and muttered something about needing gas. The car pulled into a station called Gas-n-Sip and Alex got out and began filling the vehicle's tank, leaving Castiel to wait. Dean was still knocked out in the back, his wheezing snore a steadfast rhythm that was becoming irksome and unbearable. Cas reached for the knob he'd seen Alex use to control the volume of the radio and he carefully twisted it, trying to bring the music back to cover the sound of snoring. He heard no sounds and twisted more and more, then reached the end where the knob wouldn't go any further. Perhaps the music playback device was broken. He gave up and resigned himself to listening to Dean's grating snores.

Alex finished putting gas into the tank and loped across the pavement and into the convenience store, casually glancing left and right as she went, taking in her surroundings. Castiel watched out of the corner of his eye. She had this certain way about the way she walked that he found intriguing. He had noticed it before, and studied it yet again. It was a long stride, confident but unaware, like she knew where she was going and had a purpose or a goal but wasn't over thinking her movements. Other women didn't walk that way. Other women pranced, they ambled, they strutted, they flounced. Alex had her own way, and Castiel liked it.

A minute later she appeared again with some brightly colored packets in hand. She squinted against the noonday sun as she came out of the store and when she got back into the car, she offered him one of the packets she was carrying. It read Hostess CupCakes. "Want one? These are my favorite." She tossed a pack of them back at Dean without looking, where it hit her sleeping brother in the chin. He started, made a sound of protest, then settled back down.

Cas shook his head no. "I do not require sustenance."

"You don't even wanna try it?" she asked, giving him a look as she ripped hers open.

"No." As an afterthought, he added, "thank you, though."

She was already chomping into her cupcake without ceremony as they sat there in the unmoving car. He intently watched the way she chewed, licked some icing off her finger, looking at each movement closely, with great interest. She looked at him oddly, opened her mouth to say something, and then accidentally dropped the cupcake where it splatted down onto the seat right beside her thigh.

"Oh shit," she hissed and grabbed the cupcake up. Quickly, she looked back at Dean, her expression fearful. When she saw that he was still sleeping, she tossed the smushed cupcake out the
window and reached into the glove compartment, her arm brushing against Castiel's upper thigh as she dug for something. There again, his vessel reacted immediately, with the same horrifying, dizzying, unexplained sensation it had felt earlier, and the angel went tense, not sure what to do. Before he had time to panic, she had already grabbed a few napkins out of the compartment and was scrubbing at the seat, repeating the word "shit" over and over again, panicked. Castiel watched, intrigued, forgetting his momentary panic. After a few more swipes of the napkin, she seemed to be satisfied and sighed, sounding relieved. "Dean would kill me if he saw that just happened," she muttered, seeing Cas's perplexed expression. "Do me a favor and don't tell Dean?"

Castiel tilted his head to the side, trying to make sure he understood right. "You want me to lie?"

She held out her pinky, eyebrows raised, her gaze seeming to be telling him to do something. "Just pinky promise. That you won't tell him."

He looked at her blankly. "What is a... pinky promise?"

She held out her pinky and wiggled it, nodding at him as if to say 'now you.' He held his out in similar fashion and she hooked hers through, pulling their fingers against each other's tightly. She spoke in a low, serious voice, and her expression became intense. "It's an unflinching bond agreement between two beings. Forever binding. You break a pinky promise, the wrath of the universe will reign down on your poor, lost soul." Castiel felt his mouth open slightly—why had he never heard of this all-powerful binding 'pinky promise'? Alex's grim expression suddenly dissolved into chuckles and a laugh, and Castiel narrowed his eyes, not sure what—and then, suddenly, he understood, and was surprised that he understood.

A pleased little expression came over his face. "You were joking just now," he surmised. "About the wrath of the universe."

She smiled again, and again, the corners of her eyes wrinkled. "Yup. But seriously... don't tell Dean."

Castiel just smiled slightly, a little impressed with himself. Alex started the car and suddenly music blared so loudly that it seemed like the speakers were going to blow out—Alex shouted something like, "Whoaaaaa!" and very very quickly reached for the knob and turned it way down, seeming a little out of breath from how startled it had left her. Once the ear-assault was over, she looked at Cas, flabbergasted. "Did you do that?!"

Cas was surprised, too. "I... didn't realize that would happen," he said, feeling embarrassed. To his surprise, she started laughing.

"What the crap are you two morons doing up there?!!" Dean complained, sitting up halfway and scowling at them with a grumpy, sleepy face.

"Just uh, making sure the volume knob still works!" she exclaimed. Dean mumbled complaints even as he shifted and flopped facedown to return to his nap. Alex was still laughing softly while shaking her head and glancing at Cas again. He was unsure what to do—why was that funny? Either way, she seemed to have thought it was extremely funny. She grabbed the gear shift and put the car into motion, turned her attention to driving then gently fiddled with the volume knob and found a station of classical music then looked at Cas with a knowing smile.

Surprised and touched at the gesture, Castiel felt himself smiling back without a second thought.
Late That Night

Alex kicked over a broken chair in the abandoned house they were squatting in. Dean was downing beers and pacing around, bored like his sister.

They had visited the Waterville Police Department earlier and found out with some digging that Raphael's vessel was a man who was committed. Taking Cas along as a third FBI agent had been a disastrous idea—the guy was seriously a trip and had almost given them away like ten times. However, it made for some funny memories at least. Alex shook her head as she remembered Cas holding his FBI identification upside down. He was so clueless. After finding out who Raphael's vessel was and where the man lived, they had gone to the psychiatric ward where he resided. They found the man, empty and glazed over with Raphael no longer possessing him. But Cas had insisted he knew how to conjure Raphael and had done some strange Enochian chant, then said tomorrow, the ritual would play out. After that, he disappeared without explanation and been gone for hours now. Long enough that Alex was just a little worried.

Sighing, she stopped pacing, picked up a beer and cracked it open on the side of the table. "I mean, couldn't we stay at a motel?" she asked out of nowhere. "This place is a freakshow."

Castiel suddenly appeared in the room, holding an ancient looking clay jar, surprising the siblings in tandem.

"Where've you been?" Dean asked.

"Jerusalem," the angel replied simply.

Whoa. Impressive. "What's in that?" Alex asked as he set the jar on the rickety old table that remained in the house.

Cas seemed distracted. "It's oil. It's very special. Very rare."

Dean smirked. "Okay... so we trap Raphael with a nice vinaigrette?"

Alex snorted at her brother's comment then took a swig of beer even as Castiel sat down in a chair and gave him a short look. "No."

"Tell me something," Dean said, sauntering over with his beer in hand. "You keep saying we're gonna trap this guy. Isn't that kinda like trapping a hurricane with a butterfly net?"

"No." Cas paused, narrowed his eyes. "It's harder."

Alex paused, beer suddenly forgotten. Dean looked a little put off. "Do we really have any chance of surviving this?"

Cas finally looked up fully, his expression neutral. "You two do. An archangel will not touch Michael's vessel, nor a child of God under divine protection."

"So... are you saying that you're dead meat?" Alex asked, not liking the implication at all.

"In all likelihood, yes," he said apathetically, looking into middle distance in front of himself.

She looked at him seriously. "Cas... I don't know if I'm okay with that."

He was avoiding looking at either of them again. "There is nothing to be 'okay' about. It must be done. I have to do it. I have to take responsibility."
"But..." Alex trailed off and he finally looked up at her with a veiled expression. She couldn't find anything else to say and they just looked at each other with silent, tense eyes. He had just accepted his death? Relegated himself to dying tomorrow? No way—there had to be another way.

"Well. Last night on earth!" Dean said, trying to break the tension by being a smartass. "What are your plans?"

There was another pause, as if Cas hadn't thought that far ahead. "I just thought I'd sit here quietly." Something about that comment touched Alex, made her feel sympathetic and endeared to him. She was kind of a homebody, too. Even though she didn't really have a home. She took a sip of beer, deep in distressing thought about what would happen tomorrow.

Dean apparently thought Castiel's answer was lame. "Come on—last night on earth!" he repeated more emphatically. "Anything? Booze?" He paused, his tone lowered, a shit-eating grin on his face and voice. "Women?" Alex almost choked on her beer at that question and her wide eyes went straight to Cas to see his response.

Castiel was suddenly very visibly uncomfortable and faltered, said nothing, looked at Alex, faltered even further, said nothing. Dean looked shocked. "You have been with women before... right? Or an angel, at least?" Cas, said nothing, only looked even more distressed. A silent no. Dean didn't stop. "You mean to tell me you've never been up there doing a little cloud-seeding?" he asked in amused disbelief and Alex literally sputtered at her brother's words and decided to stop trying to drink the beer altogether for fear of choking herself on it. Holy shit this was the most awkward moment ever.

Cas seemed almost riled by the line of questioning. "I've never had occasion, okay?" he asked defensively, and Alex thought she recognized that look on his face. Embarrassment, just wanting to disappear, not wanting anyone to bother him about it or imply that it was weird or freakish.

"Dean... leave him alone," Alex said, setting down her beer hard on the table. She felt sort of protective, if also very flustered.

Dean only shook his head, looking determined. "No way, Al. This is too good." He looked at Cas pointedly. "Lemme tell you something. There are two things I know for certain. One, Bert and Ernie are gay. Two, you are not gonna die a virgin. Not on my watch."

Cas looked positively scared and Alex looked at her brother like he'd sprouted horns. "Oh my god, really, Dean?" She looked at him pointedly. "You're gonna try and get an angel laid?!!"

Dean feigned great thoughtfulness. "Mmm..." he pretended to think really hard then grinned. "Yeah."

Uncomfortable and mad for reasons she didn't totally get, Alex gave her brother an evil eye. She felt so put on the spot and mad and also incredibly embarrassed, like everyone could see straight through her. Hot-blooded and shaking slightly, she thinned her mouth briefly. "You're an idiot," she declared, then stalked out of the house, needing a damn cigarette.

Cas stood as Alex left, his expression strange, almost afraid. "Dean, I don't think that—"

"I don't care what you think, bud," Dean said, grabbing his jacket. "You need to get laid, and pronto."

"But why?" Castiel asked, confused.
"Because you're a virgin!" Dean exclaimed, as if being a virgin were a horrible disease. "You gotta take care of that, pronto."

Castiel's eyes narrowed as the wheels in his head turned. "Dean, I don't understand why you are so adamant about this. Why haven't you shown the same concern for Alex's virginity?"

Dean did a double take, sputtered. "What?!" He fumbled a minute. "A vi—how the hell do you know that about her?!"

Castiel just raised his chin a little bit. "I know everything about her body. And yours. And any other body I encounter. You had your tonsils removed at age fifteen, and—"

"Okay, okay, I get it. Wow," Dean said, rolling his eyes, then reflected briefly, kind of stunned by this revelation. "Well, I was pretty sure she was, you know, a, a virgin—I mean she's never even had a boyfriend and I've been with her like every freaking moment of every freaking day for the most part, but… I wasn't totally sure… well, that's a relief."

"A relief?" Cas asked, becoming more puzzled by the second by the double standards. "You're not anxious to… 'get her laid'?"

The hunter's face dropped. "Hey! Don't talk that way about my sister!" Dean snapped, approaching the angel, suddenly angry.

Cas's eyes narrowed, his head tilted to the side, he frowned. "But if virginity is such a stigma, and both she and I are virgins, then surely the two of us cou—"

Dean's jaw almost hit the floor as his eyes went as wide as they could. "No. No, no, NO. Lemme stop you right there, 'cause I don't like where you're going with that line of logic… Cas! No! You hear me? No, don't even imply that. Oh my god!" He was reeling in a fit of protective, brotherly rage, bearing down on Cas with a vengeance. "No one, I mean no one, is ever going to have sex with her. Not until she's like at least forty. You hear me?"

"Yes, of course I hear you. My ears function perfectly. But I don't understand…"

"Understand this," Dean growled. "Any pervy, asshole guy who so much as thinks about touching my little sister is dead. Six feet under, dead."

Perplexed and not understanding the outburst, Castiel carefully explored Dean's logic. "But what if she marries someone?"

That question stilled Dean and caused a look of shock and then chagrin to come over the man's face. His fire was replaced by a certain kind of stunned sadness. "Uh—Cas. No. That'll never happen."

Dean's quiet statement gave Castiel a pause. "Why?"

There was a strained pause. "I mean, like I said, she's… she's never even had a boyfriend, okay?" Dean gave a soft little airy laugh that seemed to be a coverup for some other, sadder emotion and suddenly his eyebrows were pressing in together as he looked down. "She's not really uh… she's not normal, Cas. None of us are, but… she's… how's she gonna find a good guy in this life? How's some moron guy ever gonna get who she is and what she's been through? Me and Sam are the only two people in her life who haven't either died or left, so…" he trailed off and his face worked oddly, he clapped a hand onto Cas's shoulder and looked at him pointedly, leaving the talk of Alex behind. "This doesn't matter, all right? We're not talking about her problems. We're talking about yours. Now, let's go find you a woman to make you into a real man."
Dean steered Castiel toward the door of the house and out into the night. They found Alex huffing on a cigarette and pacing the yard. Dean stalked up to her and snatched the cigarette out of her mouth without ceremony and threw it to the ground, stamping on it with his foot. "Hey!" she protested, even as he shoved his hand into her jacket pocket, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. He wagged it at her angrily.

"I thought I told you to stop this crap two days ago!" He drew back his arm and flung it as far as he could into the dark night.

"Hey!" she protested again, looking angry.

Dean was even more angry than she was and pointed a warning finger at her. "You stop this crap, okay? Dad would kill you if he saw you smoking! It's a friggin' horrible habit!"

"Thanks for the morality lecture, Mr. Family Values," Alex spat back.

Her brother made no comment, just gave her a wan look and then turned toward the Impala. "We'll be back."

"What?" Her expression fell and she looked at Cas briefly for explanation. Her bravado was gone in favor of vast uncertainty. "W-where are you going?"

Dean looked at her with a half-smirk. "You know where."

Alex gaped at him, then quickly looked at the angel. "Cas?" she asked, sounding surprised at him. "You really wanna do this?"

Uncertain of what he wanted, Castiel answered indirectly. "I'm told it's necessary."

"Quit being a cockblock," Dean said in a dismissing tone to his sister.

If looks could kill, Dean would have been dead underneath the glower Alex was giving him. "Yeah fine," she retorted, "but you gotta be crazy if you think I'm staying at this creepy ass house all by myself." She looked at Cas who was standing there as a feeling of alarm grew inside. His arms hung at his sides uselessly, but he was aware of how strange he felt in his body right then. Alex studied him with an odd expression then looked back at her brother again. "Plus, you know, uh... moral support?"

"Yeah, fine, whatever," Dean said, and got into the car with a slam of the door. Alex and Cas didn't move—they stood there just looked at each other for a short, strange moment in which Cas felt his heart rate picking up in distress. Cas almost asked her Alex somehow get him out of this insane idea, this plan of sexual intercourse. He didn't want it, honestly—the idea of it seemed bizarre and disturbing, undignified, and inappropriate for him. But then Dean hollered an impatient, "move your asses!" and when Alex got into the car, Cas said nothing and got into the car, too.

Low, thumping music pulsed through the "strip club" that was clearly a lot more than that. Seated at a flimsy table near the stage where strippers swayed and sashayed, Dean leaned over the table and fixed Castiel with a commanding stare. "Hey. Relax."

"This is a den of iniquity," Castiel said nervously, eyes darting around like a frightened animal. "I should not be here."

"Dude, you full on rebelled against Heaven," Dean said, brushing Cas's concerns aside. "Iniquity is one of the perks."
Nearby, one of the women had set her sights on them. With an enormous amount of grace and poise, Dean pointed at Cas animatedly, and waved the hooker over like he was hitching a ride on the highway. "Showtime," he said, grinning.

Cas seemed to shrink a little into his chair and he briefly caught Alex's gaze—they sat directly across from each other. Help me, she imagined he was thinking. But that had to be wishful thinking, right? She just pulled her huge mug of beer close in both hands, lips on the rim, trying to disappear. Why had she come along for this?! Bad idea. Stupid idea.

The scantily clad woman arrived at their table and Alex stared openly. The stripper was super close and smelled of strong, pungent perfume. She was wearing almost nothing—just a sheer, gauzy white lingerie thing. Her huge, fake breasts were pushed up oddly, squished together with a huge, garish bow in the center where the cleavage dipped low. She had unnaturally blonde hair and eyes lined heavily in black, her eyebrows looked painted on, her skin was an orange kind of color. She didn't look real at all or like she had much going on in the general area of her brain, but somehow, Alex was still intimidated.

"Hi," the woman said softly, flirtatiously, looking at Cas with suggestive eyes. "What's your name?"

Castiel tried not to look at her. In fact, it almost looked like he was going to be sick, and Alex put her beer down, holding it with tight fingers. If Cas didn't want to do this, he shouldn't let Dean pressure him into it. "Cas," Dean put in for the silent angel. "His name is Cas." He leaned forward, a playful, coy smile on his face as he flirted with the stripper. "What's your name?"

"Chastity," she purred.

Alex snorted at the irony. "That's friggin' rich." Castiel shakily lifted his mug of beer and gulped it down fast. The hooker's boobs were close enough to Alex that she couldn't resist. She reached out and poked an index finger into one rudely. "How much did these things cost?" she asked in an ugly tone, and Chastity gaped, stepped back, a hand covering the breast that Alex had just poked.

"Excuse me?" She asked, offended, and Alex just smiled at her falsely.

"Hey, hey, whoa whoa whoa, don't pay attention to her," Dean said, sending Alex a meaningful scowl and then grinning at Chastity, trying to appease her. He gestured at Cas and wiggled his eyebrows. "He likes you, you like him, so—" he spread his hands out and sat back, the picture of self-content. "Dayenu!"

"No, I don—" Cas started.

Chastity was already tugging Cas up by the hand. "Come on, baby."

Cas looked back at Alex, full of alarm, and as a result, she began to feel the same way—freaked the hell out. Alex thought her tight grip on her mug of beer might shatter the glass and she suddenly stood up, drawing a questioning gaze from Dean and Chastity. She was flaming hot from embarrassment but she just looked at Cas, trying to back him up and stand up for him somehow. She struggled with words for a second. "You... you don't have to, Cas, if you don't want to," she squeaked out in the most mortifying tone she'd ever heard herself speak in.

Dean got up too, his chair scraping the floor loudly as he rolled his eyes. He smacked a bunch of bills into Cas's chest after giving Alex an impatient glance. "Hey, listen. Take this. If she asks for a credit card, say no. Now just stick to the basics, okay? Do not order off the menu. Go get her, tiger."
Cas took the money awkwardly, seeming very unsure about what was about to happen. Alex looked at him wordlessly, trying to let him know, silently, if he had said the word, she would have laid that skank out right then and there. But Dean stepped forward a little, blocking their view of each other. "Come on, Cas! Don't make me push you." Dean said, then did just that: physically pushed Cas backward a little bit. "I know you want to, now go! Make me proud!"

Chastity was pulling on Cas and without a word, Cas went along with it, allowed the blonde to lead him away by the hand toward the back of the club. Alex watched, slack-jawed and almost angry, especially when Chastity smiled back at Cas alluringly.

"Hey, what have I told you about being rude to strippers?" Dean asked, demanding her gaze.

Indignant, Alex whirled on him. "And what have I told you about hookers?!"

He was pleased with himself and it showed. "I forget. Heh." He took his seat again, glancing up at a nearby dancing girl.

"Moron," Alex muttered, basically seething.

"Ah, come on," he said, verbally swatting her away, taking a sip of his beer. "Lighten up. Even angels need to get some."

She wanted to hit him, honestly. "Shut your face," she retorted, and stared at the door where Cas and Chastity had gone through. She pictured herself striding through that door, ripping that bimbo off of Cas's half-naked body and throwing her across the room. What the hell! Get a grip, Alex. No one forced Cas to go in there. He went of his own free will. Still... clenching her jaw, Alex she shook her head at herself and in frustration she knocked a chair over, grabbed her beer, and went to the opposite end of the club, ignoring Dean and sliding into a quiet, dark corner booth. There she proceeded to stew over her beer while trying to decide if she should go in after Castiel or not.

It was literally ten seconds after she’d sat down that a crusty redneck trucker-looking guy in his forties sidled up to her. "Hey sweetheart. You here to watch the show? That's kinda hot."

Alex gave him a harsh look, not in the mood to deal with assholes. "Screw off."

Instead, he sat down there at the booth with her, grinning, looking her up and down appraisingly. "I mean, if you're looking for a good time, I uh, would love to get to know you."

Getting real agitated real quick, Alex refused to look at the guy, just stared away pointedly, trying to control herself. "Listen, asshole. I'm not interested. Not now, not ever, so get lost."

He scooted a little closer, trying to wrap his arm around her. "Come on baby, just lemme buy you a drink, that's all."

She shot him a dangerous glare, shoved his arm away hard. Do not fuck with me. The guy seemed to be amused by her agitation, like he found it cute. She raised a single eyebrow, gave him one last warning, her expression deadly. Below the table, her hand was sliding down to the back of her jeans, where her knife was tucked into its sheath. Her fingers wrapped around the handle. "I said, leave—me—alone," she growled.

"Don't be like that, sweetie—" the guy said, but never finished his sentence. In a blur of motion, Alex stabbed her hunting knife down into the table, right between his fingers with a sickening thwack, missing cutting off his middle finger by millimeters.

The guy yanked his hand away, flailed backwards, stared at her in total shock. She was still
gripping the hilt of the knife and leaned forward a little bit, into his face. Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "Unless you wanna lose a limb, baby… back… off." She yanked the knife out of the table even as he stumbled out of the booth, shaken and terrified.

"You crazy bitch!" he said, even as he practically ran the opposite direction.

She chuckled at that, put her knife back in its sheath. "Like I haven't gotten that one before," she commented wryly to herself, and then returned to her beer… and at that point noticed Dean had disappeared. Where the hell was he? Probably in the back… ugh. Even if that asshole trucker guy had been barking up the wrong tree, at least he'd distracted her for a second from all the Castiel crap. Alex tried not to think of what that hooker chick would be doing to Cas right about now—or oh my god, what would he be doing? She stared at the mug of beer in front of her, her stomach churning. This sucked. Why did she come along for this? What the hell was she thinking? That Cas was gonna change his mind and then want to hang out with her or something? Oh my god you're pathetic. Alex couldn't stand it anymore and she stood up, threw her beer glass at the wall. It shattered and she stalked out of the club under the questioning, startled gazes of patrons and strippers alike. She didn't take much notice.

She was too busy imagining Cas and that stupid, plastic woman all over him, pulling off his clothes. At first, she pictured him terrified, laying there, afraid for his life, cowering, wide-eyed as that bitch crawled onto him like a bug. That was a bad mental image, but the next one was far worse, and on the opposite end of the spectrum. She pictured Castiel hungrily sweeping Chastity up into his strong arms, throwing her down on the bed roughly, ripping her lingerie off, taking her passionately like the characters in the romance novels she read sometimes. Both images made her want to rip someone's eyes out.

She ran a hand through her hair in agitation, reaching the end of the building where the alleyway started.

"Come on baby, let's get you more comfortable," Chastity said, walking Cas forward, her chest pressing into his as she tugged on his tie. They were in a darkened room that was small and had a large bed in it and she wouldn't stop touching him, leaning into him.

"I, I assure you, I'm perfectly comfortable—" he lied, trying not to be rude, holding his hands out, trying to keep her at a respectable distance from himself. She smelled very strangely and was looking at him in a way he found disturbing—he suddenly found the backs of his lower legs had hit against the bed and he fell slightly to sit down there. Chastity was already climbing on top of him, her legs straddling his. She was making soft little mmm sounds that perplexed Castiel completely, made him feel afraid, alarmed. Her hands ran up his chest through his shirt and pushed at his coat a little. She was trying to undress him. He tensed, trying to stop her from what she was doing. "Y-you're making me less comfortable," he said, and then she nipped at his neck with her mouth—was she trying to taste him? Cas felt frozen in the worst way possible and unsure of how to escape. Chastity ran her tongue along the place just below his ear even as she stuck her hands down low between their bodies and began to undo his belt. Castiel was no longer able to be polite as his mind clanged with the word no over and over. You don't have to Cas, if you don't want to. Alex's words, words that he decided to get behind. He grabbed Chastity by the upper arms and pushed her away.

She reacted immediately. "What the hell is your problem?" she asked, face conveying her aghast, angry emotions. "Don't push me. Straight up stuff only. No roughhousing." As quickly as her anger had shown itself, her face suddenly transformed into the coy, flirtatious mask it had been before and she approached him again, tried to touch him—but Castiel held her back, looked at her in the eyes, deeply.
Usually he would ask permission before reading a mind, but today, he didn't. He was desperate for some way to get her mind off of touching him. He didn't like her touching him. "I see pain in you, Chastity," he said, seeing everything about her in a small second. "It's not your fault that your father Gene ran away. It was because he hated his job at the post office. You work this job because you have no self esteem and want to be loved as you never were as a child."

Chastity's expression went cold with shock, then dark with anger. And then without warning she drew back and slapped him in the face, began screaming insults and telling him to get out... then thankfully began to push him away.

Alex paced the alleyway with short patience. She heard footsteps right behind her and turned to see the guy who had bothered her in the club and another guy. Oh shit—she recognized that angry, vengeful glint in his eye, and turned to make a run for it, but he was already too close and caught her by the wrist, then shoved her up against the wall in the dark alleyway. "You crazy, dumb bitch! No one tries to cut my fingers off!"

He had yellow teeth and red ruddy skin from drinking too much. He was slow and stupid and drunk as hell at the current moment. "Oh, is that right, Billy Joe Bob?" Alex asked coolly. He seemed momentarily confused by her calm, nonchalant demeanor. And then, he was doubled over after she violently kneed him in the balls and smashed him in the top of the head with her elbow. She broke out of his grip only to get grabbed by the second guy, who bear-hugged her, pretty much disabling her completely. He wasn't as drunk or stupid as his friend. "Hey!" she shouted, wiggling hard and trying to get free. The first guy had already recovered from her assault, and helped his buddy slam her back against the wall. Both of the men held her there against the wall, not just her arms, but her legs. Pissed more than anything else, Alex thrashed violently, seething.

"Hey!" came a thundering shout—Dean?

Then a low, threatening voice—Castiel. "Get away from her. Now."

Her attackers turned to look, and Alex could see her brother, murderous, and Castiel, devastating. They were coming closer, and fast.

"Why, what are you gonna do?" The first guy sneered, but even before he finished asking, Cas had reached out and practically ripped him off of Alex; threw him across the alley with brutal force where he smashed into some dumpsters and ceased to move. Dean had simultaneously grabbed the second guy and bashed him in the face with his fist, knocking him out cold in one violent, enraged punch. In all, the boys made quick work of the guys in all of five seconds, if that.

Alex couldn't help it. She was impressed at the show of strength and looked at Cas in a mixture of appreciation and then... dread. She took in his loose tie, the trench coat all askew, his partially unbuckled belt. She swallowed, suddenly feeling a little queasy. Had he...? Did they...? He was oblivious to her wandering, questioning gaze and had grasped her just above the elbow, looking at her sternly, leaning in, his eyes demanding a quick answer to his questions. His touch sort of startled her. "Are you injured?" he asked, his voice low and deadly. "Did these men hurt you?"

His closeness also caught her off guard. "N-no, I—"

Dean pushed Cas aside, looking at Alex with a horrified, savage expression. "You okay? What were they—"

Crowded, Alex held her hands up, palms facing them, as if to tell them to back up. 'I'm fine. I'm fine. I totally had that." She straightened a little, gave Cas a questioning look. "So um that... didn't
He remained silent, obviously not understanding the implication. Dean chuckled ruefully. "Yeah, so, Cas scared off the girl with all his angel ESP stuff. Messed the whole thing up."

"Oh," Alex said, trying not to sound as relieved as she felt. "So no…" she shook her head, trying to appear like she was searching for the words, trying to appear like it didn't matter either way. "No, consummation, or..."

No. No consummation. Cas's expression confirmed that he was still a virgin.

"Wow, come to the current century, Chaucer," Dean commented and Alex rolled her eyes at her brother, then brushed past them and went over to the unconscious form of one of the guys who had attacked her. She yanked him over onto his stomach, sticking her hand in his back pocket as she told herself to get a grip. Cas's sex life wasn't any of her business, anyway.

Cas looked stunned. "...What are you doing?" he asked her.

Pulling out the guy's wallet, she wagged it at him. "Hey, the guy needs to make the pain in my ass he's been worth my while." She pulled out several hundred dollar bills, impressed with the find. "Not bad."

Dean was going through the other guy's wallet and Castiel came to Alex, who was counting bills. He fixed her with a stern expression. "They had foul intentions for you," he insisted. "You shouldn't be so nonchalant."

" Relax, Cas. Everything's fine," she said, avoiding looking at him in the current moment.

His intensity didn't waver. "No, I shouldn't have allowed Dean to distract me." His expression changed, slightly, and she didn't know how to interpret it. "My duty is to protect you." It was said so vehemently, and combined with his gaze, Alex was temporarily stilled.

Geez. His eyes made it hard for her to find words. Flustered, she got outwardly pissy. "...I'm fine," she told him, then had to brush past him to avoid looking at him. She hardened her voice. "I protect myself, okay?"

"Like you just did a minute ago?" He challenged.

Alex stopped and turned, head tilted to the side. She was pleasantly surprised. "Cas… was that... sarcasm?" She cracked a grin at him. "Very good, young grasshopper."

He just frowned. "I'm not an insect."

God, Cas. He didn't know how cute he was. "I know you're not," she said, her tone decidedly fond. She smiled again, a crooked little quirked smile, and on a whim she reached out and fixed his messed up tie, carefully sliding the knot back up to its rightful place. Her thumb just barely brushed against the skin of his neck, and somehow, that simple, mistaken touch against the warmth of his skin made her smile fade. And then she made the mistake of looking him in the eyes again. His gaze was locked on hers, and it suddenly felt incredibly awkward, intense. Why did he look like he was asking her a question with that smoldering gaze of his? And what was the question? Alex's expression fell completely and she pulled away from him, unsure of how to react... and if she was reading into things wrong.

"Dude, this guy has a bunch of church business cards in his wallet," Dean said, clearly amused at his findings in the guy's wallet, oblivious to Cas and Alex. Alex, a little shaken—not by the attack,
but by Cas—turned away silently and began leading the way to the Impala, her hands in her pockets, leaving the guys to lag behind a little bit.

"Man, I mean, I still think we should try again," Dean said to Cas, pocketing the cash he'd taken from the guy's wallet. "There's more clubs around here, and—"

"No, Dean," Castiel said almost wearily as they began walking to the car.

"Aw don't be like that, Cas," Dean said. "I still don't get why you didn't make it with Chastity. I mean, dude, she was beautiful!"

"No, she was not," Cas corrected.

"Oh, come on, you got nothing to judge her against," Dean scoffed as they came to a stop at the car. Alex was already in the back seat, shutting the door behind herself. Dean looked at Cas over the top of the car. "I mean, how many women have you even seen in your lifetime, like five?"

Cas's head tilted to the side just slightly, as if what Dean had suggested was ridiculous. "All of them."

Dean looked a little put off. "Well. Uh. Touché. Well, maybe your thing isn't blondes, huh?" He chuckled. "Brunettes!" Cas's gaze faltered, his eyes sliding over to Alex. Dean, too busy laughing as he got into the car, didn't notice.

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Later That Night

Alex sat out on the crappy, dilapidated porch of the abandoned house, not really doing anything, just staring, just awake. A few empty beer bottles were beside her, a twelve-pack she was working on. She was definitely a little buzzed. She heard the front door open behind her and she listened. Heavy footsteps were coming close to her. Dean came down one step below her, his familiar shape and size sort of comforting and annoying at the same time. "Whatcha doing?"

"Nothing," she replied honestly, carelessly, glancing sidelong at him tersely.

He looked at her a couple beats. "You should get some rest. Big day tomorrow."

"Not tired yet," she said with a weak shrug.

There was a short silent. "You're still mad about your smokes," he assumed. Alex made a face. Not really, but if he thought that, fine. He sat beside her, let out a 'whoosh' of air, cleared his throat. "Right. So... uh, awkward subject." Alex's head turned slowly, her expression quickly becoming suspicious. Dean looked highly uncomfortable. This couldn't be good. He searched the sky, not looking at her. "Cas told me you're a... you know... a... uh... virgin."

Alex's face went completely blank, her mouth dropping open from the punch of shock to her stomach. "What? How did he—" she stopped, seeming to remember, oh yeah, he always friggin' knows everything. She rubbed the back of her neck self consciously. She didn't want to have this conversation. She tried to play it cool, tried to laugh lightly. "Yeah, fine, maybe I am." She shrugged, trying not to sound the way she felt. "Whatever. Don't talk to me about that."

Dean, more awkward than she had ever seen him, clasped his hands together as he leaned over his knees. "Alex, uh... abstinence is—"

"Oh my god!" She looked at him in horror—he was not about to have the talk with her. "Stop, are
you serious? Abstinence? You think I'm choosing to be the way I am? Uh, no. It just... turned out that way." She let out a laugh of dry, humorless air. "Yeah, okay? I'm twenty-six. And I'm..." she couldn't say the word. She gave him a tight little expression. "Happy?" she asked cynically.

He cleared his throat. "Well yeah, honestly, I kinda am."

She looked at him sharply, immediately offended. "What? Why?"

Dean looked very convicted and sure. "Because you don't need to let any guy touch you. Ever," he replied, as if that settled it.

What kind of moron was he? Was he really that unrealistic and even cruel? "Ever?" she asked, sinking inside and feeling worthless. "Wow Dean," she commented, staring off into the night and feeling more miserable than she had in awhile. "That's so fucking hypocritical."

He just shrugged, kind of accepting the accusation. "I mean, I just... maybe not ever, okay? But I.... I can't see you hurt, Al. And most guys out there... trust me, all they want is sex. Not love, not a relationship. They just want a good time. I can't see you used like that."

She looked at him sidelong. She knew he meant well. He was just an idiot in the way he went about it. "Well, I wouldn't worry yourself, Dean," she said sarcastically. "I don't see much chance of me ever being even in a relationship, let alone..." she trailed off, embarrassed at this entire situation. They had never really talked about anything like this before. "I mean, I have no experience, nothing to offer. I don't even know how to put on makeup—or how to talk to a guy without offending him or making him feel stupid—I don't know how to be the kind of girl any guy, ever, would even like. I'm a fucking disaster." Beside her, Dean looked kind of taken aback, like he hadn't thought of all the things that Alex carried silently. She wasn't done yet though. She stared at the dark brown beer bottle in her hand. "I mean, come on. What man would want all of this baggage I have? All my problems and weirdness? I'm not normal. I've never been normal. I'm a freak. A total freak."

"T-that's not true," Dean protested feebly, even though they both knew it was.

Alex just laughed at him, took a swig of beer. "It is," she said, cold to herself in that moment. "You know it is. Do you know, I've had one kiss my whole life? And it was a damn prank."

"What?" he asked softly.

She was smirking, as if it were a joke to her. "Yeah. I never told anyone. Too embarrassed I guess." She picked at a splinter next to herself.

"Tell me," he commanded. "Now."

Her smile faded. A long silence passed, and she wasn't sure she would tell him at all. But she ended up taking in a deep breath and barreling forward. "Fifth grade. Kevin Dukes. Passed me notes in class... said he liked me. That I was pretty. I couldn't believe it." She looked down, breathed out heavily. "And, turns out I shouldn't have." Dean was listening in something like dread-filled anticipation. "He took me to a classroom that I thought was empty, and kissed me... then a bunch of the kids came out from where they were hiding and watching, and then they all started to laugh at me and say... the most horrible things." She went quiet. Those memories still hurt as bad as they had the day they happened. How could kids be so mean? She still remembered one girl jeering at her. 'No one would wanna kiss the girl who can't talk! You're such a waste of space!' The laughter still sounded so crystal clear in her mind. Alex was ashamed all over again.
"Son of a bitch," Dean growled, visibly pissed. "You shoulda told me. I woulda kicked his ass all the way to China—all their asses."

Alex looked at him directly. "Why do you think I dropped out of school, Dean? Stuff like that happened, too many times. There was nothing for me there. At any school. I had to protect myself from it."

He knew that of course. He'd seen her and Sam get picked on and isolated from groups of kids a lot of times. "But you had me to do keep you safe," he protested softly, hollowly.

"Maybe," she said. "But some things, I just was too afraid to let anyone know about." She scoffed. "Kevin Dukes—some skinny little ten year old with a bowl cut—was basically the only guy who ever really showed an interest in me. And that interest wasn't real. Kind of gets under your skin. Makes you feel..." she trailed off, her expression pained. She couldn't seem to say anything else. Dean scooted a little closer, put a caring hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, no, don't do that," he said, voice filled with brotherly care and affection—the kind he'd always used when she'd been upset as a child. She leaned into him a little and felt more and more like crying. But she wouldn't let herself. Dean was quiet and thoughtful, more sensitive to her than before. "You know, I want you to find a guy someday who will... will take care of you and treat you good and marry you," he said, and it sounded like he was having to pull this stuff out of his ass. "I can see you, a couple scrappy kids, some kinda lumberjack, outdoorsy guy maybe..." he said, trying to sound optimistic. It was sweet—he was trying to cheer her up, say things that he thought all women wanted, but Alex just felt aversion. None of that sounded quite right to her.

She shook her head, correcting him. "Yeah, I don't think I want that stuff though... I mean I'm not sure what I want but... not that stuff." She tried to picture herself being a wife or a mom. It was totally foreign and not fitting. She was a hunter, and always would be. That's what was right—and if she had to do it alone, okay. Honestly, she'd decided awhile ago that she was pretty much going to be alone forever anyway.

Dean was looking at her intently. "Come on, you don't ever, you know, wanna... meet a guy... see where it goes...?" He was trying, but it was making her feel worse, because she was twenty-six and hadn't ever 'met a guy' so why would she now?

She chuckled humorlessly, because otherwise she'd start to cry. "Dean... I think the possibility of God being real is more plausible than me ever finding a guy who would wanna be with me."

"But even if—" he started.

"Dean," she said loudly as she gave him an open, pleading look. "I don't want to talk about this with you. Not now. Probably not ever again, okay? Please. It hurts too much, damn." He withdrew a little, as if stung, but she was too humiliated to care. "Can you just... just leave me alone? You don't have to worry about me being a virgin or not. I'm pretty sure I'm always gonna be one, so congrats." She gave him a thin, sarcastic smile to cover up her true feelings.

Dean considered her sadly for a couple seconds then nodded and got up, looking remorseful. She knew he was thinking he never should have brought up the topic. He almost seemed embarrassed. That didn't happen a lot. "Yeah," he said, nodding shallowly. "Yeah. I'll uh, be inside if you need anything."

"Yeah, great," she mumbled, and didn't watch as he retreated. The door shut behind him, and she was alone again. She took in a deep breath, shut her eyes, and then looked back up at the stars. And then frowned when she heard the door opening again. Aggravated, she rolled her eyes. "Dean,
come on, I said—" she looked up and went silent. It was Cas. A little surprised, she blinked a couple times. "Oh. It's you." He made her immediately a little nervous.

"Hello Alex." He came down to her stair and sat down—and she could see that he remembered his lesson from the last time he sat next to her. He leaned his arms over his legs, casually, just like she'd shown him.

That brought a little smile to her face, and she reached for the twelve-pack near her foot, forgetting her angst momentarily. "Here. Have a beer." She cracked it open on the edge of the porch for him and handed it over, noticing his fingers and the way they felt when he reached out and took the beer, surprising her.

He sampled it slowly. It was a darker beer than the one he'd had at the strip club. He took a huge gulp and a frown creased his face as he stared at the beer sourly. "This tastes disgusting."

She looked at him sidelong. He really was so endearing in the weirdest, sweetest way. "You get used to it."

His expression got thoughtful, stone-like, and he set the bottle down. There was a long, long silence. So long that Alex gave up on a conversation and thought while staring off into the stars. And then Cas's voice cut through her thoughts, startling her.

"I should have been there to protect you tonight."

His concern was nice, but Alex heaved a rueful sigh. She should have known he wouldn't let that go. "Cas. I told you already. I've got my own back," she said, gesturing errantly with her beer bottle. "Don't guilt trip yourself. So I get beat up sometimes, no big deal."

He looked at her sharply at that comment, but said nothing else for a long moment. He grew pensive and stared broodingly out into the dark, overgrown yard for a long moment. Then suddenly he spoke again. "Count your scars."

Alex felt her eyebrows pressing in together as she looked at him for explanation. "What?"

His eyes came to hers, and even in the dark, the hue was brilliant and startling. He looked pained. "That's how many times you needed me and I wasn't there."

The words were a shock and a thrill all at once and felt distinctly truthful and almost romantic which no way they could be romantic. Right? Alex gave him an odd look, a little lost for words, a little more than unsure how to respond. She felt nervous again. She settled on deflection, decided to imply he was being flowery and cheesy while she laughed it off. "Have uh, have you been reading romance novels, Cas?"

He got one of those tiny, knowing smiles on his face as his eyes traveled her face. "Have you?"

That question, combined with the look on his face, almost made her jaw drop. Busted. "Uh…" what was the point of lying? She grimaced, made a face, flustered at his playfulness. When had he picked that up? "Yes…?" She smiled sheepishly but he was smiling, too. Just the corners of his mouth upturned, the edges of his eyes wrinkled a little. And feeling like they shared an inside joke or something, Alex playfully nudged her shoulder against his before she could think it through. Then she regretted it and cursed herself for being tipsy. She let out a long sigh as her smile faded slowly into a confused expression. She didn't know how to act around him sometimes.

Cas didn't seem bothered. He peered at her a moment, concern covering his face after a moment of softness had rendered his face younger. "To be honest, Alex, I regret not acting sooner," Castiel
said quietly, still thinking about his statement about her scars, apparently. The grave tone of his voice transfixed her. "Letting Sam hit you. Letting harm befall you at all. I hated seeing that. I didn't want it to happen." He sounded so very vexed about it.

Cautious, Alex let her eyes search his for a moment, her somber expression mirroring his. "I'm okay, Cas." And she was. She broke the grim atmosphere with a playful expression. "Not to brag, but… I'm a pretty tough bird. I can take the hits."

Without missing a beat, he replied. "You shouldn't have to."

Her playful expression fell. Awkward again—everything was awkward again. "Yeah, well," she replied uncertainly, hesitantly. He had this way of always knocking her off her feet and it mystified her. Anyone else saying she shouldn't have to go through pain or be hurt and she would have been offended, thought they were saying it because they saw her as weak—that they felt sorry for her. But Cas… when he said stuff like that, it didn't seem that way. How did it seem? She couldn't quite put her finger on it. So without knowing how to reply to him, she moved on, changed the subject. "So," she cleared her throat, leaned heavily over her wide knees, fixed him with an appraising look. "You okay after today? The whole… Chastity thing?" She tried not to sound overly curious.

"Yes." He leaned a little over his knees too, looking at the way she did it. "It was a very... strange experience."

Well that was cryptic. Alex wet her lips, took another swig of beer to just fill in the silence, trying to decide if she should ask what she wanted to know or not. Apparently there'd been no sex but… what had there been? Feigning great casual half-interest, she cleared her throat, pretended to be studying and squinting at a distant star. "So did she… did she, uh, kiss you?"

"Yes," he replied. Alex's eyes widened a little and darted to him, even as he placed a finger against his neck. "Here." She couldn't stifle her feeling of relief to hear that. Was that messed up of her to be relieved?

"Oh," she said softly. "So not a real kiss."

Her words caused him great intrigue and he tilted his head to the side. "And what makes a kiss real?"

A little unprepared to answer that, Alex fumbled. She was imagining herself kissing him without even meaning to. "Wha—well, I guess… on the mouth," she said, flustered, still seeing them kissing in her mind's eye. She straightened, tried to explain her entire line of questioning, tried to get herself out of the hole she was digging. Tried to stop envisioning what she was envisioning. "I was just um, you know, asking because I thought it would be kind of sad if an angel had his first kiss with a... a hooker." Honestly, the thought of him kissing any woman seemed offensive and wrong to her.

"The term 'irony' comes to mind," Castiel commented, surprising her yet again. Sometimes he seemed so shrewd to her, so knowing. Other times he was as clueless as they came. He was fascinating… and impossible for her to figure out.

"Yeah. Irony," she agreed, sending another little smile his way before she took another sip of her beer and then leaned her elbows on the stair one level up. "So, Cas," she said conversationally, teasingly. She had to be cool and act outwardly chill, like she wasn't sort of crushing on him and finding herself liking him secretly. "You're still a virgin. Dean's heartbroken."

"I'm not heartbroken," he replied, then seemed to consider. "Then again, I have no heart."
Metaphorically speaking, of course."

That comment caused her pause. "I'm not so sure," she said, and he met her gaze, looking oddly conflicted. She sat up, mimicking him, leaning over her knees again, looking at no particular point in the distance in front of her. The seriousness of what she was thinking about took away her more girlish feelings. "What you did for us… disobeying Heaven and risking everything…. dying?" She paused, affected, remembering. She shook her head. "I don't think you can say you're heartless." She looked back at him and slowly sat up straight underneath his gaze. There it was again. That intense, consuming feeling brought on by the way he looked at her. In the dark, his eyes seemed so full of so much, and it was suddenly too much. Her emotions suddenly surged at strengths she didn't know possible and she fought to get her question out. "Are… are you really gonna die tomorrow, Cas?" she asked softly, eyes abruptly brimming with tears.

He saw her tears and grew greatly concerned. "Why are you crying?" he asked softly, seeming stunned at the sight of her face contorting. She said nothing, just let her expression silently plead with him: don't make me say. Part of her was compelled to suddenly take hold of him and kiss him and let that be her answer. But she was too afraid and didn't know how to just kiss a man out of the blue—it was too scary and too risky, the chance of being rejected. All she knew was that Castiel dying was something she did not want. A tear rolled down her cheek and she saw how his eyes followed the trail of grief as it streaked her cheek. Alex was humiliated to let him see her like that and suddenly became panicked when she felt even more tears coming, more emotion rising. With startling abruptness she stood up and fled into the house, trying to escape everything he was making her feel, trying to escape the hold of his soulful gaze.

The intensity of her confusing feelings was terrifying to her.
"And I'm finding in myself the things that chase me to the corners: in the dark, far from home, the sins of longing for you."
- The Crash Years

Two Days Later

"Dean. We have got to stop driving," Alex was cramped, uncomfortable, and going crazy in the passenger side seat. None of all that was unusual per se, but after sixteen friggin' hours of it with only three or four short stops, she really was beginning to feel like she might murder someone if they didn't pull over soon.

Dean was ignoring her at the moment, just like he had been all day. She waited a few more seconds and then tried again, her tone bordering on pushy. "You've been driving for a million hours straight and you haven't slept in like three days. Can we please stop?"

He acknowledged her with a half eye roll, said nothing. She could tell he was tired as hell, but trying to fight it. He had a lot on his mind—guess you would after trapping an archangel and nearly being fried by his wacky lightning powers. Alex thought back to Raphael's grand speech about God being dead, the angels who would bring the end of the world and "paradise" with it. Raphael had then suggested that they should consider that Lucifer was the one who had raised Castiel—something that had startled all three of them. That suggestion was still eating at Alex, honestly. And she could tell it had shaken Cas, too. After leaving Raphael trapped in a ring of holy fire, they'd gotten out of there, thankfully. Cas, clearly disappointed and troubled by the encounter, had disappeared shortly after without saying much of anything. But at least he'd survived the encounter. That was a definite plus.

"Dean," Alex prompted again.

A muscle jerked in his cheek. "What."

Getting annoyed now too, Alex huffed, stared at him. "What's your problem?"

"I'm tired and I've been driving all day!" He retorted.

Alex gave him a wan look. "How many times did I offer to drive?" She reminded him flatly. He just ignored her and huffed loudly. Alex took a deep, tired breath and watched the buildings pass by outside. "So," she said, trying to be tolerant. "Do you think God's dead like Raphael claimed?"

He chuckled sardonically. "Alex, I don't even think God is real."

"Then where did angels come from?" She asked.

"Planet Voltron," Dean wisecracked.

Alex patiently refrained from jabbing him in the side and thought a minute instead. "Maybe God got lost out there," she suggested. "It's a pretty big universe. Or maybe someone trapped him somewhere to get him out of the picture."

He gave her an unamused expression. "Or maybe it's all friggin' nuts and you're starting to sound looney tunes."
"Love you too," she retorted, giving him a playful look despite his grumpy antics.

She pulled out her phone to check it for messages—usually she forgot that she even had a phone unless it rang, but after getting a text earlier that day from Cas, she was curious if she'd hear from him again. He had written Does this message appear on your device? After laughing about how awkwardly he had phrased himself, she had texted back, No. And about two minutes later, he had texted back, What about this one? And she and Dean had giggled uncontrollably, Dean commenting that he forgot how much fun gullible people were.

Cas kept unintentionally throwing these funny, ironic, surprising moments into their lives that somehow made the horrible dark mess a little brighter. She almost didn't want to admit that to herself, because it was almost like they had replaced Sam with Cas there for those two days when they were tracking Raphael, anyway. And that made her feel guilty. She thought about being with him on that porch under the stars and how scared she'd been at the thought of him dying. Her face hardened a little in deep thought as she stared out the window but no longer saw what passed outside.

After about twenty more minutes, Dean finally gave in and pulled them over onto the side of the street in front of a motel in the heart of Kansas City—Alex left all of her stuff in the Impala, Dean grabbed his backpack, and then they headed inside, but not before being accosted by some religious pamphlet-passing guy asking them if they had thought about God's plan for them. If only that guy knew.

Even as they got into the room, Dean's phone rang. "Oh look, angel calling," he said sarcastically and answered.

Alex half listened, catching snippets of Dean's side of the conversation as she crammed the contents of a pack of crackers into her mouth for her dinner… at one point, Dean covered the mouthpiece and, amused, told her, "He says the voice told him he's almost out of minutes." Oh, Cas. She finished the crackers with a grin and tossed the wrapper as Dean continued walking the length of room, still on the phone. "Yeah, uh, in Kansas City. Century Hotel, room one-thirteen. No, whoa, whoa, not now. There's stuff we gotta do. Like what? Like sleep! Just pop in first thing tomorrow morning." He hung up and tossed his phone onto one of the beds.

"What'd Cas want?" Alex asked, looking at Dean sidelong.

Dean was taking his jacket off. "He says the Colt is still around… the demons have it… and he thinks that's what can kill the devil. We just gotta track it down."

"I thought no one could kill that guy," Alex said with a frown. Cas had said as much.

Dean shrugged. "Well if we can, I'm two thumbs way, way up. Colt, here we come."

Alex scratched her head, squinting. "Okay yeah but we track it down how?"

Dean groaned, scrubbing his face with his hands, clearly over her questions. "Lemme think about that in the morning." He all but crashed into one of the beds, hugged a pillow into his face, and ceased to move. Poor guy was exhausted.

Alex thought a moment then pulled out her phone, composing a new text message, addressing it to Sam. She glanced Dean's way, feeling like she was doing something wrong. She returned her attention to the phone keyboard, poised to type—and then, nothing. She didn't know what to say. How are you? No, that wasn't enough. Just took Cas to a brothel few days ago and almost chopped a guy's hand off, how are things your way? Or, maybe, Dean is being an asshole (what else is new)
and oh btw God is dead. How's the whole demon blood problem? She sucked in her cheeks thoughtfully, then put the phone down softly without sending anything.

She had no idea how to reach out to Sam, and she had this growing, ugly suspicion that he didn't want to be reached out to at all. It wouldn't be the first time. She didn't really want to believe that Sam was rejecting the family, but it had been true before, hadn't it? She pulled her jacket off and glanced at Dean—he was already snoring. She figured some sleep herself wouldn't hurt, but before she crawled into bed, she took off Dean's smelly shoes for him, grimacing against the familiar, sweaty odor. Gross. She tossed the shoes onto the floor then went to her own bed, switched off the light, fell asleep pretty fast. She dreamed that she heard Dean talking on the phone, but couldn't remember what about, or who to.

Alex opened her eyes to the morning light and immediately knew something was different—*wrong*. Below her, the bed was hard and poking into her in odd places—and when she looked, she realized why. She was laying on bed springs. *What the*—she looked around and became even more alarmed—the room was the same room, but looked like it had been through hell and back. There was ripped, disintegrating wallpaper, debris all over the floor, cobwebs in the corners, rusted, broken lamps on the cracked bedside tables. Freaking out, Alex jumped up, shook Dean. "Dean! Wake up!" She whispered urgently, feeling as if she needed to be on guard, like something horrible was about to happen. He was groggily blinking, then realizing what he was laying on, and he shot up. "Something's wrong," Alex said, looking around in confusion. "I mean like, *wrong* wrong."

Dean got up, looking as confused as she was. He went to the window, and she heard him murmur a soft "*what the hell?*" She joined him there and saw the street they had parked on last night—her mouth dropped open. As far as they could see, the entire city was in shambles and ruin, like there had been riots, fires, and all-out destruction. Wrecked, hollow, burned out cars, trash everywhere, graffiti all over everything, broken store windows. And not a person in sight.

"What the hell happened last night?" she asked, stunned. *Did we sleep through a nuclear bomb or something?*

"I don't know, but we're getting the hell outta here." Harrowed, Dean grabbed her arm, pushed her toward the door. When they got to the ground level, realized the Impala was gone, Dean's quiet panic went up two notches—Alex could tell by the way his jaw clenched and his nostrils flared that he was more freaked out than he was pissed. And that, in turn, freaked her out. The car being gone meant that they only had the things on them they'd taken with them into the motel room—which was only Dean's bag, as Alex had left hers in the car. So, no weapons, no car—and no clue what was going on.

Dean wandered down the street tensely, looking at everything in shocked silence. "We shouldn't be in the street," Alex whispered, trying to walk quietly as she trailed close behind. Her boots kept crunching on broken glass.

Dean turned suddenly, going stock still. "Did you hear that?" he cautiously headed down a wide alley way, and Alex, looking behind and around, followed. A small, skinny little girl was huddled over some broken glass on the ground. Her hair was matted, her skin was filthy. Dean approached her. "Hey, kid—are you okay?"

Alex looked at the little girl, then her eyes went up to the graffiti leering at them from the end of the alleyway. She froze, her heart seeming to stop. Spray painted in blood-red letters: *CROATOAN*.

Alex looked back at the little girl, at Dean leaning down to touch her shoulder—and made a
horrible realization. "Dean, no!" she warned in a shout, yanking him aside even as the girl looked up and lunged forward, a piece of jagged glass in her hand. Dean and Alex jumped backward in tandem, barely missing being cut. The slash had been so violent that the kid almost pitched herself off her feet—and taking the only chance he might get, Dean kicked the kid in the face. She fell over, going still. Dean was breathing heavy, mostly from surprise and adrenaline.

They glanced at each other. "That was just wrong," he commented grimly. No time for sympathy, Alex nodded her head toward the ominous graffiti, and he saw it then muttered, "aw crap."

Just then a bunch of disheveled, agitated adults, maybe twenty of them, rounded the corner—Alex's blood chilled—Croatoans. Dean grabbed onto Alex, already backing up. "This is the part where we run!" he yelled, and run they did, ran for their very lives, not even sure where they were going. They rounded corner after corner, trying to lose the rapidly gaining Croatoans in the destroyed city streets. And suddenly, they rounded another corner, and ran right into a high, chain link fence that shuddered on impact. Dean and Alex whirled, realizing they were cornered, weaponless, and probably as good as dead.

And then without any warning, the sound of semi-automatic gunfire rang out, and several of the Croatoans in front of them jerked and dropped as bullets pelted the crowd. Dean and Alex grabbed at each other and fell to the ground for cover, half-crawling half-scrambling toward another nearby alley way. Dean pushed Alex ahead of himself. "Shit!" Dean swore, panting as they narrowly dodged several bullets and found cover in the narrow, stinking alley.

Alex was shaking and panting, pressed up against the wall beside her brother. "What the hell?!" she asked in a gaunt, breathless whisper over the sound of continuing gunfire as she gulped air down. "Kansas City got infected and destroyed overnight by the Croatoan virus?!

"Not possible," Dean said, shaking his head in a sort of stunned way. "N-no way." But he didn't sound so sure. The sound of gunfire died out.

Dean craned his neck, peering in the direction from where they had just come. Alex recognized the look on his face—he was trying to figure out what to do.

After a couple seconds, he looked back at her. "We'll wait until dark and hop the fence. Stay sharp. You got your knife?"

She gave him a look—duh.

"I don't get it," Dean said, holding his phone up in the air. "No service. The hell is going on?"

Alex fiddled with the car's radio, but there was only static on every channel. They were driving down an entirely still highway in the dark of night. Every now and then they passed wrecks, abandoned cars, or fires, but they saw no people. It was eerie and disconcerting. After they had found a way out of the city, they had seen a sign posted on the outside of the fence that said the city was a "Croatoan Hot Zone." The sign had been dated August, 2014—a date that was years into the future. So, there was that. Alex glanced at Dean whose expression was rigid as he drove.

"You really think Bobby will he able to help us?" Alex asked.

"Well who the hell else could?" Dean retorted.

"He might not even live in the same place in 2014," Alex pointed out. She hoped she was wrong.

"Or he could be dead," Dean said bluntly. Alex looked at him in surprise. She hadn't even
considered that. And now she was. Her stomach twisted sickly.

"Croatoan pandemic reaches Australia." The Winchesters both jumped at the sound of a new voice behind them, turning fast to see Zachariah sitting in the back seat reading a newspaper leisurely. And suddenly, this entire thing made perfect sense.

"I thought I smelled your stink on this Back to the Future crap," Dean growled.

"President Palin defends bombing of Houston," Zachariah continued, casually reading from the paper, then looked up, smiled at Alex. "Certainly a buyer's market in real estate. Let's see what's happening in sports. Oh… that's right—no more sports. Congress revoked the right to group assembly. What's left of Congress, that is. Hardly a quorum, if you ask me."

Dean's knuckles were white on the steering wheel. "You are not funny, man, so stop trying."

"How'd you find us?" Alex demanded.

Zachariah smiled, speaking in a pleasant conversational tone. "Afraid we had to tap some unorthodox resources of late—human informants. We've been making inspirational visits to the fringier Christian groups. They've been given your image, told to keep an eye out."

"The Bible guy outside the motel—" Dean surmised. '"He, what, dropped a dime on us?"

"Onward, Christian soldiers."

"Very funny... now send us back, you jackass," Alex said acidly.

"Oh, you'll get back—all in good time," Zachariah said with a friendly smile. "We just want you two to... marinate a bit." His friendly persona seemed to fade a little, and he leaned forward, looked at Dean, talked with a soft, dangerous tone. "Three days, Dean. Three days to see where this course of action takes you..." he then looked at Alex meaningfully. "And your family."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Alex asked, not sure what the angel was getting at, but disliking his tone.

"It means that your brother's choices have consequences," Zachariah said. "This is what happens to the world and your little family pack if Dean continues to say 'no' to Michael. Have a little look-see." And then he disappeared, leaving two very frustrated Winchesters.

"Son of a bitch," Dean muttered. "Three days. Fine. Great. Friggin' great. I already don't like this."

"I sure as hell hope Bobby can give us some damn answers," Alex muttered grimly.

But trying to contact Bobby would prove to be a dead end. They found his house in a state of abandonment, his wheelchair rusted and bent and turned over in his living room. Bobby was nowhere to be found.

They did find one lead—a black and white photograph of some gun-toting guys they didn't recognize. Bobby was in the front of them, sitting in his wheelchair, holding a gun too. Beside him, there was a guy who looked kind of like Cas. They were all standing in front of a sign that read Camp Chitaqua.

After doing some fast old fashioned research with some local maps and directories, Dean and Alex located the camp. It was only a couple hours from Bobby's, and they raced there in breakneck speed. Dean was convinced they would find Bobby there. Alex wasn't so sure.
The camp was surrounded by chain link fence, and had armed patrols—Alex argued in whispers with Dean, said they should wait for daybreak instead of just sneaking in and risk being shot in the middle of the night—and he almost listened to her. Almost. But then he saw the Impala sitting off in some overgrown weeds, broken down and rusted out. He had muttered, "Oh, baby, no…" and climbed the fence. Alex had followed him, pissed but unwilling to be separated. She did hang back by the fence when he crept over to the car. It was out in the open, and she had a bad feeling about it.

"Dean—" she protested in a hissed whisper.

"Oh my God…" Dean said, touching his car frantically, not paying attention to his sister. "Baby, what'd they do to you?"

Alex saw the shadowy figure too late—wasn't able to warn Dean before he was hit over the head. Alex ran out of where she had been hiding, ready to deck this guy who had just knocked out her brother. "Hey!"

The man whirled, and when their eyes met, both of them froze momentarily in complete astonishment. "What—" Alex managed, staring into the assailant's face, her mouth hanging open. In that brief pause, his face changed from shock to aggression, and there was suddenly a fist flying towards her face and the whole work went dark.

"Look, man—I'm not a shapeshifter or demon or anything, okay?" she heard Dean say.

Alex groaned, grimaced, and opened her eyes, blinking against double vision. She was awkwardly sitting on some dark wood flooring, and her wrist seemed to be tethered to something when she weakly pulled at it. "Yeah, I know," Dean's voice replied, as if he were talking to himself.

Alex looked up, confused momentarily, and saw that she was handcuffed to a metal ladder and that Dean was beside her... and that Dean was also in front of her. She suddenly remembered everything—Dean getting knocked out, her rushing in, then seeing Dean was the one who had knocked Dean out. She was so, very confused. She looked back and forth at the two of them, stumped. "There's two of you," she muttered while wondering if she was high. "Why are there two of you?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out… 'Alex,'" said the Dean who was holding them hostage. He said her name as if he didn't believe that was her. He looked back at her Dean. "I did the drill while you were out. Silver, salt, holy water—nothing, both of you. But you know what was funny, 'Dean'? Was that you had every hidden lock pick, box cutter, and switchblade that I carry. Now, you want to explain that? Oh, and the, uh, resemblance, while you're at it?"

"Zachariah." Dean said simply.

"Come again?" the other one asked.

Dean fixed the other Dean with a contemptuous look. "Zach plucked us from our beds in two thousand nine and threw us five years into the future."

This apparent future version of Dean's eyes narrowed. "Where is he? I want to talk to him."

"We don't know," Alex told him, catty.

"Oh, you don't know," he retorted doubtfully, matching her tone.
She raised her eyebrows slightly. "He's not exactly on our speed dial."

Her Dean was watching the exchange with an odd expression, like maybe he was realizing what it looked like to see himself argue with his sister. He then cut in, drawing the future version of himself's attention. "Look, I just want to get us back to our own friggin' year, okay?"

Future Dean stood up from where he had been leaning against a table. "Okay. If you're me, then tell me something only I would know."

Beside her, Dean went into deep thought, glanced at her, sighed defeat, then looked at the other version of himself. "Rhonda Hurley. We were, uh, nineteen." He glanced sidelong at Alex, cleared his throat. "She, uh, made us try on her panties. They were pink. And satiny." Alex was now looking at him with an open mouth. Dean awkwardly rubbed his neck, avoiding her gaze. "And, uh, we kind of liked it."

The other Dean looked impressed. "Touché."

Alex, however, was trying not to dissolve into laughter. "Wo-ow. Did you feel really pretty, Dean?"

Dean finally turned to her, looking very serious. "I swear you to secrecy, right here and now."

Alex leaned forward conspiratorially. "Fine... but just remember: I know your satiny little secret." That would make for excellent blackmail if she ever needed it. Dean looked deadpan and unamused.

The 2014 Dean just watched, a strange expression on his face. Something like sadness. He wiped it away. "So, what, Zach zapped you two up here to see how bad it gets?"

"I guess," Dean said. "Croatoan virus, right? That's their endgame?"

The other Dean nodded. He looked really tired. "It's efficient, it's incurable, and it's scary as hell. Turns people into monsters. Started hitting the major cities about two years ago. World really went in the crapper after that."

This was a lot of heavy information. Alex's Dean took a pause, then looked up again, suddenly thinking of something. "What about Sam?"

2014 Dean went still, got a little quiet. "Heavyweight showdown in Detroit. From what I understand... Sam didn't make it."

Alex literally felt her heart drop. No. How? "We weren't with him?" She asked in soft disbelief.

A long, somber pause. "No." 2014 Dean looked down, withering slightly under his sister's wounded, questioning gaze. "No, me and Sam, we haven't talked in—hell, five years."

"What, we never tried to find him?" Dean asked, shellshocked at the information.

There was a jaded, if guilty, scoff. "We had other people to worry about."

"Like who?" Alex asked, a little angrily—because, why would any version of Dean let the family fall apart like that? She suddenly realized she didn't know where future her was. "What about me?" She asked. "Where the hell am I in all this mess?"

Dean nodded, looked down, like he'd just been waiting to be asked that. "Not here."
"Okay... so where am I?" Alex asked, getting fed up.

Dean stood up, took a couple steps toward the door, looked back at them with a strange expression, and his jaw clenched, unclenched. "Alex Winchester... is dead and gone."

"What?" She asked, to which Dean just scoffed.

"Yeah. Dark times, what can I say?" He turned to leave. Beside Alex, her Dean was positively speechless and horrified.

"What do you mean, what can you say?" Alex repeated, not really sure she believed what he'd told them. "I'm dead? You're joking, right?"

"No, I'm not joking." He looked slightly sickened. "You died eight months ago, okay?"

Alex felt stung. This was a surreal conversation. Her curiosity, as morbid as it was, got the best of her. "How?"

He let out a soft air-laugh, a sound that had no happiness in it at all. He looked bitter. "I don't think its best for you to know that little detail." He turned to leave, and the other Dean strained against his handcuffs in disbelief.

"Where're you going? You're just gonna tell us that crap and leave us here?"

2014 Dean turned and looked at them, irritated. "Yes. I got a camp full of twitchy trauma survivors out there with an apocalypse hanging over their head. The last thing they need to see is a version of The Parent Trap, and Alex back from the friggin' grave. So, yeah, you stay locked down." He left, slamming the door behind him, his retreating footsteps the only sound.

"... dick!" Dean exclaimed, earning a funny look from his sister. They were silent and still for a few seconds, trying to process all of it.

"Okay." Alex looked at her brother. "So have we decided if this real or not?"

Grudging, Dean looked her direction. "For all our sakes... I hope not. But I don't wanna wait around to find out." He looked down and began digging at a nail in the floor with his fingernails.

Alex waited a couple seconds, then cleared her throat. "What're you doing?"

He shot her a look. "How else are we gonna pick these handcuff locks, genius? I'm not sitting here cuffed all day until I come back."

Alex just smiled and calmly pulled the lock pick out from underneath her shirt where it hung on its silver chain. She dangled it in midair and then pointed at it. Dean stopped his floorboard digging and looked at her in a mixture of confusion and pleasant surprise. "When did you start wearing that?"

"You're too observant for your own good," she said sarcastically, fiddling with her handcuffs and the lock pick. "Remember that time I got locked in the panic room? I didn't like that very much, so..." she trailed off. Her cuffs snapped off, and she began working on his. "Good thing I never mentioned it to you, or you—the 2014 you—might have known about it and taken it." She thought a second, frowned. "Wait. But if this is real... the real future... then why doesn't twenty fourteen you remember this? Wouldn't the you here in front of me be the same one later? So, the guy who just left, would be you, but later—and would remember doing this. Right?"
Dean gave her the weirdest, most confused face ever. "Huh!?"

"Never mind," she said, feeling a little confused herself. "It made sense in my head." His cuffs fell off with one last turn of the lock pick. Now both free, the siblings stood up.

Dean turned on Alex, his face stern. "Okay, I'm gonna go find Cas. You stay here."

"Stay here?" Alex asked in protest, unable to believe he would ask that of her, especially in this crazy place.

Dean gave her a deadly serious look. "Yes. You heard him—uh, me. You're not alive anymore in this version of the future. These people see you, recognize you, they will shoot you on sight. Think you're a Croatoan or a zombie, I dunno. So, yeah. Stay here."

Not at all happy about it but conceding to the point, Alex complied, sitting down in one of the kitchen table chairs sullenly as Dean left the cabin. She folded her arms, frustrated. Too much of her life had been spent sitting and waiting around. All of five minutes passed before she stood, shaking her head, and left out the back door, stealing through the thick brush and skirting around the back of the cabins. Dean was always leaving her behind and making her stay behin—ouch!—she walked right into a bunch of briers and hear a huge ripping sound, looked down, and swore softly—her shirt, Dean's old Metallica shirt—now had an impressive tear right up the center. She pulled the brambles away with just the tips of her fingers, wincing against the sharp pricks. She needed to pay closer attention to her surroundings. She could see Dean going up into a cabin near the edge of the camp. She didn't see anyone else around and stole closer, then ducked down and froze as a handful of women came out of the cabin, talking and laughing. She waited until they had all walked away to steal a little closer.

She crept around the side of the cabin, and could hear two voices inside, indistinct, but both male. One was definitely Dean. She waited there at the corner of the cabin, peeked around, looking to see if the coast were clear. One woman was still visible, but heading up into another cabin. Alex could hear her brother's voice. "Dude, what happened to you?"

"Life," was the strangely nonchalant reply in a voice that was very familiar—Cas? There was an odd laugh. "I recognize that look Dean. I'm past help, but thanks for your concern." That definitely sounded like Cas, but something was off. She glanced around—the coast was clear. She dashed up the stairs and through the beaded doorway. It was dim inside, but she recognized Cas immediately, even if he didn't look like himself at all.

There was a strange, goofy smile on Cas's face—he was sitting on a wooden chest and looking up at Dean—but when Cas glanced at her, the smile fell, was replaced with incredible shock. He shot up to his feet, his mouth open, his eyes wide, expression almost horrified. He looked like he had seen a ghost—which, she supposed, he kind of had, if she were really dead in this future.

"Hi, Cas," she greeted, kind of cautiously. "You look..." She trailed off, taking him in, not sure how to react. "Different."

Truthfully, he was barely recognizable and it shocked her, caught her unawares. Cas looked incredibly rugged yet worn down in a way Alex couldn't describe. He had a scuffy beard and his hair was longer, tousled and unstyled. He had dark circles under his eyes. His outfit was the strangest part: He wore a loose, long-sleeved tunic, some kind of stretchy pants, and of all things, beaded sandals. He even stood differently, and the expression on his face was so unlike anything she'd ever seen on his face before. It scared her for a second, honestly, that gaze in his eyes.

He didn't appear to have heard a word of what she had just said. He was just staring, swallowing,
looking horrified. The blood had drained out of his face and he seemed to be at a complete loss for words. His expression wobbled, he looked down, and when he spoke, it was almost like he was talking to himself. "Yes, of course. You're... you're here. Why didn't I realize?" His eyes were doing weird things as he looked at the floor. Widening, then squinting. "Dean from two thousand nine, Alex from two thousand nine..." His voice was weird, he moved strangely. "Makes sense," he mumbled, a hand on his head now. "Makes sense."

Alex frowned, looked at Dean, sniffed the air slightly. Was that weed? Alex was quickly getting more and more confused. "Is he stoned?"

"Among other things," Dean said, and gave her an unhappy look. "You weren't supposed to come out of there until I came and got you."

Alex shrugged innocently. He gave her a scowl. "Relax." She was distracted by Cas as she spoke to Dean. "No one saw me."

Dean just sighed in aggravation. "Fine. Well look, halo over there can't take us back to our year, says he's got no angel power left." Cas looked up from the floor at them, his face blank. He kept looking at Alex and he appeared mildly physically ill. "So basically," Dean continued, "we're stuck. With this weirdass version of Cas."

Alex and Cas's eyes met and she felt her eyebrows moving in together as she studied his strange expression and old, weary eyes. What happened to you? An instance of worry rippled through her darkly.

The sound of the beaded doorway opening caused the three of them to turn and look. A tan woman with blonde hair peeked in, smiling at Cas. There was an oddly suggestive kind of quality to the smile. "Cas, we're ready for you in my cabin."

He glanced her way clearly irritated, not really even looking at her. "Not now, Tiffany," he said, gruff and impatient and maybe a little embarrassed. He waved a hand, trying to tell her to go.

She looked immensely confused. "But—"

Cas flew off the handle. "I said not now!" he practically shouted, trembling, his eyes wide and expression disconcerting. "Get out!"

Dean and Alex glanced at each other—more than a little surprised by the outburst. The girl left, looking pretty offended. Cas began to pace the floor. "What, changed your mind about the orgy?" Dean asked sarcastically, and Cas shot him an angry, frazzled look. Alex looked at Dean and balked. Orgy? Last time she'd seen Cas, he was a stuttering, fumbling, frightened virgin—had never even been kissed. Cas said nothing in reply, just looked sick and ashamed and wouldn't look at either Dean or Alex.

Dean rolled his eyes. "Whatever, there a bathroom here?" Dean asked.

"In there." Cas replied distractedly, gesturing vaguely.

Dean left the two of them alone, and Alex just looked at Cas, not understanding. He wouldn't look at her, only ran a hand through his hair, made a weird grimacing face. "What's happened to you?" Alex asked softly, looking around the cabin. "Incense... candles... weed?" She paused. "Orgies?" She couldn't quite believe that part.

His expression worked so oddly that for a moment, she thought he was going to cry. "Just... ways to pass the time," he said in a strained voice. He was still looking down. He was frowning too, but
not like he did in 2009. In that time, he frowned because he didn't understand. Now, it looked like he were upset about something, really bothered. Alex was entirely caught off guard by this entire scenario. She had pictured the same Cas she remembered—wearing his trench coat, operating in a stoic, calm, awkward way. But this guy in front of her—was shocking. Saddening. Confusing.

"Ways to pass the time," she echoed faintly. There was a sadness in that phrase that she felt somewhere deep down. She peered at him with sudden intent studiousness. "You okay?" She asked, sounding almost suspicious. "What's…" she looked around the cabin again, confused. "What's going on with you?"

His eyes came to hers and he seemed so wretched. His eyes were shining and his face was filled with a grave, desolate quality that was terrifying to look at. "I've… lost a lot," he said gruffly, then turned, began to straighten the things on top of the dresser behind himself with shaking hands, ignoring her.

What could he have lost? Besides apparently his mind? He continued to needlessly busy himself with needlessly tidying the top of his dresser—a little mirror, a photo frame with a pressed flower in it, a comb, an empty bottle of perfume, an incense burner. She was sorry that he was sad and upset at her appearance, but she had questions to ask and couldn't hold them in. She cleared her throat, stepped a little closer, trying to ask politely for him to humor her. Maybe he could clear up a couple things for her and and then she could leave him to get high in peace. "Hey, uh, Cas, is it true?"

"Yes."

Her stomach flip-flopped with a weird, sick feeling. "How?" she asked intently, taking another step toward him and craning her neck around, trying to see him better. His profile was gaunt and rigid. Pained.

Slowly, he turned his head to look at her with eyes that seemed wounded. "A mistake." His voice wavered and he looked away again, back at the dresser in front of him. "It was a mistake."

Alex waited for him to say more, but he didn't. "What kind of mistake? Like, an accident, or—"

Cas suddenly whipped to face her, almost confrontationally—his expression was fierce and angry and unstable. "I can't talk about this to you, okay?" He all but snapped, startling Alex with his loud, rough voice. The look on her face must have made him feel bad. He paused, calmed a little, looked contrite. "It's—it's... I just can't talk about it." He gave her no further explanation, but he'd clearly been set off by talking about her death.

"O-okay. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—I didn't realize." Alex was a little embarrassed. Cas obviously felt the same.

"It's all right," he said faintly, and yet again, he wouldn't look at her. Alex however, studied him closely, trying to figure this strange future version of Castiel out. Why was he so emotional? Why did he look the way he did? What happened to him?

As her eyes traversed his worn features and age-lined face, then down his scruffy neck and smooth chest the tunic revealed, she noticed a silver chain hanging around his neck. Whatever was on the end caught the light, and she could see a flash of silver shapes there in the V of the unbuttoned tunic. Wait a minute—! Without a second thought she reached out and grabbed the necklace, consequently pulling him a little closer as she examined the two shining objects on the end of the
necklace with wide-eyed, slack-jawed confusion—her old silver whistle, the one she'd had worn as a kid and teen—and her dad's wedding band, the one she wore all the time? Stunned beyond words, she looked at Cas, then back to the items, then at him again. "Why do you have these?" she demanded, feeling stranger by the second.

Cas was just staring at her, the oddest look on his face at her proximity and question. He closed his hand on the items and pulled the chain back gently, tucked it back into his shirt, backed up a little bit. His body language was guarded. "You gave them to me."

Alex tilted her head to the side, her eyebrows knit together. "I gave them to you," she repeated in disbelief. Her suspicions were raising. "And why the hell would I do that?"

Cas seemed unwilling to tell her, just looked away, shook his head. "Just… good luck charms. It's not important."

Alex gave him an exasperated look, frustrated by the situation in general. "Still allergic to straight answers, huh? Fine; listen, have you got anything I can wear? This shirt got ripped on my way in."

She pointed to the giant tear on her shirt, and he seemed to notice it for the first time. His eyes raised from the tear to hers and he seemed way too conflicted about her question. With a great deal of reluctance, he nodded toward the dresser. "Bottom drawer."

He was acting so strange. She opened up the drawer and froze. She recognized most of the clothing there—her green and gray flannel button up, her Guns N' Roses tank top, her light green t-shirt with the smudge of vamp blood on the hemline that she'd never been able to get out. What the hell? She was beginning to feel afraid, almost. She turned and looked at him for an explanation. "What are you doing with these…?" she asked shakily.

"Roommates." Alex turned very slowly, looked at the one bed… then back at Cas questioningly.

"Yes, roommates," he repeated blankly, and began to walk out. "I need some air."

"What, I slept on the floor?" Alex called after him, but he had already left. No. Something about this was majorly off. He was lying, or leaving something out. One little voice whispered that maybe they'd been… together. A couple. But she quickly shut that thought down. That couldn't be possibly true, could it? She was left to look around, puzzled, wondering if this were a huge joke. Roommates with Cas. That sounded like a sitcom or something. Dean came out of the bathroom at that moment, and Alex pointed a finger at him. "This future is fucking bananas."

"You're just now figuring that out?" he asked sarcastically.

Alex changed into one of the tank tops in the drawer, one she didn't recognize—it was too weird to wear one she already owned—and about five minutes later, they could hear the sound of cars rolling in on the gravel. "Oh look, I'm back. That didn't take long," Dean said, and went outside. Alex stayed on the porch of the cabin, watching from a distance, and Cas stood a few feet off from the porch as Dean ambled toward the new arrivals. They were all were opening beers and drinking at the Jeep they had driven in. And then without any warning, 2014 Dean drew his gun and pointed it at one of the men's backs. "Hey. Hey! Watch out!" 2009 Dean shouted, even as a single shot rang out. The other two guys looked up and saw the two Deans standing ten feet apart.

"Dammit," 2014 Dean said, and then glared at his confused soldiers, taking a couple seconds,
obviously trying to think of a way to remedy the weird situation. "I'm not gonna lie to you! Me and him—it's a pretty messed-up situation we got going. But believe me, when you need to know something, you will know it. Until then, we all have work to do." He pointed an angry finger at Dean and said, "My cabin, now."

Alex came down from the porch, rushing to Cas's side, watching future Dean roughly manhandle her Dean into the cabin.

"What's he doing with him?" Alex demanded.

"Bitching him out, probably," Cas said idly, and Alex looked at him oddly.

One of the soldiers stepped closer to them, looking at Alex with narrowed eyes, with recognition. "Wait—she died. I remember her. She was here when I first got here… then died. How can you still be alive?" His hand was crossing his body to the pistol on his hip.

Even as Alex was recoiling, her reflexes kicking in, someone flashed past her. Cas lunged forward with blazing speed, socking the other guy in the jaw with everything he had, a certain wild and sloppy but brutal energy to it, unlike the other times she'd seen him kick ass—but the guy went down onto his back from the force of the impact, and Cas stood over him, grabbing him by his jacket viciously. "Don't touch her, Adam, not you, not anyone! She's fine. Not a Croat, not anything! And keep your mouth shut about this, or you'll have to deal with me." He shoved the guy back, and took a couple backward steps toward Alex, keeping his body between her and the guys.

"What, the camp drunk?" Adam retorted, wiping blood from his lip and getting up slowly. "That's real scary."

Cas's voice lowered, and he sounded something like she remembered. "Don't make me tell you twice."

Adam seemed to think about it, then rolled his eyes, acting unaffected. "Whatever, man." Adam looked at Alex suspiciously, but they left.

Cas turned to her, his expression more familiar to her—grim, dangerous. "Go back inside my cabin."

"But—"

"Just go!" He snapped.

Alex looked at him indignantly. "Look, I don't know why you're acting so weird, but—"

He took her by both arms suddenly, startling her, staring at her in the eyes, and his eyes were desperate, he seemed on edge and like he was close to losing his mind. But he spoke carefully, clearly forcing himself to calm down and reign in whatever emotional breakdown he was close to having. "Alex, please just do what I say, go back into the cabin. Please." He seemed almost at the point of agony, and he looked down at her briefly, at his hands on her arms and seemed to have a slightly epiphany. He let go and looked down, thinking hard, somewhere far away mentally.

Blinking a couple times in surprise, Alex shut her mouth, frowned, and muttered, "Fine."

Alex went back inside and crossed her arms, watching Cas through the window. He was standing in front of the cabin, running a hand through his hair. He almost looked like he was going to be sick. He slowly came to the porch and sat on the steps, putting his shaggy head in his hands. Alex's anger died down in a sudden wash of empathy, of sadness. She wondered how that could be
Castiel. He looked like Cas, but what had happened? Was this really his future? It made no sense—none. He was nothing like he used to be.

Alex looked around the cabin, giving it a better once-over. Candles, a Buddha statue, an exotic looking rug. The single, big bed. There was a dresser, a chest, a couple chairs and a small table. She glanced back outside, where Cas remained unmoving, and she turned back around, eying the wooden chest curiously. She went to it and cracked it open as quietly as possible—then went still. His trench coat was neatly folded up there, and the sight of that triggered some kind of deep, surprised sadness in her. She touched it gently, with just the tips of her fingers, and she remembered him in it, just a couple days ago, as they traveled across the country in the Impala.

She shut the chest softly, slowly, momentarily too disconsolate to really do anything but stare around, puzzled. Shaking herself, she went to the closet, opened it curiously, then eyebrows went up as she saw what the shelves were lined with—hard liquor, and lots of it. She picked one bottle up, recognizing the green liquid as absinthe. Damn, Cas. To the left of the shelves were some of his clothes on hangars, and behind that, she recognized the sleeve of one of her oldest, most worn out cargo jackets. Seeing their clothes hanging together was odd. A morbid reminder that she had been here, but now was gone. Below the clothes, there were some boxes piled in disarray, and she frowned, peering at the one on top.

The contents of the box were jumbled—a bunch of pill bottles. She raked through them, realizing what they were with another pang of shocked sadness. Opioids and amphetamines—illegal, highly addictive drugs. Some of them looked like they had been half used up, most were nearly empty. She held a bottle of Oxy in her hand, suddenly so very sad, not sure what to think of this discovery. Oh, Cas. What happened to you? And more than that... why? Her heart hurt inexplicably for him. She carried the bottle with her and went to the window where she could see him.

He hadn't moved. Shoulders slumped forward, shaggy head of dark hair in his hands. Who was that guy, and what had happened to the Cas she knew? Moreover, what happened to the Dean she knew? He'd just shot a guy in the back, told her she died without so much as blinking, said he hadn't talked to Sam in five years—this really couldn't be the future. It just couldn't. She didn't believe this.

Cas came back in after a couple more minutes, avoiding looking at her. She, however, was watching him closely, concealing the bottle she still held from his sight. She had a theory, and had to know if it were right. "You're not an angel at all anymore, are you?"

He let out a soft, grudging sigh. "What gave me away?" Alex just gave him a look. What didn't give him away? He smiled cynically. His eyes were unaffected and dead. "Yeah. I'm not like I used to be," he said, and the amount of self-loathing in his voice was staggering.

Yeah no shit. She held the bottle of pills up to see how he'd react. His face went cold when he realized that she knew his secret. She was perplexed. "You know this shit could kill you, right?"

His eyes raised to hers and there was an emptiness there that was devastating. "Kinda the point."

He expressed a soft, grudging sigh. "Life's just not working out for me these days," he said with a surprising amount of sarcasm and he snatched the bottle from her unceremoniously. Too stunned at his behavior and changed personality to do much of anything, Alex just gaped, watching as Cas walked the length of the room and tossed the bottle into the trash can there. He ran a hand through his dark, unkempt hair and then composed himself, cleared his
"Yeah. So, what part of two-thousand nine are you from?" He asked, apparently not wanting to talk his drug habit anymore.

Alex looked at him cautiously. "Early spring. We just hunted down Raphael and got jack squat from him."

"Yeah," Cas said, thinking. He chuckled to himself, a bittersweet and short sound. "That time we sat on the porch and you told me what a real kiss was." Her surprise at his comment showed and Cas's eyes fell away from hers. "It stuck with me," he explained heavily, and brushed past her, went over towards his closet, pulling his tunic off and over his head as he went.

The sudden half-nakedness startled Alex all over again, but Cas seemed to think nothing of it and didn't notice how Alex stared at his bare back, and as he turned around, his broad chest and shoulders. It was shocking because he had scars. On his strong, tanned arms he had a few white lines like scratches, there was a blotchy raised pink spot on one of his biceps—a bullet wound? Smaller, dark long shapes—a few on his shoulders, a couple across his ribcage. Those looked like a knife had left them. It almost looked like he had seen as many fights, if not more, than she had. For a second, she let her eyes wander down his torso, to the flat stomach and tapered hips. He turned around again, his back to her again. His very strong, defined back. Alex touched her neck, cleared her throat. It was a little warm in here.

Cas got another shirt out of his closet and shrugged it on, buttoned it up. The things of hers he wore around his neck glinted in the light as his fingers went up, button after button and Alex eyed the ring and whistle sidelong, not sure if she believed him. She'd given those to him as 'good luck charms'? She looked at the bed again, could see some of her stuff hanging in the closet, thought about her shirts in a drawer below where his shirts were.

She mulled it all over with increasing suspicion. Roommates. Considering Cas again, she didn't believe that for a second, but the other option she was thinking of seemed just as ludicrous. Could they have actually been... involved? Like, romantically? Or was that a crazy thing to think? Because really, in what version of reality would she go for an alcoholic drug addict who apparently loved orgies? And in what version of reality would Cas decide Alex was what he wanted? In what version of reality would Cas even have the ability to have a romantic side? She rolled her eyes at herself briefly, sat down on the edge of the bed and heaved a frustrated sigh, didn't ask him if they'd been more than roommates. Some things just didn't need to be explained, she guessed.

When Alex plopped down onto the end of the bed and began to fiddle with a shoelace, Cas froze. She missed the way his face tightened in pain simply from seeing her sit on the bed. His voice grew strained and he doubled its gruffness to hide the emotions. "Come on, I need to take you to Dean's cabin," he said, pointing sharply at the door and hiding everything underneath a sour expression.

Alex looked up at him with curiosity, slowly standing, seeming to understand something was off. "Why?"

"You just... can't stay here," he said darkly, stone-faced, and was already heading out the door, throwing a "follow me" over his shoulder.

Cas took her to Dean's cabin like he said, then made himself scarce for the rest of the day, unable to face Alex for even a second longer. He would go back to his cabin and pour himself the strongest fucking drink he could find, anything to cover up the shame that was burning him alive inside. He would contemplate the alcohol, battling himself as he filled with self-hatred so strong that it sent him into rage. He'd then throw his glass against a wall and sink down to sit, miserable, with his face in his hands as he cried bitterly, like a broken, hopeless man.
What had he done? How had he let himself become this? He was appalling and disgusting to himself, a shell of who he'd been, a sick and low excuse for a man. He'd been able to forget reality in recent times with the drugs, the booze, the women he'd filled his hollow existence with to feel something (anything) save the pain of her loss. But today, looking into her eyes again… he was convicted completely and miserable with himself for how deeply he'd betrayed her and her memory.

This wasn't just his cabin. It had been theirs.

In Dean's dark cabin just after sunset, Alex lurked in the with her brother and watched as the other Dean and a woman named Risa leaned over a map. Cas was sitting at the table in a lazy, casual stance—his ankles crossed and propped onto the table. His gaze was on the unseeing side though.

Why the gathering? Well, it had become abundantly clear to Alex, for one, why Zachariah had sent them here, to this specific date. 2014 Dean had finally tracked down the Colt—the same one Cas had mentioned to them in 2009—and with it, he planned to kill the devil. Not next week, not next month. *Tonight.*

"Lucifer is here," Dean said, jabbing his finger into a circled portion of the map. "Now. I know the block and I know the building—"

"Oh good," Cas wisecracked, cutting Dean off. "It's right in the middle of a hot zone."

Dean gave him a cursory, challenging glance. "Crawling with Croats, yeah. You saying my plan is reckless?"

"If you don't like reckless, what about insouciant?" Cas retorted without missing a beat. Dean made a face, clearly not appreciating the attitude. "Are you saying we, uh, walk in straight up the driveway, past all the demons and the Croats, and we shoot the devil?" Cas continued, his sarcastic tone and matching facial expressions causing Alex to stare. He hadn't looked at her even once since he'd shown up again.

Dean just narrowed his eyes at Cas. "Yes."

Cas leaned further back in his chair, giving Dean an unamused look.

"Yeah, well, no one's forcing you to come, Cas," Dean growled, to which Cas sighed, relented.

"I'm going. Of course I'm going." Cas looked at the 2009 Dean. "But why is he? I mean, he's you five years ago. If something happens to him, you're gone, right?"

"He's coming," Dean said authoritatively. "Alex too… we could use the extra gun. She's a damn good shot."

At that, Cas's feet came off the table, his expression changed as he sat up straight. "What? It's too dangerous to take her there, let alone Dean!"

2014 Dean tilted his head to the side at the outburst, frowning, looking at Cas with a suddenly intent gaze. "Cas… are you sober?"

Cas looked caught, as if that were an accusation he resented.

2014 Dean was clearly genuinely surprised. "Last time you were straight was…" he looked at Alex and his tongue nervously darted out, his eyebrows shrugged upwards. "Awhile ago."
Cas ignored the comment, getting physically agitated, and he leaned over the table. "They shouldn't go, Dean, and you know it."

"Hey, we're right here, you know," 2009 Dean said. "And we wanna go. So, end of discussion."

Cas turned on him, angry, using his hands as he talked. "Aren't you listening to me? It's much, much too dangerous for either of you!" He looked between both Deans, as if looking for back up. When he got nothing, he seemed to grow resolute, hostile. "Fine," he snapped, and then pointed a finger at Alex while he looked at 2014 Dean. "But Dean, she's not going. I won't let her."

That comment definitely caught Alex's attention. "You won't let me go?" She asked incredulously even as she stood up, becoming defensive. "That's not your decision."

Cas's eyes darted to her and he was deeply affected, regretful, upset. He looked away, his jaw tight. "You don't understand."

"I don't think you do," Alex challenged, to which Cas said nothing, only clenched his jaw even tighter.

2014 Dean gave Cas a dirty look, shook his head and stood up, map in hand. "We're locked and loaded and on the road by midnight. One of you take Alex and get her a weapon, one of you start getting the grunts moving." Dean looked at the other Dean. "I need some time alone with... myself." That would have been funny in different circumstances. In these, it was just adding to the feeling of a bizarro world.

"I'll get everyone rallied," Risa said, already brushing past Dean and heading out of the cabin.

"I guess that means you're with me," Cas said to Alex, sounding positively thrilled about it. What was his problem? She didn't like that, him telling her she couldn't go along on the assault. He was starting to sound like Dean for god's sake. Alex couldn't handle all these fucking men trying to tell her what she could and couldn't do. Either way, she shouldered that and followed him out of Dean's cabin and to one of the rusted tin sheds that offset the camp's mess hall.

After he had basically kicked her out of his cabin that morning, she hadn't seen him again all day and he was currently acting just as oddly as before. He was dressed differently, though. Not like a damn hippie. He had on faded jeans, military style boots, a button up, a rugged cargo jacket. He looked rakish and handsome, but his face, his eyes—they were still hollow and avoided looking at hers.

The storage shed he took her into was about ten feet long and ten feet wide and the walls were lined with gun racks and those racks were brimming with semi-automatic weapons. Cas went to the back of the shed and pulled one off the rack, brought it back to her. "Here ya go," he said apathetically, holding it out to her. "AR-15 rifle. Your favorite."

Alex looked at him a little uncertainly, not taking the gun. She had never used one of those before in her entire life—shotguns and pistols and rifles, yes, but machine guns, assault rifles? "I've never used one of these."

He thought a minute, then seemed to realize something. His tone remained businesslike, forced. "Well, you will. And, I assure you, it'll become your favorite."

He held out the gun to her, and her hands brushed over his as she gave in and took it. His expression went cold. Alex froze, thinking she had done something. "What is it?"

He shook his head, suddenly kind of laughing and smiling, as if what she said was funny, but there
was no light in his eyes. He threw a hand up briefly. "Look around us! Everything's wrong." The smile was fading into a dark expression and he obviously regretted his little outburst. He pinched the bridge of his nose and muttered a curse word in frustration, trying to compose himself.

Alex watched him, not sure what to say or how to react to his behavior. Sadness filled her to see him like this and she once again didn't understand how he had become this way in five years. She turned her attention to inspecting the gun, tested the feel of it in her hands, trying to sidestep his confession of pain, trying to get the atmosphere to be less awkward. "This has a good weight to it." She looked down the sights. "Not bad. I can see why I like it."

Cas said nothing—he turned so that he wasn't facing her. He began poking around on a shelf that had ammo boxes stored in disarray. Alex set her gun aside for a second, studying him. She had to try again—had to. She was sorry he had a hard time with it, but she needed to know. "How did I die, Cas? Come on. Please, tell me. It's important." She gently grasped one of his arms, trying to appeal to him, trying to get him to look at her.

He looked at her like she revolted him, and he stepped back, refusing to look at her, looking at the guns beside him instead. "It's—it's best if you don't know."

"Why?" She demanded, not letting up. "I mean, it's my future, right? I deserve to know. That's the whole point of Zachariah sending me and Dean here."

"No, I don't talk about it anymore," he said lowly, refocusing on the ammo boxes and starting to sort them for no reason.

Alex stood right beside him, getting in his space. "Cas—" she started.

He abruptly snapped, lost his composure completely. "I said I don't talk about it anymore goddammit!" He shouted, trembling with what looked like terror. Startled and even a little spooked, Alex stepped back from him and his features went from furious to stunned and hollow. "No, don't—don't be afraid of me, please," he begged, and his voice grew tight with grief. "I'm sorry. I don't... I don't like to talk about what happened that day."

Newly cautious with him, Alex felt her eyes narrowing. "Did you see what happened to me?" She asked carefully, going out on a limb, not sure in the least of how he would react to her question.

He didn't fly into a fit of rage. Instead, his eyes clouded with a sheen of tears and he let out a miserable, pained breath and looked down, put his face into his hand, let his shoulders slump. "I was with you when it happened," he confessed quietly, then let his hand fall and with a sick expression, he looked at her, not bothering to hide his distress. "I could have saved you. If I'd been just a little faster. Just a little faster." His eyes were glazed over and stared into middle distance unseeingly now. "Alex... I let you die." Again, his face crumpled and he ducked his head away, hiding his face behind a hand as a miserable choking sound came out of the base of his throat.

"Hey, hey... it's okay," Alex said, trying to calm him down. She put a hand onto his shoulder, trying to relay some reassurance to him. Her touch startled him and his hand dropped away from his face. He looked at her with the strangest expression and seemed unable to help himself. He reached out and let his hand cradle the side of her head, his thumb stroking downward over her hair with great bittersweet affection. Stock still, Alex stared at him, her hand pulling back from his shoulder. "W-what are you doing?" She asked, finding her breath short.

His heart was in his eyes as he studied her. "Have you really not figured it out yet?" He asked softly, sadly, fondly, then stroked his hand against the hair against the side of her head carefully, conveying great tenderness in the touch. Taking his hand away and becoming more conflicted, he
wet his chapped lips, waited anxiously for her reply.

Her loud pulse filled her ears and shock flooded her veins with a shaky, lost feeling. So it was true then. "...We weren't just roommates."

"No," he confirmed, just a murmur. His eyes held hers apprehensively. "We weren't just roommates."

Alex was shaking her head kind of hollowly, and was abruptly wondering where the hidden cameras were. "No," she said, doubting so hard all the sudden, getting freaked out. "No. That's crazy. You're not serious." His expression flickered just slightly, as if he were offended by that assumption. Alex struggled with what that meant, them not being just roommates. "I mean... you and I... we lived together?" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "We... we slept together?"

Cas didn't say yes or no, but come on Alex, of course you would have if you lived together. But she was so emotionally young when it came to relationships and romance, having never even kissed a man, that the idea of sex and living with someone—let alone the rugged, jaded man in front of her —had her dizzy and freaked.

Cas saw that and was gentle. "I understand this is probably a lot for you to process," he said somberly, his eyebrows pressing in a little further. "I... I wasn't going to tell you at all... but I thought it had to be obvious by now."

Alex did a mental double take, distracted by the thoughts of sex. Her eyes went wide. "Oh my god, wait—did I do orgies too?" She asked, hating that idea completely. Had she been on drugs, too? Into all kinds of weird stuff she'd never imagined herself capable of?

"Wh—" Cas's face went both embarrassed and insistent. "No, never," he said, then paused, his humiliation etched onto his face. "I uh... I was never with anyone but you. Ever. Until after you died." Another punch of shock to her stomach at his words and the love and commitment it seemed to imply. His shame at what he'd done since her death was tangible. "I'm so sorry," he whispered as his eyes fell. He was apologizing to the Alex she hadn't become yet but it hit her hard, made her feel strange. Hurt.

"I... don't understand any of this," Alex said, barely able to find the words. The painful mood of the conversation was hard and unexpected, and the way he looked so defeated and hurt was difficult to watch. His sadness kept radiating off of him and sinking into her, so she tried for half-hearted humor to clear the air and cover over her own emotional distress. "I mean aren't you, I dunno... like several thousand years too old for me?"

He chuckled, a surprisingly fond smile coming over his face, softening his features, making the pain ebb away. "That's not the first time you've asked me that," he said affectionately. Alex went blank again. It was a totally disconcerting thing to hear from his mouth—it was so knowing and fondly said. Cas swallowed, looking genuinely apologetic at her expression. "I'm sorry. I've made you uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable?" She shot back. "I feel like I'm tripping balls right now Cas!"

"So to the point. I always lo—" he caught himself, his expression going rigid, "...enjoyed that about you."

"How?" Alex didn't miss what he was about to say, and she blinked a couple times as her heart turned a flip of shock and awe. She just couldn't believe this. Her and Cas? Sure, she had definitely admitted to herself that she found him incredibly attractive and interesting and she enjoyed being
around him recently... and yes, she'd pondered it, a couple times in her mind, what he might be like 
to kiss or hold, but she blamed the romance novels and her idealistic, virgin mindset for those 
thoughts. Their chances at ever really being together... she hadn't even given those any real 
thought, because she had been pretty sure those chances didn't even exist, and what would anyone, 
an angel most of all, see in her?

Alex shook her head no slowly. If this were some kind of cruel trick, she didn't want to fall victim 
to it. She almost didn't want to believe it at all. It was too sad, too complicated, too unthinkable. 
Too far removed from what she knew now.

Castiel saddened in front of her, somehow seeming to be aware of what she was thinking without 
er even saying anything. Maybe on an impulse, he touched her arm with his hand, resting it there 
just above her elbow, bare skin to bare skin, his thumb tracing down slowly. The touch startled her, 
warmed her. Made her feel. He sought her gaze, his brow wrinkled. She stared up at him, feeling 
incredibly short of breath all the sudden. The way he touched her was just so unlike what she had 
expected, and there was a familiarity to his touch that was stunning. He stared back into her gaze, 
expression intense and unreadable, his eyes flicking from her eyes to her mouth, then back. He 
looked at her like he knew her—intimately. Alex pulled back from him, flustered. Cas looked 
almost rejected by the way she had pulled away, and then seemed to shake himself, pull himself 
together. He thrust a box of bullets at her, all business once again. "Sorry. Here. Should be enough 
ammo."

He looked at her a second longer, seemed to be struggling internally and then abruptly brushed past 
her, making a quick exit out of the shed, leaving Alex by herself with many confusing thoughts to 
ponder. The place where he had touched so slightly and softly still tingled, and she couldn't stop 
thinking about it.

It was midnight and there was a full, bright silver moon directly overhead in the sky. Alex headed 
toward where all the vehicles were starting up, her weapon slung over her back, her jacket hung 
over her arm. She paused when something caught her eye she hadn't noticed before.

Over past where the cabins ended and the woods began, in an overgrown patch of land, there were 
maybe twenty wooden crosses sticking up out of the ground. In something like morbid curiosity, 
she wandered over. Some of them were fresh. One of the graves, grass already grown over it, was 
crudely engraved with the initials A.E.W. She went still—Alexandra Elizabeth Winchester? Was 
this...? Someone was coming up behind her. She turned to see Chuck, who she had seen earlier 
that day while she and Dean were waiting around. He gave her a tight smile, hands shoved in his 
pockets. "Hey, Alex."

She looked back at the grave with her initials on it, ignoring his greeting. "Chuck, is this—?" she 
looked at him for confirmation.

"Yeah," he confirmed, kind of grimly. "That's your grave."

She could think of nothing to say, only tilted her head to the side, looking at the little bunch of 
yellow wildflowers there at the base of the cross. She wondered if Dean did that. "Someone put 
flowers on it."

"Yup," Chuck said. "Cas does." This statement drew a stunned looked from Alex. Chuck was 
oblivious, looking at the cross as he continued. "He always does. It's the only thing he does 
consistently around here. Well, besides drink and cause problems."

Someone hollered Chuck's name, and the prophet threw a "gotta go" at Alex as he hurried off. Alex
watched him leave, speechless, then looked over where Cas was loading up some weapons into an SUV with Risa. He had a rifle slung across his back and looked so manly to her in that moment—a shiver ran up her spine when she thought of his thumb rubbing against her arm. She thought about his eyes full of sadness because he'd cared about her deeply. *Loved.* He'd been about to say he'd loved her, back in the shed. Her throat felt tight with tears and Alex turned her attention back to the grave, the flowers. They were fresh like they'd been put out recently, so carefully arranged, tied with a tiny little strand of twine in a very uneven bunched up shape, like he'd try to tie a bow and not been able to quite pull it off. She smiled a little through her pain and confusion. *That* was more like the Cas she remembered—kind of clueless on how to do everyday things. Like tying bows.

How strange to stand at her own grave. Somehow, even though it was more than just a little macabre, she thought how nice it was to know, even though she was six-feet-under dead in this future that someone still looked after her and still remembered her—and that someone just happened to be her guardian angel. She wasn't sure if that were ironic or kind of beautiful. On impulse, she crouched down and pulled a single yellow flower out of the gathered bunch, then slipped it into her jacket pocket discreetly.

Cas shut the tailgate of his SUV and rounded the corner of the vehicle, only to be confronted by present-day Dean, who was glaring at him. "Okay, you wanna tell me what the hell that was that back there?"

"What do you mean?" Cas asked, to which Dean gave him an unamused look. Cas could tell from the look on Dean's face that he was about to get chewed out.

"The way you got all bent out shape about taking me and Alex on our little field trip? Don't ever challenge me like that again."

Cas looked away, agitated. Dean stepped closer, his voice lowering gruffly. "You know, as much as I despised you and my sister together, I need you to get your crap handled, and pronto. If Alex, the one from our time, could see what the way you roll these days… the women, the drugs, the days on end you stay wasted with chicks you won't even remember the name of the next day… what do you think she'd say, man?" Cas couldn't look at Dean in the eye. Dean sounded disgusted, and Cas felt disgusting. He knew he was so lost and far away from what he should be. Dean wasn't done. He was bearing down physically on Cas, getting angrier and angrier.

"You think you're honoring her memory with this crap?" Dean continued, and Cas felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. "You're really over her that easy, Cas?"

That final comment made something snap inside Cas, and he looked sharply at Dean, struggling to control himself. "I will never be over her, Dean."

Without any warning, Dean shoved him back against the truck violently, his voice a harsh growl. "Well if that's true, you sure as hell have a funny way of showing it!"

Cas grabbed Dean roughly and shoved him back, all of his pent up anger and sorrow boiling over into outrage. "I loved her, Dean!" Both men were frozen like that for a moment, fistfuls of the other's jacket in their hands. Breathing heavily, shaking, Cas struggled to maintain a straight, calm face. "You know I loved her. More than anything!" His voice was bordering on desperate. "But I don't know how to do this anymore!"

Dean shoved him and let go, bitter. "It's a damn shame what you've become, Cas."

Cas only glowered, struck by the irony of it. "I could say the same for you, Dean."
There was a brief silence and Dean let the comment go, looked Cas up and down judgmentally. "I can see you're shaking, man. What kind of crap are you on now?"

"Nothing," Cas admitted, looking away. "Which is the problem."

Dean scoffed at him, disgusted. "You picked a hell of a time to start rehab, Cas."

"Dean—"

"No—shut up. I don't wanna hear your lame excuses anymore. Nothing you ever say can make this—" he vaguely gestured at Cas, "okay with me. Just hold it together a little longer. We need to do this right, and kill the devil. You with me?"

Cas's jaw clenched. "Yeah, I'm with you," he replied caustically. He looked at the man who he used to call his good friend, and felt nothing but bitterness and shame and regret. Dean was looking at him as though Cas were the biggest disappointment and failure he had ever seen.

The sound of approaching footsteps on the crunching gravel alerted them that they were no longer alone. "Everything okay here, guys?" Dean from 2009 asked. Alex was behind him, totally unaware of what had just happened, hefting her gun.

"Yeah, everything's just peachy," 2014 Dean said, and brushed past them roughly.

"God, that guy is a douche," the other Dean said, watching him go.

Alex chuckled at that. Cas looked at her out of the corner of his eye, the sight of that little smile of hers making his heart twist in ways he couldn't bear. He motioned to his SUV, turning away before either of them could see his face. "Let's go. We're about to move out."

The car bumped down the back road they had turned off onto, and Cas glanced to his side. Dean was still awake, but Alex had fallen asleep about thirty minutes into the drive. Her head lolled on Dean's shoulder, and he stared out the window tersely. Cas returned his gaze to the dark road ahead. This was so risky, and he couldn't believe he was actually driving these two to the place where they should be the furthest from. He blinked a few times, trying to stay awake, trying to stay alert. He felt horrible physically, suffering from sobriety. He hadn't been this clear in awhile, and he remembered why. Everything hurt, and he couldn't stop his mind from going to all the dark places he so desperately wanted to pretend didn't exist.

Dean was digging through the glove compartment. "You got anything for a headache?" he pulled out an orange medicine bottle and squinted at it. "What the hell are these? Amphetamines?"

Cas snatched the bottle from him. "Give those to me."

"What the hell are you doing with those?" Dean asked, sounding genuinely shocked and even a little offended. It was almost as bad as when Alex had discovered his habit. Almost.

Cas shook his head, shamefaced, but trying hard to just stay aloof, calm. It was easier to be less emotional with Dean. "Nothing, today."

Dean sounded hesitant. "Uh, right... don't get me wrong, Cas. I, uh. I'm happy that the stick is out of your ass, but—what's going on—w-with the drugs and the orgies and the love-guru crap?"

Cas gave him a sidelong glance. "I'm not an angel anymore." Dean's eyebrows shot up. "Yeah, I went mortal," Cas said, with distasteful emphasis on the last word.
"What do you mean? How?"

He thought a minute about how to answer, shook his head tiredly. "It wasn't by choice, if that's what you're asking. I think it had something to do with the other angels leaving. But when they bailed, my mojo just kind of—psshhew!—drained away. And now, you know, I'm practically human. I'm all but useless, Dean. Last year, broke my foot, laid up for two months." Without warning, he remembered Alex bringing things to him when he had been stuck in their cabin—he remembered her doodling on his cast a few times (a few appropriate things, and a few maybe not so much)—dropping a kiss on the top of his head when he had been complaining about how much he hated sitting for so long. His chest tightened at the memories. He'd loved her beyond anything and everything and her loss had destroyed him.

"So, you're human," Dean was saying. "Well, welcome to the club, I guess."

Cas just shook his head sadly. "I used to belong to a much better club. Look at me. I'm powerless. I'm alone, I'm drowning. Not even sure why I even bother getting out of bed most days."

Dean looked at him strangely. "Geez. So… the drugs? The women?"

Cas sucked his cheeks in, stared at the road ahead, loathing himself. "I guess that's just how I roll."

Dean looked deeply bothered. "Right. Yeah."

Cas fell silent, his grip tight on the steering wheel, his stare blank and straight ahead of himself.

His mind was full of noise and confusion, of memories of his downward spiral into who he'd become now. He hadn't meant to fall apart like this, and if he'd known what would happen, he would have found a way to make sure it never came to pass.

At first it had just been alcohol abuse to deal with her death. Being drunk had soothed the void in his life and helped numb the excruciating pain from losing the only one he'd ever loved—the only one who'd ever truly loved him. He'd drank more and more and more, testing his limits, trying to kill the pain and loneliness and despair that hounded him and made life a miserable affair. It had worked well enough.

And then one night, around a campfire with a bunch of newly-rescued people fleeing the Croatoan virus, the unthinkable had happened. Drunk out of his mind, Cas had stumbled off from the group and one of the girls had followed him into the woods, giggled, pulling at his jeans as he fell back against a tree, unable to even stand. She'd had hair the color of Alex's and confused, completely out of it, Cas hadn't even known who she was, had just seen the top of a brown head of hair bent low over him and he'd thought it was her, his Alex, doing that to him.

When she looked up at him after blowing him, Cas had seen her face and almost passed out in horror at the realization of what had just happened—he'd pushed her away and run stumblingly back to his cabin, retched violently off the porch and nearly fallen off of it, weeping loudly for what he'd just done. It felt like treason and betrayal and he cursed himself for it, for dashing Alex's memory onto the rocks so readily. But it would get much worse. A month or so later he woke up after a night of being high off his ass and drunk to the point of passing out. A woman he didn't know had been naked in bed beside him, in Alex's place. Dismay and panic had set in over Cas, then fury—no one else belonged there, ever. Only Alex. He'd gone a little crazy and immediately kicked the girl out, not even dressed. He'd been so shaken up at her presence and what had clearly happened between them that he'd thrown a sheet at her and tossed her clothes after her, slammed the door in her face uncaringly and reached for more booze immediately, almost having a full on panic attack in the process.
He hadn't been sober once since then. Not until today.

He could barely stand to face himself. The things he'd done. The ways he'd tried to escape the pain, the high he'd been chasing every single day to keep his pain at bay. It was a wonder he wasn't dead yet. It wasn't like he hadn't tried a few times. But somehow… he was still here.

And now the worst part was that so was she. She saw what had become of him, understood in some small way how he'd betrayed her and spit in the face of their love. A love she didn't even really understand yet, but would soon. If she could see him now, if she knew what he'd done… she would hate and despise him. Just as she should.

They arrived to the outskirts of the city just before sunrise and the convoy stopped to regroup.

Cas put his truck into park and then looked down at Alex, whose head lolled awkwardly on his shoulder—he'd taken a sharp curve a few minutes ago, and she'd just kind of fallen into him. Dean was already getting out, slamming the door behind himself. Cas looked down at Alex's sleeping face, so familiar and so missed. Hesitantly, he gently brushed a few strands of her hair away from her face. Her skin was so soft under his fingertips. Her quiet breathing and just barely parted lips were the most beautiful thing he could ever remember seeing. As his eyes flickered over her face, all he could think was I miss you so much. There was so much pain in his chest. His throat closed up in grief and his eyes ached as tears threatened to come. How had he let her loss become his undoing? How had he sunk so low? He was tortured, knowing what he'd done.

Cas pulled away, shaking, trying to get himself together. His entire nervous system was shot to hell. Could he do this? He needed a hit of something, or a strong drink. It was all too much to handle for him. He glanced at the floorboard, where he'd stuck the bottle of amphetamines. But then, beside him, Alex stirred, sitting up slowly, squinting a little. "I fell asleep?" she asked groggily.

"Yeah," he confirmed, trying to control himself and sound unaffected. "We're here. Just waiting for a few others to arrive, I think."

She sighed and stretched a little, oblivious to the way he watched her. "Okay. So, let's go kick Lucy's ass, huh?" She gave him a playful but helpless little smile. And his heart broke a little more even as it healed a little, too.

Alex got out of the SUV, shutting the door behind her. The sun was just coming up, and it looked like it would be a dim, overcast day. It was already warm out. She went to the back of Cas's SUV, where the tailgate was down. Dean was already with the others, who were congregated around Risa's SUV, maybe about forty feet away—why had Cas parked so far off? Alex peeked around the edge of the vehicle, up toward where Cas was. He was just standing there, staring at nothing, in front of the driver's side door.

Momentarily forgetting her gun, Alex went over to him. "Hey—you okay?"

He took a step away, his back to her and the car. Then turned around, looked at her plainly, his featured etched with a haunted expression. "No. I am not okay." Hesitating, Alex went to him, put a hand on his shoulder gingerly. Wished she knew what to do or say. Wished she knew what had happened to him to break him this way. At her touch, he visibly became emotional—and Alex pulled her hand back, like she'd done something wrong. She backed up a little, but his hand shot out to grab her arm. "Wait."

"What?" She asked. He looked strange, and just stared at her, looking like he had something to say,
but couldn't get it out. "What Cas?" she asked, more urgently this time.

He shook his head, his eyes staring down at the ground, then someplace off beside him before coming to rest on hers. His expression was full of a pain she didn't understand. "Some mornings I'll wake up, and for just an instant, I—I forget. I forget you're gone. And I turn over and see you're not there and..." he was barely holding tears back. "You were the one bright spot left in this world for me," Cas continued shakily. "All the shit I've done to myself these past few months... it's all to forget the pain. I've made so many mistakes and I can't take any of it back but..." He inched just a little closer, making her breathless. "Alex..." he trailed off, his expression desperate, intense. "Please... I..."

Alex waited, frightened because his intensity was palatable and he looked half-sick. He looked like he was about to ask for something impossible, or something uncomfortable. Her heart began to beat faster in dread and anticipation. "What?" She prompted, searching his gaze anxiously. Her voice was barely audible.

Cas's expression worked oddly and his eyes fell away from hers. "I know I shouldn't even ask but... I want..." he squeezed his eyes shut, rubbed his forehead with his fingertips, refocused. "I need—" he got frustrated again, and Alex waited, then jutted her face forward, raised her eyebrows. His expression was strange and hesitant. Finally, he swallowed, and his voice was just above a whisper. His eyes clung to hers. "Kiss me."

Her stomach dropped and her face went blank. "...W-what?" she asked faintly.

"Please," he said, his voice just a broken whisper. "I just... I can go in there and face the devil, face death, the whole nine. If you kiss me." He wet his lips nervously. "One last time," he paused, thinking of something, and frowned, then smiled in the softest, saddest way. "Or... first, I guess. For you."

Alex's mouth hung open slightly. "I... uh..." she had quickly become flustered, breathless. His expression was so pleading, and then he gently caught her hands in his.

At the touch of his warm, dry skin against hers, she felt her entire body flush over in unexpected heat. "A dying man's wish," he said softly.

"But... you don't know you're dying," she protested weakly.

A muscle in his cheek jerked, and his gaze faltered, the softest self-deprecating smile on his lips. "I have been for awhile now."

Alex looking up at him hesitantly, her heart hammering faster than she could ever remember. She couldn't find the strength to say no—and besides that she thought in the most secret place of her mind that this was an opportunity she might never get again—because she had fantasized and wondered about this. She had. But now, with him actually in front of her, actually asking for a kiss—she felt more afraid than she ever remembered. She'd never kissed anyone—that kid at school didn't count—which maybe was another reason that compelled her forward—she needed to get kissed dammit, she was twenty-six fucking years old and it was ridiculous not to have even kissed anyone. But she was still petrified at the idea. What if she couldn't do it right? What if he kissed her, and it wasn't what he was expecting? Or she was bad at it? But she pushed the fear aside and took the plunge, telling him yes silently with a nod.

His expression changed to something else altogether, and she thought she saw his breathing hitch. Hers did too. The intent and the earnestness and the trepidation in his eyes made her dizzy. His chest touched hers as he closed the distance between them, one of his hands came to the side of her
neck, the pad of his thumb tracing her jaw. She could smell him and it was so heady—linseed oil, firewood, incense. Everything felt too intense to even process—her veins sang with anticipation, terror, curiosity, excitement as he came closer and closer. Cas leaned down, the side of his nose brushing against the side of hers as he softly pressed his lips down onto hers, giving her a careful, measured, chaste kiss... and the soft touch sent a zing! of thrilling feelings shooting throughout her entire body. She softened toward him a little without even realizing. Her eyes fell closed and her heart shot through her chest even as he drew back, just a little and just for a second, his lips soft and open, just centimeters from hers—she could feel him breathing against the skin of her lips. Oh god—her body was in overdrive, going crazy. His hand, now at the back of her neck, gently pulled her to him again, guiding her as he kissed her again, a soft, aching little touch that was maddening, that was infuriating. Instinctively, Alex could tell he was holding himself back for her benefit... but she surprised even herself when instead of letting the kiss end there, she escalated it out of a sudden, insane need for him and this and more.

With a boldness she didn't quite recognize in herself, Alex threw caution to the wind and pressed into him hard as she tilted her chin up further, grabbing a fistful of his shirt as she kissed him fully, openly, in a desperate way she hadn't predicted. Her other arm reached up and and circled around his neck to pull him closer possessively. Her sudden actions seemed to unleash something in him—there was a low sort of broken down moan from someplace deep in his throat, and she felt one of his hands crush against the small of her back, pulling her firmly against him. His other hand was tangling in the hair on the side of her head. She could feel his heartbeat thundering against her chest, fast. His mouth moved with hers now boldly, openly, taking her into a deeper kiss, showing her how, and Alex felt like her body literally had been lit on the sweetest, most heavenly fire. She couldn't concentrate on one thing—it was all so much—the way their mouths were entangled, the sound and feel of his labored breathing, the warmth and solidness of him everywhere against her, so indescribable, so beyond stunning, so unlike what she had imagined.

Their breathing was becoming heavy and noisy in each other's mouths, and the way he pulled at her, his hands on her back, then her waist, then her hips, was becoming more and more frantic. Alex heard a strangled sort of moaning gasp escape her mouth and into his as her back hit against the side of the SUV. She might have imagined it, but she swore he whimpered as his hands skinned down to her hips and grabbing roughly, lifting her up easily, pinning her against the truck almost harshly. His body pressed hard against hers, maybe he didn't remember who she was. But she didn't care. She didn't even consciously realize that she wrapped her legs around his waist or locked her arms around his neck, hands gripping his head tightly—she was completely and totally caught up in the way he kissed her: wild and free, desperate and hungry, with his whole body, with his heart and soul. It felt like she was the only thing he wanted in the world, like she was something that he adored. As he held her like that and kissed her so furiously, so passionately, she couldn't deny it: she wanted him so, very, badly.

The sounds of more cars pulling in nearby cut the moment short and they broke apart, breathing heavily, stunned. Cas gazed at her with eyes full of raw emotion as he still held her. She could only stare back—reeling, aching, confused, entranced. Her heart was racing and her breath was short and she was stunned at herself, at him.

Cas hesitated... and then gently pushed a strand of hair back from the side of her face, never looking away from her, his eyes full of memories, of unspoken things. His hand stayed there at the side of her face, tender and sweet, he looked heartbroken and in love at the same time... and Alex knew he was remembering moments she hadn't even lived yet. And she might not have known much, but after that kiss especially, she knew one thing for sure. This man, this version of Castiel, had loved her. Loved. The proof was in the way he was looking at her, the way he had kissed her. The flowers at her grave. The clothes still neatly folded in her drawer. The things he carried of hers. Her chest was tight and there was a lump in her throat that wouldn't go away. So
overwhelmed by him that she touched the side of his face, too, with a tenderness she hadn't even known she felt, letting her thumb brush against his cheek. His vivid blue eyes seemed so full as they searched hers and he leaned into her touch. The moment felt indescribably intimate on a level she had never experienced.

It was suddenly too much and Alex pushed away, slid down. She walked a few steps off, her back to him, overcome with emotion she wasn't sure what to do with. She didn't want him to see her face or how much she was feeling at the moment. She took a few shaky breaths, trying to gather her thoughts, trying not to freak out completely. After a few beats he came up behind her, and there was a long, strained pause.

"You asked me how you die."

She turned around slowly at his soft words—was he going to finally tell her? He was pensive, grim, and looking somewhere off to his left, remembering. "You and I went on what was supposed to be a simple mission. Recon, far outside the city. But we got cut off, and there were Croats, too many of them. And, by the time we took them all out..." his voice softened, his eyes shut. "You were infected with the virus. You begged me to kill you before... before the change." He opened his eyes again, and she saw that they were shining with tears. "I said I couldn't, not with... not because of..." he swallowed, blinked, tried to stay composed. "But it didn't matter. I had to." He looked right at her. The raw pain on his face suddenly made sense. "And I did. I shot you and then watched you die." Again, his eyes began to shine with grief.

Alex shook her head, wordless, realizing in faint horror why he felt so responsible and traumatized.

Cas looked down. "I was supposed to be your protector. Forever. And I failed, miserably. I hate being just a man." He took a deep breath, cleared his throat, forcing himself to recover a little. "The point of me telling you this is... you and Dean have to change it. Have to. Because this — " he looked around, gestured at nothing in particular, then back at her, "isn't how it's supposed to be."

"Cas, I—" she started, but was cut off by a familiar, gravelly shout over somewhere behind the other cars.

"Hey! You two clowns comin'?" One of the Deans yelled. The other one bellowed, "We don't got all day!"

Cas and Alex looked at each other a moment longer. There was so much more to say. But it would have to wait. Or never be said at all.

"Coming, Deans," Alex called back, then turned her gaze back to Cas. "Cas..." she started, but she was cut off when he unexpectedly drew her into a tight, impulsive, earnest hug. His arms felt strong around her and his hand cradled the back of her head. His face was buried in the side of her hair. He trembled and Alex was taken aback at him yet again. He was so human. She slowly put her arms around him too, noticing how their bodies fit so well. How safe his arms felt. Her emotions were going haywire, her throat felt tight. She shut her eyes tight, trying to steady her breathing.

When he drew back, just a little, there were tears swimming in his eyes. "Thank you," he said softly and stroked his hand down the side of her head, his fingers in her hair, his eyes holding hers. He leaned in again and kissed her cheek softly, slowly, and his eyebrows drew together deeply, making him look grieving as he did it. She leaned into his touch helplessly, softened into the warm press of his lips, inhaling his woodsy scent. Alex was left to wonder who it was he was kissing. Her, or the Alex from his time? Either way, she felt deeply touched and confused all at once. She felt love in his touch and it almost broke her. A tear slid down Cas's cheek and his hand tightened
on the back of her head, like he was trying to hold onto something he knew was already lost.

"Alex! Double time!" One of the Deans was calling, and the moment was interrupted.

Cas pulled back, let go of her and with surprising deftness he composed himself, flashed her a crooked, disarming grin despite his inner turmoil. "Wanna go kill the devil?"

Alex's eyes rested on his face and a soft, sad smile spread across her lips. He intrigued her, burdened her, and made her ache, this Castiel. He hid his pain so well. But not so well that she couldn't see it. "Sounds good," she answered, trying to match his tone of voice. But she sounded soft and sad, like she felt.

Cas gave her an understanding, bittersweet smile, then headed toward the back of his truck and pulled out their guns as Alex smoothed her hair, straightened her tank top… both of which had gotten a little askew and disheveled during the kiss. Cas saw her straighten herself, and gave her the smallest little coy smile at that—like they shared a fun little secret—and he looked so boyish, so much younger in that moment. She smiled back, suddenly feeling shy—she tucked some hair behind her ear. He hoisted his gun, and then tossed her hers. For a moment, Alex didn't ever want to leave 2014.

Dean and Dean headed up the group, taking the lead about ten paces in front of everyone. 2014 Dean glanced back at Cas, Risa, and Alex, noticing that Cas and Alex were close to each other, that Cas kept looking at Alex every few seconds. Dean gritted his teeth, stepped a little closer to himself. If this guy really was him in 2009, which he was pretty sure he was, then he deserved a warning.

"Hey, word to the wise," he said, garnering a cursory sidelong glance from himself. "Keep Cas and Alex away from each other, you hear me? If it weren't for him, she'd still be alive."

"Huh?" Dean asked, clearly not following.

"Just do what I said," Dean insisted in a harsh, low voice. "Put a damn end to it. Don't let them be together."

"Cas and Alex?" Dean asked in a low, disbelieving voice. "Like, as in, together?" He suddenly seemed to think it was a joke, and chuckled. "Come on, man. What're you smoking?"

"Just shut up," Dean snapped, exceedingly annoyed with himself. "Trust me. He is her death sentence." He grabbed his other self by the shirt, demanding the other one's gaze. "She dies, dude, you get that? And that's on him. I didn't know, I didn't have a chance of stopping it. Now you do." He shoved him away. "So I hope to god you do something about it, man." He clenched his jaw, then stalked away.

Dean sobered, looked back behind them at where Alex and Cas followed. The way future-Dean had said that didn't sound like he was lying.

Just outside the Jackson County Sanitarium, Alex glanced again in the direction that both Deans had gone about five minutes ago. They only had a couple more minutes until they stormed the building ahead of them where Lucifer was.

After her Dean had asked for 'a word with himself,' the two Deans had disappeared behind a building. She didn't think she could wait any longer, and turned to Cas, who was beside her. "I'm gonna go find the Deans."
"I'll come with you," he said, but she shook her head, standing up.

"No. I'll be right back."

He stood up too, looking terrified. "No, Alex, I can't let you go alone."

She stopped, looking at him plainly, warningly. The small group didn't need to be any more disbanded than it already was, and the Deans were just around the other side of a building within earshot. "Stay here," she repeated. "I'll be back." She paused, looked at him and gave him the smallest, saddest smile. He stood tall and brave, a gun slung across his body and 'fighter' written across everything about him. And at her command he looked conflicted but he stepped back, silently agreeing to stay behind.

Castiel watched as she left—and even though that wasn't his Alex—not completely—it was still Alex. And he would always love any version of her. From any time or dimension, she was the one his heart had decided to love.

Alex hurried off, not knowing that was the last time she would see that version of Cas. If she had known, she would have looked back at him again. But she hadn't known. And she didn't look back.

She darted over to the building she'd seen the Deans go behind, and when she rounded the corner, she stopped short—one Dean was standing over the unconscious form of the other. "Son of a bitch," she muttered, cautiously approaching Dean. It wasn't her Dean. Her Dean was the one laying on the ground. "Care to explain?" she demanded suspiciously, very aware of where her weapon was and contemplating using it.

"Just a little... disagreement," he said, eyeing her with a look she didn't like.

"A little disagreement that ended with you knocking my Dean out? My ass. You liar."

He shook his head, laughed a little—a sound tinged by sadness. "Goddamit kid I've missed you." The smile faded. "Forgot how sassy you are." He looked oddly stricken, but only for a second. He lunged and reached out and grabbed her hard by the arm. "Sorry, Al. I recognize that look. You were about to run. Well, I can't let you do that. See, Dean here was gonna warn everyone that I'm going in the back while they go in the front."

Alex didn't pull away. She was too shocked at what this meant. "You're using those people as a diversion? Even Cas?"

Dean yanked her closer. "I have to!" He was breathing hard, and his eyes were crazed, wild. "I got to kill Lucifer, and I've run out of damn options—what the hell else am I supposed to do?"

Alex opened her mouth to argue with him, but he cut her off. "Listen to me, Alex. Do not get involved with Cas. I'm begging you." He paused, his face full of a pain she hadn't seen there before. "He's the signature on your death certificate."

"What do you mean?" She asked, not sure if he were insane or delusional or what.

He just shook his head, looked at her sadly. "I'm sorry about this. I am." Without hesitation, he drew back and punched her, hard, and she fell to the ground unconscious. Dean Winchester stood over his baby sister, breathing hard, unable to believe himself on the one hand, but also to the point where he couldn't afford to care anymore. He had one thing left to do. One thing. Kill the devil. And he wasn't going to let his sister or himself stand in the way.

Dean dragged Alex about fifty feet off, down an alleyway. He crammed her between a dumpster
and a trashcan, figuring that when the 2009 Dean woke up, if he couldn't find Alex, that would
stall him a little. Dean looked at his unconscious sister, and allowed himself a final moment of
gentleness. He knelt down and moved her hair off of her face. She really was so beautiful. She had
been so full of life. Bitterness swelled in his heart as he remembered the day she died in 2013. It
wasn't right, and it wasn't fair—everyone he loved had died. He stood up, Colt in hand. Well, now
it was the devil's turn.

When Alex came to, she sat up, breathless, panicked, and beside a smelly dumpster. Shit! How
long had she been out? She scrambled to her feet and ran, trying to find her bearings. There was
wind and lightning, but no other sounds—no gunfire, no shouting. She rounded a corner, and halted
almost in mid-step—in front of her, Dean and—"Sam?"

He was wearing a white suit, and looked at her with an odd, lifeless smile. "Hello, Alexandra."
Beside her, Dean was shaking his head. "That's not Sam, Alex. That's Lucifer."

"What?" Alex breathed, suddenly understanding why Zachariah had told made them come here,
had insisted they needed to see. "No..."

Lucifer laughed a little at her protest. "Oh, yes, Alexandra. Yes." Absolute horror overcame Alex.

Lucifer then looked at Dean, a patronizing smile on his face. "While this little family reunion of
ours has been sweet, honestly, I have things to do." He looked at both in turn. "Goodbye. We'll
meet again soon." He turned to go.

"You better kill us now!" Dean shouted.

Lucifer turned back around. "Pardon?"

"You better kill me now. Or I swear, I will find a way to kill you. And if I don't find a way, she
will. One of us will be the end of you, I swear to you."

"Fascinating. Well, I swear this to you. You won't say yes to Michael. You won't kill Sam, you
won't be able to save Alex from her own foolish choices..." He shrugged almost modestly.
"Whatever you do, you will always end up here. Sam will die, Alex will die. Nothing you can do
will change that. Whatever choices you make, whatever details you alter, we will always end up—
here. I win."

Dean shook his head, his expression completely tortured. "You're wrong."

Lucifer just smiled. "See you in five years, Dean."

There was a ground-shaking roll of thunder, and lightning seemed to crack the sky in two. And
Lucifer was gone. Alex and Dean looked at each other, aghast. Then Dean grabbed at Alex,
catching sight of something behind them—Zachariah, and he was reaching for them.

Suddenly, they were in the quiet motel room in Kansas City. Alex almost fell over, dizzy from the
sudden change.

"So, Winchesters." The two of them turned to see Zachariah behind them, smiling.

"Oh, well, if it isn't the ghost of Christmas screw you," Dean growled.

The angel ignored the comment, looking between both of them animatedly. "You saw it, right?
Both of you! You saw what happens. Dean, you're the only person who can prove the devil wrong.
Alex, you're reasonable… tell your brother here—just say yes. Avoid all that pain, all the sad outcomes, all the death and guilt." He raised his eyebrows, smiled a little bigger. "Huh, Dean? What do you say?"

Alex looked at Dean, and for a moment, she had no idea what he would say, what he would do—they had just been to a future where Sam's body was Lucifer's vessel, where Alex was dead, where Dean was a shell of himself.

Dean turned away from Zachariah. "I say… nah."

"'Nah?'" Zachariah's smile was gone. "You telling me you haven't learned your lesson?"

Dean turned back around. "Oh, I've learned a lesson, all right. Just not the one you wanted to teach." He stood in front of Alex protectively, but she wasn't sure what good that would do. Zachariah could probably rip them to shreds with a single thought. Still, she inched a little closer to her big brother.

"Well, I'll just have to teach it again!" Zachariah said, his expression murderous. "Because I got you now, boy, and I'm never letting you—"

And suddenly, they were somewhere else entirely, standing beside a road, under the light of a street lamp. And there, between them, holding them each at the arm above the elbow, was Castiel. He gave them a little smile as he let go.

"That's pretty nice timing, Cas," Dean commented, looking at Cas with a lot of relief. Alex was doing the same—seeing Cas as he was supposed to be—trench coat, clean-shaven, looking in his right mind—almost counteracted all the heaviness of the past three days spent in 2014. Almost.

"We had an appointment," Cas was replying to Dean, the ghost of a smile touching his lips.

Dean put a hand on his shoulder. "Cas… don't ever change." Cas smiled a little more at Dean, then looked at Alex. His expression flickered, as if he were noticing something off. She looked away, her pulse a little faster than normal. He contemplated her a moment longer, then turned his gaze to her brother.

"How did Zachariah find you?" he asked Dean.

"Long story. Let's just stay away from Jehovah's Witnesses from now on, okay?" Dean pulled out his phone.

"What're you doing?" Cas asked. Dean glanced at him as he scrolled through his contacts.

"Something I should have done in the first place. Calling Sam." He walked a couple steps off, phone to his ear.

Thank God, Alex thought. At least one good thing would come out of that crazy trip to the future. She glanced up again. Cas was watching her intently and she couldn't help it… she looked at him strangely, seeing the Cas she'd met in 2014. "Alex. What happened? What did Zachariah do?"

She still couldn't quite look him in the eyes. "He, uh, sent us to twenty-fourteen. To see the future. What he said would happen, if… if we don't stop it. If Dean doesn't say yes to Michael." She trailed off, finally looked at him from under her lashes, her chest aching with sadness. "It was, uh, pretty… crazy."

He was frowning intently. "In what way?"
"Um." She was having trouble forming sentences. "Try every way." She looked at him kind of sidelong, trying to reconcile the Cas of 2014 with this one. They didn't even seem like the same person—and she couldn't help but remember, in torturous detail, what she and the Cas from 2014 had done beside a beat up old truck, how he'd hugged her and held her and kissed her cheek and the life they'd apparently shared in a cabin, together. She almost felt ashamed, like she had done something behind this Cas's back—but it had been with him, only, a later version of him, right? Alex tried to keep eye contact, tried to appear fine and normal.

Castiel frowned slightly, his eyes narrowed in confusion as he looked at her. "What is it?"

"What? Nothing..." she said, looking at him and shaking her head, trying hard to appear normal. But he didn't seem to be buying it.

His head was tilted to the side. "You've never looked at me like that before." Castiel said. His words made her wither and Alex felt entirely vulnerable, as if she had been found out. "What is it?" He asked. He sounded distinctly suspicious, or maybe it was her guilty, confused conscience. He had stepped closer, and she was looking up at him, similarly to the last time she had, right before they had kissed. She couldn't control herself. She was breathing faster, remembering every little detail of those lips, that mouth—oh god. It all flooded her mind at once. The cabin, Cas's drug addiction, the sight of tears in his eyes, the feeling of his arms hugging her so tightly. His almost-confession of love. She swallowed, shook her head, tried to brush off his question. "Something's wrong," he insisted levelly, searching her eyes.

She shook her head, trying to think of anything but this man in front of her. "No. I'm fine. I'm... totally fine. It was just, a really dark future and uh, I had a hard time with it." Well, that was true enough, wasn't it. "And I feel really, really run over by it, really overwhelmed and not sure of, stuff, and uh emotional things, that's all." She wanted to die. She sounded like a stuttering, fumbling mess.

Cas seemed to let it go. But he was still looking at her suspiciously. Dean was coming back, putting his phone in his pocket. His intrusion was a blessed relief. "So, Sam's gonna meet us halfway."

Speaking of Sam... Alex looked at Dean closely, suddenly anxious for another reason entirely. "Dean, did you know? About Sam being Lucifer's vessel?"

At that, Cas looked distinctly surprised, but stayed silent, just listening as Dean replied.

"Yeah. The other me told me. And, actually, Sam told me. Last night, here in two-thousand nine, when he called in the middle of the night."

Alex was hurt, immediately. He had never once mentioned anything to her about it, and it wasn't because he'd lacked opportunity. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Her brother gave her a hooded glance. "Dunno. Guess I hoped it wasn't true," Dean said. "I didn't want you to be worried if you didn't have to be." He shook his head, looked at Cas, who had been listening silently. "Cas, I begged myself to say yes to the angels."

Cas squinted. "I don't fully understand that sentence."

Dean paused. "Right. It's kinda trippy. Long story, actually. Listen, can we just fill you in later? I'm tired as hell and me and Al need to hit the road if we're gonna meet Sammy in the morning."

Cas nodded. "Of course. You have my number."
Dean held up a finger. "Can you bring the Impala here, or…?"

"Oh. Of course." Cas disappeared for all of three seconds, and suddenly, the Impala was right there in front of them, sitting on the side of the street, and Cas was where he had been three seconds ago.

Beaming, Dean clapped Cas on the shoulder. "You are one handy guy to have around, Cas," he said, fully pleased.

"Thank you. Call me when you are ready to discuss the events of this journey to two thousand and fourteen," Cas said.

"We will," Dean said.

Cas glanced at Alex, who had already been looking at him. And then he was gone.

Life was back to normal again. Dean driving the Impala, Alex in the passenger seat. Except she felt like everything had changed. Seeing a future where you died, your family shattered to pieces, your angel fell apart at the seams… it left her feeling tired, heavy, afraid. "You're awful quiet," Dean commented, as if reading her mind.

"A lot on my mind," she replied vaguely.

"Me too. Glad we got outta there," He chuckled. "I was such a friggin' jerk, huh?"

She shrugged. She didn't feel in the mood for joking. She could feel Dean looking at her sidelong. "Listen," he said. "I know this much for a fact. You're not dying in twenty-thirteen. Sam is not gonna be Lucy's chew toy. And, hell. Cas isn't gonna end up a mystic stoner guy. Not if I have anything to do with it. That version of the future will not happen."

Alex looked out her window, troubled. "But what if it does? Lucifer said—"

"Aw come on, you're gonna listen to that twerp?" Alex gave him a weird look—he had just called Satan a twerp. Only Dean. "Nope," he said authoritatively. "I'm changing the damn story. Screw fate. Calling Sam, getting him here back with us—that changes everything." Alex looked down at her lap. She hoped that was true. Dean cleared his throat. "Listen, I told myself… er, the twenty-fourteen me told me to watch out for something. For you and Cas. As in, together."

Oh shit. Alex scowled, immediately feeling like she had been discovered. She immediately scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Dean looked at her intently between glances at the road. "You're not, I dunno, into him, or…?"

"Dean!" Alex exclaimed, hurriedly trying to get him off this awkward train track. "Cas isn't even a human being. Do you hear what you're asking me? Come on. The guy is practically asexual." She went silent. She had actually kind of believed that herself, until the whole brothel thing. Now, with that and a full blown make-out session with future-him under her belt, she wasn't so sure. However, she was still talking, trying to convince him otherwise and get him to stop asking. "Twenty-fourteen Dean had it all wrong. The guy was a nutcase. No offense. Now shut up, you're giving me a headache."

"Fine, whatever. All I know is I'm not letting Lucifer get Sam. I don't care whatever else happens. Not my family."

Alex stared out of the window if the Impala, not even fully hearing Dean. She was replaying the
memories of 2014 over and over, unable to stop herself. She almost wished she hadn't kissed that future version of Cas, because now, she would never be able to look at the current version of Cas without remembering, without wanting more of the same. Her body could still remember how his hands, his hips, his arms, his mouth had all felt in excruciating detail. She shivered a little, but not from the cold. Maybe the most torturous part of the memory was the way he'd held her and kissed her cheek. She'd felt the way he loved her in that embrace and touch. Felt it in every part of herself.

She reached into her pocket, fingers touching the very real little yellow flower she had taken off of her grave. The flower he'd put there. She pulled it out gently and looked at it, twirling it somberly between her thumb and forefinger. The future looming ahead was deeply concerning. Terrifying even. But with each passing second, they were steadily moving toward it, no way of stopping the hands of time.

2014

Cas held himself up at the window just barely, watching as Alex and Dean confronted Lucifer, then disappeared when Zachariah touched them. And with the knowledge that they survived, that they had gone back to their own time, Cas let go, too weak to support himself. He fell over and rolled over onto his back, his own blood pooling all around him from several gunshot wounds he'd sustained. When Dean had returned with no 2009 Dean or Alex, Cas had almost lost his mind with worry, had almost decked Dean right then and there, accusing him of being an idiot, of risking their lives. Dean had commanded him to "calm the hell down, chill out Cas, they went inside ahead of us, okay?!" And sickened because he had known he shouldn't have let her out of his sight, Cas had stormed the compound, so afraid that she would die again and he would stand by again and let it happen again.

He groaned painfully, coughing and shaking. But at least he knew Zachariah had spirited them away, back to the year they had come from. A small assurance as he laid dying.

He stared at the ceiling in agony, trying with the last of his strength to pull out the photo in his pocket, the one he always carried. His hand shook violently as he brought the wrinkled photo close to his face. Even through his pain, his face relaxed briefly as he gazed at the picture—in it, he and Alex stood proudly wielding guns and confident smirks. They stood shoulder to shoulder. Partners. In life together, no matter what. He remembered how happy they were then, despite the shape of the world around them.

His eyes went to her torso, and he felt his throat clench as his thumb traced across her stomach on the photograph. She hadn't been that far along. Tears sprang into his eyes as he looked at the woman he loved, carrying his unborn child, the child who never had a chance, the child only he and she had known about and had been very surprised by—a blessed secret they had treasured together in the private, quiet, space of their relationship. Cas felt the tears running down his face now. The photograph had been taken just a week before they both died. One week after this photo was taken, he would be forced to kill both the woman he loved and the child she carried.

He remembered how she had begged him through tears, screaming for him to shoot her before the change, before she could turn on him. He had in turn begged her not to make him, said he couldn't, couldn't—she had grabbed his gun, pulled the barrel into her stomach, told him he had to. He knew she was right, but God. It had taken everything, everything to pull the trigger.

The sound of the gunshot still haunted his every waking moment, his every sleepless night.

He remembered her shallow breaths, her blood all over his shirt, his trembling hands. And then, as only she could, she smiled at him through her pain, touched the side of his face, whispered
something only for them to know. And they had shared one last, tender, goodbye kiss. Tasted each other's tears. She'd held his gaze, and she'd been afraid. She'd clutched one of his hands, trying not to be. He remembered thinking, how did this happen? How did I let this happen to her? He held himself together, just a little longer so that the last thing she saw wasn't him falling apart at the seams. She would want him to carry on and be strong. And even though he had known that he couldn't carry on without her, he wanted her to think he would. He remembered his choked sobs as she died—her warm body going slack in his arms, her head falling to the side, the life leaving her. That day, he had learned what it meant to weep, to hope beyond any logical method that a moment wasn't real, to beg a god who wasn't even there to please fucking change this! To Castiel, that moment was like dying, but the worst part was that he had to go on living.

In all the thousands and thousands of years he'd existed, he hadn't lived until he had met her. And that day, when she died, it was like he had died, too.

Cas clenched the photo tightly, his vision wavering, his breathing labored. He blinked rapidly, his vision going dark. This was the end, but he suddenly didn't feel ready. He began begging whatever God or power out there to save the one he loved from this outcome, this reality.

This time, let the ending be different. Please, please, please... give us one more try, a chance to live. And if not me, then at least for her.

He blinked unevenly, as if sleepy.

And unable to hold onto life any longer, Castiel let out his last shuddering breath and closed his eyes for the very last time.
"And every silence all around me is screaming through the walls."
- Copeland

Tore Me Down

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Later That Day

Dean and Alex got out of the Impala at the same time, slamming their doors in unplanned unison. Their hands went into their jacket pockets as they leaned back on opposite sides of the car, facing different directions—Sam would meet them here soon, just as agreed—and Alex was anxious for him to get there so she could maybe be distracted from herself. The late afternoon was cool and gloomy, a misty fog blanketing the landscape. There was the harsh cackling call of a crow somewhere nearby, and the muted whooshes of cars passing by on the highway.

"You okay, Alex?" From the sound of his voice, she could tell her brother had turned his head slightly toward her.

Was she okay. That question was seriously laughable. Inside her jacket pocket, her fingers moved against the wilting yellow flower there. All she could do was shrug a little, her back still to him. "I guess."

There was a short silence, then a soft attempt at a chuckle. "Yeah, me neither."

She heard him shift, breathe deeply, and let it out a troubled sigh. She knew he was thinking about everything they had seen in 2014. A world gone to complete and utter hell. Horrifying. Haunting. She hadn't slept since, actually, even though she was exhausted and needed rest badly. All she could do was remember, remember. In graphic detail, and each time she remembered, it horrified her even more. Lucifer, in Sam's body—no light or life in his eyes, only chilling malice—Dean, a broken, harsh shell of a man who had lost his way—and… Cas. Alex shut her eyes at the thought of him, pained to the point that she felt she might lose control.

Castiel. Never in a hundred years would she have guessed he could ever turn out like that—fallen from grace and a messed up human just like the rest of them. Beaten, broken, scarred, destroyed in ways she didn't even really understand. And in love with her…

How do you come back from that? From going to the future and finding out the angel who saved your life, your brother's life, restored your voice, defied Heaven to help your family… that all he wanted before going to his death was a kiss to remember you by? And then, how did you deal with the fact that in that man's arms, under the spell of his kiss was the most alive you had ever felt? And how did you even begin to confront the floodgate of intense feelings it all set free inside—feelings you hadn't even known existed at all? Or maybe you had known they existed somewhere deep down… but had tried your damnedest to ignore them and push them away.

Alex didn't know how to process any of it, and felt like she was suffocating inside. If in the moment when it had happened she had felt overwhelmed, she now felt crazy. There were so many thoughts zipping through her mind, and all conflicting, jumbled, confused. She felt almost guilty, like the Castiel she knew now would be shocked to find out, or that he would be offended or hurt.
Maybe he wouldn't though, how could she know? Would he even care one way or another? Would he understand any of it? She sure as hell didn't. It was literally making her head hurt.

She knew one thing: she hadn't been able to stop thinking of him, both of him. She was trying to figure out when the one she knew now in this present time became that Cas, the one who had so obviously loved her. Was it after the angels left and he became human? Had it happened before then? Moreover, when had she begun to feel that way about him? Although, if she were honest with herself… hadn't she already started, a little bit? ...More than a little bit? She knew the answer was yes, even though she didn't want to admit it to herself. It was terrifying to her.

Cas had blown through her life like a tornado, and in his wake left so many moments that alone might not have meant much—but piled on top of each other, they now seemed to take up her entire heart. She remembered at first not trusting him and wishing he would screw off and stop messing up her life. Those feelings had changed very quickly into grudging, reluctant tolerance. Then she had unconsciously come to some kind of appreciative, curious interest in him, in who this angel was. When he'd told her he was the one who'd given her a voice again... she'd looked at him in whole new light. And now? She didn't want to think about it. But if he disappeared tomorrow and never reappeared, she would not be okay.

*Dammit.* She closed her eyes, remembering a clutter of moments and sensations in rapid succession. Every time he'd healed her—the touch of his hand, the blazing intensity in his eyes. How he hadn't understood her anger at him about his blind allegiance and unquestioning obedience to Heaven—the look on his face any number of times she'd bitched him out. That look on his face any time she'd been hurt, even just a little bit. When he had healed her injuries with Uriel in the same damn room even after he'd been told to stop. Him healing her voice. *Him healing her voice.*
She still wasn't over that one. And other moments stuck out in her mind, odder moments. That little sassy question he'd posed to her about romance novels, in the dark, on a porch under the stars. How easily she had tricked him into thinking a pinky promise was a deadly-serious binding agreement, but then when he understood, when he got it… how proud he'd looked. She opened her eyes again, but the memories kept coming.

She thought about his disobedience to Heaven for the sole purpose of giving her and Dean a chance to stop Sam, to stop Lucifer—when Chuck told them Cas was dead, her stomach had dropped and her body had seized up. She had cared, she had been affected, she had been distraught inside.

She thought about how he wouldn't drop it, earlier that very day, when he asked what was wrong, she'd lied to his face and said nothing. And he hadn't believed her. Her breathing hitched slightly, as she realized that she was pretty sure Cas wouldn't have even known or picked up on that a few months ago. He was learning her. She wasn't sure if that made her feel afraid or something else entirely…

Again she thought of what he'd given her. Her voice—the gift of speech. When she really thought about it, her body threatened to break down into tears. How could someone do such a beautiful thing for her? How had she ever deserved that kindness? When he said it cost him a lot, she believed that. She was afraid to find out what it had cost him.

All these moments and more had collected inside of her and she didn't know how to undo what they had done to her. Cas had gotten under her skin without her even realizing. He was so unassuming in that way. She hadn't guarded herself well enough, because she hadn't expected it. Not only because she never really anticipated having any kind of real relationship with a man—but because he wasn't a man. He was an angel. The body he inhabited wasn't even his—that was a man named Jimmy Novak. She forgot sometimes that Castiel was that blinding light that had glowe
underneath his skin when he healed, when he exorcised. That the physical appearance of Jimmy Novak wasn't Cas at all. That Castiel was some kind of heavenly, celestial spirit who had traversed the universe for a thousands—hundreds of thousands?—of years. But even when she thought about this massive, baffling reality… it changed nothing about the way she felt.

It was stupid to feel that way about someone you would never even have a chance with. It was like high school all over again, the one time she'd had a crush on that artist guy in ninth grade. He'd never noticed her, even though she'd tried so hard to get his attention. It had broken her heart. This was that, all over again, but with a weird twist in fate where she'd traveled ahead in time (to a future that she had to ensure would never happen) where she did get the guy. It was like fate got off on torturing her. And damn, did it know how. That kiss, his embrace and words, the look in Cas's eyes had unlocked things inside her. Things she wanted now to forget. Because it would be easier not to remember that moment—the way he held her with such a tender longing, reverence, desire. She could still remember the way every part of him felt against her in the kiss that they had drowned each other in. She remembered how he'd held her and trembled, his hand against the back of her head. Was that what it felt like to be loved?

Her thoughts made her breathing a little shorter. It made her feel a little ill. How the hell was she supposed to deal with this? The more she thought about it, the sicker and more confused she felt. She didn't understand, and she wasn't sure if it were real at all. Maybe it was an elaborate prank by Zachariah designed to get to her, to mess with her head. Well, it had worked. Whatever confused feelings she had about Cas before were even worse. No, not worse, well yes, worse. And stronger. She didn't want to have them at all, because it was too much. She allowed herself to wonder if Cas, the one in her time here in 2009, if he cared about her in that way at all. She wanted to laugh at this point. She just couldn't imagine him choosing her in any version of reality. It just made no sense—she was the most abysmal excuse for a person, let alone a woman… it had to be a cruel joke.

"There he is," Dean said, and Alex started, remembering where she was. She looked up, momentarily distracted, thankfully, from her chaotic, spilling thoughts. She could see a dark car rolling toward them up the dirt road out of the fog, and she stood straight, no longer leaning against the Impala. The car pulled to a stop.

Sam's familiar, hulking figure got out of the car, and Alex went to him, almost running the last two steps. For a moment, she was just so glad to see her brother again, in one piece and not possessed by the devil. She momentarily didn't care about all the crap between them, all the water under the bridge—she was just relieved, so, so relieved. They hugged tightly for a minute. Alex looked up at him tensely. "You okay?" she asked, searching his face.

"Yeah," he said. He looked strained and nervous, but happy to see her, too. "It's really good to see you. I've missed you guys."

Dean, who had sauntered up slowly, was more reserved. "Sam."

Sam's expression fell a little bit. And then Dean pulled out Ruby's knife. For a second, Sam and Alex both stared at it nervously, but then Dean held it out to Sam, handle first. "If you're serious and you want back in… you should hang onto this. I'm sure you're rusty." Sam accepted the blade with hesitation, and Dean sighed, getting ready to apologize. "Look, man, I'm sorry. I don't know. But I was, uh—wrong."

Sam looked at Alex, then back at Dean. "What made you change your mind?"

Dean and Alex looked at each other very briefly. "Long story," Dean said. "The point is… maybe we are each other's Achilles heel. Maybe they'll always find a way to use the two of us or the three of us against each other, I don't know. I just know we're all we've got. More than that—we keep
each other human. We keep each other alive."

Sam looked touched by the words. "Thank you. Really. Thank you. I won't let you down." He looked at Alex. "Either of you." She gave him an attempt at a smile. Sam took a deep breath, fixed Dean with an intent gaze. "So, what now?"

"We make our own future," Dean said, shrugging, trying to seem confident and unaffected. But Alex noticed how tensely he held himself.

Sam considered then nodded at Dean's statement, sort of hesitant and earnest at the same time. "Okay. Yeah. Sounds good."

Dean turned and headed back to the Impala, obviously waiting for his siblings to follow, but Sam had fixed Alex with this inquisitive, close look. "Alex, you okay?"

She wasn't really able to maintain steady eye contact at his question, tone, and stare. She tried to sound convincing. "Uh, yeah, Sam. I'm fine." She gave him a thin-lipped smile, which she could tell he didn't buy—but after a lifetime of "I'm fines" on all three sides, maybe they had learned that fine wasn't a thing they would ever be again. He didn't say anything else.

She stared at the ground as she walked. No. She definitely wasn't fine.

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That Night

Dean looked closely at Alex to make sure she was really asleep. She was breathing deeply, evenly, her mouth open a little bit. She was exhausted (hell, he was too)—but she hadn't slept at all in the three days they visited 2014 except in Cas's truck for maybe an hour. So, she was pretty conked out now. She slept with her arms crossed, on her side, head kind of turned into the pillow, hair all over her face, her breathing wheezy and deep. Yup, definitely asleep. She always looked so ridiculous asleep, and a little smirk tugged at Dean's mouth. He turned, beer in hand, and sat across from Sam in the dim motel room, focusing on his brother now, his momentary amusement at Alex fading. He really didn't want to have this conversation, but he knew he'd been putting it off for far too long now. With Sam back, with everything he'd seen, it was time. He'd already told Sam briefly about 2014 on the car ride that day, but there was something else, something that felt even bigger and darker eating at him.

He waited a couple seconds, getting up the nerve, while Sam typed away on the laptop, not paying attention. He cleared his throat gruffly. "Okay, look, Sam. We gotta talk."

Sam glanced up curiously, ceasing to type. "About?"

Dean had his hands clasped on the table, and a tense jaw, his beer now sitting to the side, forgotten. "You're not gonna like it."

Sam hesitantly nodded, as if he understood. He shut his laptop, picking up on the fact that this was going to warrant his full attention. "The demon blood? Yeah, I kinda figured you'd want to talk about it. We haven't yet, I mean, not in depth." He paused, looking down, an exasperated little smile on his face, his eyebrows shooting up. "You kinda didn't let me before."

Dean ignored Sam's passive aggressive comment, cutting to the chase—it wasn't demon blood he wanted to talk about, not really. There was something almost worse. "I, uh, I know I promised you a few years ago we wouldn't talk about this, uh, particular incident again, but after everything that's happened… I think we gotta." He looked at Sam meaningfully, and for a second, his brother stared,
confused. And then chilled understanding washed over Sam's face, and he went totally still and silent. He looked at Dean with a questioning, dread-filled gaze. Dean forced himself to maintain eye contact. "Come on, Sam—I just came back from five years in the future where you said yes to Lucifer and the world went to hell because of it. I need to make sure that's not gonna happen."

Sam's chin was low, his eyes staring at Dean balefully, nostrils flared. "It won't."

"How do you know that, huh?" Dean challenged. "I've been thinking about it, and hard too. All the things you've done up to now." He paused weightily. "And not just recently."

Sam looked cornered and pissed. "Dean, you promised we wouldn't talk about that again."

"Yeah well that was before I knew you were Lucifer's friggin' vessel," Dean retorted, a little loudly. Sam's eyes fell away from his.

Dean's jaw worked, clenching and unclenching. He wanted to get up and walk away, but he needed to keep going. He stared Sam down. "Look, all I know is that I got to keep this family safe. And lately I've been thinking, do I have to keep this family safe from you?" Sam's eyes snapped up to his. "I need you to be straight with me. If we're gonna hunt together, if you're gonna sleep in the same room as Alex, you need to tell me you're not gonna go down that road. I need to know you are not going to say yes to Lucifer, no matter what."

Sam just looked at him, sullen and tense. "I told you. I'm not."

Dean sat back in his chair, at a bit of a loss at Sam's short answers, and getting mad. "You're gonna have to do a little bit better than that, Sam. I mean I hate to say it, but it makes sense now. Lucifer, wanting you."

Sam was glaring at the table, his cheeks hollow from his clenched jaw. "Because of the things I did as a kid."

Dean's eyes dropped, staring unseeingly into his lap. "Yeah."

Their eyes met at the same instant, guarded and mistrustful. Sam wet his lips, obviously trying to stay collected. "Look, I haven't done any of that stuff in like fifteen years, maybe more." He paused. "I promise." He looked earnest and hurt, which only further pissed Dean off.

Dean leaned in, voice a little lower. "Yeah, you're a real nice guy aren't you. You think I buy that sensitive, understanding crap you peddle? I've known you your whole life, Sam. And I know you're not really that guy."

Sam looked stung and fearful, and Dean just looked at him, grim. "I remember, Sam. You probably think I forgot, right?"

"What, Dean?" Sam muttered, looking like he was trying to brush it off, "It was just angsty kid stuff, like me trying to deal with being angry about everything. So what, I started a few fires at a couple schools, stole some stuff? No one was hurt, no one found out it was me."

"I found out. I did," Dean said gruffly, and paused, feeling physically sick as he thought about it, barely able to look at Sam now. "You're lucky I never told Dad about any of that shit you pulled. But you know the fires and stealing weren't even what I was talking about."

Sam's eyes locked onto Dean's face, and he looked caught, guilty, afraid. There was a very long pause, where he struggled for words. "I—I don't know why I did that. I still don't know why, Dean."
"I do," Dean said grimly. "It was Azazel, Sam. That blood he dripped into your mouth? It pumped through you then when you were a kid. Just like it's pumping through you now."

Sam could say nothing, just looked down, agonized. He was shaking his head in absolute horror. "What I did... it wasn't me."

Dean met his brother's agonized gaze, and he almost choked on the lump in his throat. "Sam... it was you."

It had been a cold fall day. Frost on the ground, dead leaves falling off the trees. Dean and Alex had been playing hide and seek around one of the motels. Dad was gone, as usual. Sam had gone off on his own, probably to the gas station down the street. Maybe Alex was hiding behind the motel? Dean really didn't like it when she decided to get creative about her hiding spots. He always got worried if he couldn't find her right away. He told her a million times not to hide outside of the motels, but sometimes she did anyway, always so amused by his angry rants.

He had looked all over their room—no Alex—he had checked the lobby of the motel—no Alex. So he went around the back of the motel, heard a strange sound, like a cat crying. And rounding the dumpster, he froze at what he saw. Sam sat there in the corner made by the dumpster and the painted brick wall, and for just a couple seconds, he didn't notice Dean—and Dean saw it all. Sam was holding a mewing kitten in his hands. Scattered around Sam were dark furry, bloody lumps—Dean realized with horror that they were dead kittens that had literally pulled to pieces. The word horror was not strong enough for what Dean had felt seeing that.

Sam had seen him, started, face suddenly blank. For a minute, Dean had thought Sam was possessed, had grabbed him up and shoved him against the wall and shouted the exorcism chant—and nothing happened. And that meant the dead kittens, the blood splattered on the ground and on Sam's hands—that meant it was Sam who had done that. Sam. And with fear and shame and horror, Sam had broken down, claimed he didn't know why he did that, that he hadn't known what he was doing, please don't tell Dad, please don't tell Alex, I'm so scared, help me Dean, please help me. Dean had, in stony, scared shitless silence helped Sam get rid of the little kittens torn up bodies, wash the blood off his hands using a hose hookup on the side of the building. And after that, they wouldn't talk about it for years, didn't even acknowledge it had happened. Dean had never quite looked at Sam the same way, and Sam had never quite been able to look at Dean without shame touching the edges of his eyes. They both wanted to pretend it had never happened. But they both knew it had.

Even to this day, any time Dean saw Sam with an animal, he wondered if those kittens had been the first. Or the last. He wanted to believe it had been a crazy, one-off circumstance, but maybe that was denial. Sam had also started fires at school, in gas stations, and had stolen frequently. Dean had covered for him or ignored that stuff completely, figuring it was because they had such a hard childhood, because Sam was trying to express his frustration at the crap life they shared. That Sam just needed an outlet for his anger and disappointment. But... now Dean wished he had seen those signs for what they really were. That Sam was dark inside, and not because of anything he or Dad had done or not done. Because now, after all Sam's betrayals—the demon blood, beating Dean to a pulp, consorting with Ruby, lying constantly—Dean saw that his biggest mistake was blind denial. But he really wanted to believe Sam could conquer this.

Maybe the worst part of what Sam had done was when he ruthlessly attacked Alex. When Dean had watched him standing over her like that, there was a horrible few seconds where Dean thought he is going to kill her. How could he risk that happening again? Because Dean knew, he knew that Sam was still struggling with this problem, this addiction. But there was this desperation to believe that Sam could change, could control himself, could fight the disease inside.
"Dean." Looking up, startled out of his gruesome thoughts, Dean realized Sam was staring at him, a little accusingly. "Listen, you said you'd stop holding that stuff over my head. So are you going to let it go, or aren't you?" Dean said nothing, and Sam's eyebrows knit together. "I would do anything to take it all back."

"Yeah, you've said that before," Dean said dully.

"Because I mean it," Sam insisted, angry again.

Dean looked at him long and hard, then took another swig of his beer, not really even tasting the now lukewarm liquid. He set the bottle down, turned it in his hand, staring at it. "Yeah, I said I'd let that stuff stay in the past. But you said you were okay and then I find out a few weeks ago that you're sneaking around behind my back, drinking demon blood, lying to your family through your teeth. You chose a demon over your own family. You literally attacked our little sister as I watched. And you damn near killed me!" Sam looked at Dean resentfully, and Dean just stared back at him. "So, yeah. I got every reason to bring up the past. Because you're not okay."

"Really, Dean? I mean, are any of us okay?" Sam asked with one of those little nervous laughs of his. Dean fell silent and Sam leaned forward intently. "Have you taken a good look at Alex lately?"

"Of course I have dude, I'm the one that's been with her this whole time!" Dean fired back, pissed at Sam's self-righteous attitude and tone. He poked his index finger down hard onto the tabletop for emphasis. "All the years and times you've disappeared, it's been me and her. Dad, not always, you, not so much, but me and her, yeah. Always. So don't you try to tell me I don't know when something is wrong with her. She's fine."

Sam sat back in his seat with his arms crossed, looking at Dean with an air of superior annoyance. "Don't kid yourself, Dean. Something's really eating at her."

"Maybe it's you, Sam!" Dean exploded, shooting up to his feet. "Did you think of that?"

"Why is it always me, Dean?" Sam fired back, on his feet now too. The brothers were now practically shouting, not even remembering it was the dead of night and they weren't alone in the room. "There's a lot more to this than what I did!" Sam roared, getting in Dean's face. "What about what you've done?"

A small, grumpy voice made them both turn. "Guys… it's the middle of the night. What the hell are you yelling about?" Alex was kind of sitting up halfway, looking groggy and annoyed, her hair sticking out to the side.

"Nothing," Dean said, glancing tersely at Sam. "Go back to sleep."

She mumbled something that sounded like 'bite me,' groaned and flopped back down, rolled over and tossed her arm over her head.

Their conversation cut short, the brothers just kind of glared at each other, then Sam sat back down, re-opened his laptop and scowled at the screen, clicking the scroll pad harder than necessary. Dean swiped his beer bottle off the table angrily and paced for a minute, pissed off. It had been a lot easier with Sam gone. A hell of a lot easier.

Whenever Sam was gone, Dean had this tendency to believe they could work through their issues and not fight. And it never went that way, ever. Maybe it was because fate had been building them towards this divide since they had been born; this showdown that was supposed to go down between Michael and Lucifer. Dean scoffed at himself. He didn't even believe in fate—but with a
sinking feeling in his stomach, he wondered if he should, if he were being a moron.

Dean glanced at his sleeping sister's form, then at Sam, hunched over the laptop. All Dean could think is that he hoped he wasn't making the biggest mistake of his life. Sam was a good hunter, a decent human being most of the time, and his brother who he loved deeply. But could he be trusted? All he knew is after what Sam had done, this was pretty much the last chance Dean could afford to give. And that thought in itself was heavy enough to break Dean's heart in two. He didn't want to think about it.

So he just sat down on one of the beds and crossed his arms. He wasn't going to sleep until Sam did.

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One Month Later

Alex smoothed another page of Dad's journal down as she slowly flipped through the pages. She was careful not to wrinkle the pages or leave dog ears. She ran her fingers over words in Dad's bold penmanship. Usually she looked through the journal for the purpose of research. But today she just was missing the way things used to be. When they were younger. Even though it had been shitty, it hadn't been this shitty. She didn't miss Dad as much as she just missed a time when her brothers weren't walking on eggshells around each other and putting her in the middle of it. In fact, she didn't miss Dad much at all. Even thinking that made her feel guilty. But he hadn't been around enough to miss, and when he was around, she never felt like she lived up to his expectations—that, and he'd always been so angry, so volatile. She'd never been able to just be herself around him. It had always felt hopeless and impossible, but she had still tried so hard for so many years to be the kind of daughter he'd be proud of. Alex took her fingers off the page, thinking offhandedly about a nap. Right now, she just wanted to sleep and be dead to the world. She was tired to her bones. Tired, and lonely. She'd been keeping Sam and Dean at arms length because she didn't want them to see how messed up, how afraid, how freaked out she was.

The last month had been silent. No Cas. No angels. No demons. Just monsters of the week. Currently she and her brothers were in Nebraska in a town where people were being killed off by practical jokes—a girl had scratched her brains out after the kid she was babysitting had put itch powder in her brush. She and her brothers had traced the murders back to a boy named Jesse. Somehow—they weren't sure how yet, they had just met him earlier that day—his irrational fears were killing the townspeople.

Alex would have been really fascinated by the case in times past as it was so out there and unusual, even for them... but right now, she didn't even know why they were bothering. Wasn't the world about to end? And here they were doing grocery runs.

She was, in one word, tired. She hadn't slept well in forever, well—her whole life, but it had been worse lately. Lots of nightmares. More than usual. A lot of them involving Cas, the one from 2014. She kept dreaming about him dying alone, laying on the ground and choking on his own blood, afraid and alone. She would wake up sweating, panicked, sometimes even tearful. The weirdest and saddest thing was, if she and her brothers changed fate, she was mourning a person who would never really exist. But he had burned himself onto her heart. She could never forget. She would never forget. She was kind of dreading seeing him again here in 2009, because she didn't know how she could look at him in the eyes without falling apart. But she was also longing for the moment he'd suddenly appear again, too.

The door of the motel opened. It was Dean, by himself, keys jingling as he tossed them down. "Hey," she greeted, glancing up at him momentarily from the journal, trying to appear like she was
okay. "Where's Sam?"

"Still out, digging up stuff on the kid," Dean said, and stopped in the middle of the room, looking at her tersely. "You okay?"

She didn't miss the confrontational frown on his face, but instead flipped another page of Dad's journal, not looking at him. "Yeah, fine."

"Uh huh."
He let out a grumpy sounding sigh and came and sat beside her. Alex glanced up at him hostilley, silently warning Dean to back off while he still could, but he just stared back, unimpressed, and then asked, "Okay. So who pissed in your Cheerios today?" Alex gave him a sullen glare. He tried a half-way concerned expression. "Come on Al, level with me. You've seemed… I dunno, kind of out of it for the past few weeks."

Alex looked away silently. She had been expecting this, but still, she didn't want to deal with it. Both Dean and Sam had been giving her looks the past few weeks, trying to see what was wrong with her, why she had been so quiet. She'd been purposefully avoiding them. Making excuses and not talking much.

"Tell me," Dean prompted, and wouldn't look away. It wasn't a threat, but it almost sounded like he was warning her that she'd better or else.

"I don't know," Alex muttered, evasively, defensively. "Nothing."

Dean gave her an annoyed look, crossed his arms. "Bullshit. Total, complete bullshit."

Alex's eyes flicked up to his. "Fine. You wanna know what's wrong? How about every single damn thing, Dean?" She set Dad's journal down, crossed her arms, pissed off. "I used to think this life sucked and that was before the whole apocalypse, Lucifer, Michael thing. So if it didn't suck before, it fucking blows now." She almost laughed. "You wanna know why I'm acting weird? Because I don't think we can win this. I don't."

Silence. Dean seemed surprised by her outburst, confused, as if it didn't make sense to him. "I'm not letting Sam say yes," Dean finally said, as if reminding her of something she should already know, and as if it would fix everything.

Both of her eyebrows shot up. "Letting?" He was serious, and Alex felt herself go cold. "Don't kid yourself. Sam's gonna do what Sam wants to do. He may be trying to play nice right now to earn your good graces back Dean, but seriously. Are you that dumb? Sam's got enough pride to match yours, and then some."

Dean's scowl deepened, he held up his hands defensively. "Whoa, why are you getting on my case?"

"Well someone needs to," Alex snapped. "You're being stubborn and stupid about this. How many times has this exact issue gotten us an inch from losing our lives? Your pride and shortsightedness."

Dean looked stung, but more than that, he looked like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. His scowl had fallen. "You think I'm gonna say yes to Michael."

Alex almost wished she hadn't said anything at this point, because of the look on his face. She was suddenly grasping for a gentle way to be honest, and regretting her rude approach. She looked down, staring absenty at a loose thread on the blanket. "I think they'll find a way to convince you. Whether it's using me or Sam or something else." She looked at him. "Yeah. I do."
His expression was sad. Hurt. "You should trust me more than that. After all we've been through?"

Alex bit the insides of her cheeks. Her voice was unsteady, but she looked at him squarely. She couldn't stop now. "It's because of all we've been through. I know you, Dean. Better than anyone else. They'll figure out a way."

His jaw clenched oddly, he looked down. For a minute, she thought he was going to concede that she was right. Then he shook his head, frowning deeply, and stood up, walked away. "No. You're wrong. I am not gonna say yes. I don't care what those sons of bitches threaten, what future they show me…" He turned back around, and he had this look on his face like complete conviction. "We're gonna find a way to avoid all of this. Fate and destiny and all that crap? I'm not letting it dictate my life." He looked like he was over it, done. "And by the way, do me a favor and stop feeling sorry for yourself all the damn time."

"That's not fair!" Alex protested, standing up, almost shaking at his left-field, blase assumption. She was fighting tears all the sudden, tears that had come out of nowhere. "I'm not… feeling sorry for myself." She stared at him a second fearfully. "I'm scared, Dean."

Her brother looked a little taken aback, like he hadn't even considered that. Alex looked down, just kind of sad and quiet as she continued talking. "I don't wanna be afraid anymore." She looked at her brother pleadingly. "But have you looked at our family lately? We're torn apart. It's been nothing but fights and tension and us barely able to hold it together. I can't concentrate, I can't think straight. I can't sleep at night. I'm never hungry. All I can think about is what the future is gonna look like for us. Because if we're not together in this—the three of us, I don't think we stand one damn chance. Not one."

Dean seemed to be reeling, and opened his mouth to say something.

At that exact moment, the motel room door opened, and Sam walked in, a stack of papers in his hand. "So, I found out some stuff about Jesse," he said, then looked up, took in their expressions, the way they were standing. He frowned slightly. His timing was absolutely awful. "Everything okay? What's going on?"

Dean glanced at Alex, who was sitting back down on the bed, expression hard to read. "Uh, nothing. Everything's fine. What'd you find out about Jesse?"

Sam clearly didn't believe it, but with one last questioning glance, dropped the subject.

And just like that, they all proceeded to artfully avoided the elephant in the room—just like they had for the rest of their damn lives.

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Alex sat up, suddenly awake and very befuddled. She was in a bed with white sheets and a fluffy comforter, and the bed was in a nice, clean, bright carpeted bedroom. The walls were a soft beige color, the air smelled like clean towels or fresh laundry. Photos of children's faces dotted the walls. Sheer panicked confusion overcame Alex. What the…? Above what was probably the closet door, there were wrought iron words that said "Live - Laugh - Love" in curly black script. Alex tilted her head to the side, puzzled. That was the stupidest thing she'd ever heard. There was a porch to her left with big sliding glass doors that were currently open, letting in the sound of happy birds singing. She could see a manicured green yard through the railing of the porch, and was that a Buick in the driveway? She stared around the room some more. This definitely wasn't a motel and she couldn't remember what had happened yesterday—where had she been before this? She
couldn't remember anything recent, her brain felt like total mush. She suddenly heard water running behind the closed door of what must be the bathroom. Immediately, she jumped out of the bed, tense, and backed up against one of the walls. "Sam!" She hissed, kind of awkwardly poised to fight or run, she wasn't sure which. "Dean?"

She nearly jumped out of her skin when the bathroom door opened beside her head. "Sweetie, you gonna get up anytime soon? It's almost seven o'clock."

She almost fell over, recognizing the voice before he walked through the door—it was Cas, but—what was he wearing? And what happened to his hair? And why had he just called her sweetie? He was wearing a pair of tailored light-colored dress pants, a crisp, well-fitting white button up. His dark hair was slicked down and parted neatly on the side. He was slinging a red tie around his collar and using the mirror beside the bathroom door to watch himself do it.

Even though that looked like Cas, she was almost a hundred percent sure it wasn't. Was she dreaming? This didn't feel like a dream. Alex tilted her head to the side, freaked out, not sure at all what was happening right now. "Uh… Cas?"

"That's my name, don't wear it out," he said with an air of distracted annoyance, concentrating on his image in the mirror. He glanced at her, almost judgmentally. "You getting dressed or what?"

She hadn't even realized she wasn't in her regular clothes. She looked down, realizing she was in some kind of fuzzy bathrobe and pajama bottoms. What the hell was happening? She tried harder to remember where she had been before here, but everything was a jumble, her mind felt completely and utterly muddled, she couldn't think.

"I picked out an outfit for you," Cas said, nodding toward the closet door, and she followed his eye line, saw what he meant—a little red dress hanging on the closet door knob.

She looked at it, looked back at him, incredulous. "Um right. I would never wear that."

He just glanced at her, amused. "Oh, really?" He snapped his fingers. And suddenly, she was wearing it. She gaped at herself—it was skintight and short with a plunging neckline and no sleeves. She glowered up at him. He was just grinning, which looked strange on Cas's face. Almost creepy, in fact. "Looking good, hon!" He sauntered up, his half-done tie forgotten. He put his hands on her hips, started to pull her to him.

"Hey!" she said, stepped back, shoving him. The back of her legs hit the bed. "Keep your damn hands off me!"

He pulled her to him despite the protest, a disturbing little smile on his face, and she couldn't break his strong, vice-like grip. "Hands off?" He laughed, patronizingly, put a hand on the side of her head, stroking her hair, petting her. "Oh Alex, sweetie, I can touch you however much I like. We're married."

Alex stared. "Married?"

"Um, ye-es," he said in a bizarre sing-song voice, and pulled her right hand up, where a huge glittering diamond sat on a silver band. It was gaudy as hell, and Alex almost recoiled at the sight of it. Suddenly, somehow, Alex remembered. She remembered that she and her brothers had been investigating some bizarre, cartoony deaths and Dean had theorized a trickster was involved. Holy shit. And if she were right, it wasn't just any trickster. This had to be the Trickster. Oh my god. Okay. Now it made sense. Okay. She stared into the face of 'Cas' and almost called the Trickster out right then and there, but then shut her mouth, realizing she had a chance here. She would
pretend she hadn't figured it out and take him out when he didn't expect it.

Cas, fake Cas, had let go of her and was examining himself in the mirror, adjusting his perfectly knotted tie and straightening his cufflinks then grabbed a piece of candy out of the bowl on top of the dresser, popped it in his mouth. Alex watched him from the corner of her eye, suspicion confirmed. "The kids are probably hungry," he said through the candy. "You should get a move on."

"The kids..." Alex repeated, suddenly feeling very afraid. None of this is real, she reminded herself. And in the kitchen, she could probably find some kind of weapon—tricksters had to be stabbed with a wooden stake dipped in the blood of their victim. Wouldn't the victim be her in this situation? So all she needed was a stake. Surely she could find some piece of wooden furniture or something to use as a stake.

Cas was heading out of the bedroom door, looking at her expectantly, like he was impatient. Alex resisted the urge to shove him through the wall, and instead followed him downstairs, trying to appear as though she didn't know what was going on now. She didn't have to pretend for very long. They went down a massive staircase and through a lavish household that was a complete zoo. There were children... everywhere. All of them had dark brown hair.

There was a shrieking screaming wail—a crash—a dog barking—screams of delight—and screams that were just screams—three kids ran past, rolls of half-unrolled toilet paper in their hands (...why?), she saw a couple more kids jumping on the couches, one standing on the table and practicing ballet with a bucket on her head, another one doing karate moves on another who was crying and screaming in protest—still more were throwing cereal at each other—one boy off by himself was walking on his hands and then fell backwards into a pile of toys—Alex felt completely overwhelmed, unable to set her eyes on how many there were. "Holy shit. How many damn kids do we have?"

"I lost count awhile ago," Cas said, shrugging, then gave her a disapproving look. "Also, language, hon."

They passed a little girl who was drawing stick figures on the wall with dark red lipstick—her hair was smeared completely in what appeared to be vaseline. "Jess, no sweetiekins," Cas said as he passed, and scooped the kid up, slung her over his shoulder like a sack of flour.

Alex didn't even have time to react, as two more of the kids appeared out of nowhere and started yanking at her skirt, shouting "Mommy! Mama!" and one of them was saying "I want cereal, I want cereal!" The other kid seemed outraged by the suggestion and tackled the first one. "No, pancakes!"

There was a huge crash behind her and she whirled to see a huge flat screen TV had toppled to the ground in the middle of the living room. Cas gave the little girl wailing on the floor a withering look. "That's why Daddy said not to use the TV as a balance beam, Jillian." He looked at Alex pointedly. "Alex—what are you doing? Take care of this."

"I don't—" she started.

Another kid ran up to her, an upside down squeeze bottle of jelly in hand, leaving globs of it all over the wooden floor. He had sticky purple jam all over his face. "I'm making jelly on poptarts, look Mommy! Yay!"

Something crashed into her leg—a little boy with shaggy brown hair, being tackled by another little boy with short hair. "Joey won't give me my monster truck!" One of them screeched. There was an
enraged scream, and the other one grabbed the other by the hair. "Jared, it's mine!" They began rolling around on the floor, hitting each other.

Alex felt dizzy, turning around and seeing nothing but endless amounts of children doing insane things—she stumbled toward the kitchen, desperate to find a way to end this bizarre thing. "Johnny is eating my deodorant again!" someone said to her right, but she just kept walking toward the kitchen until she slipped on something wet—there was a bucket of mopping solution there beside her foot, a lot of it spilled onto the floor—one of the kids had his head dunked into it. Alex wasn't even sure what compelled her, but she stopped and plucked him out, holding him at arms length as sudsy PineSol dripped from his wet head. The kid screamed bloody murder and kicked like a madman, spilling the rest of the bucket everywhere. Alex backed away, stressed out and scared, despite herself—this is why she didn't like kids. They were like insane asylums on wheels!

"JENNA! GIVE THAT BACK!" and "Jamie! JAMIE! STOP JAMIE!" and "Jackson won't give me the markers, I WANT THE MA-aAaAa-RKERS!" Alex gaped, despite herself. All their names started with J. Who the hell would do that?

Cas was sitting at the kitchen table as kids, crazed like animals, bounced around him throwing things and fighting with each other. He opened a newspaper pleasantly, looked at her. "Coffee, please, hon," he said, and returned to his paper. "And make it snappy. I don't wanna be late to work." Thoroughly pissed off, but resigned to not fly off the handle, Alex turned around and went into the kitchen. She didn't miss the fact that as they had walked through the house, she had seen no doors. This wasn't a real house. There was little point trying to get out, she was pretty sure. So instead, she swept the kitchen with her eyes, trying to devise a plan.

She saw a bunch of stuff she wasn't sure of—pretty sure that was a blender, and that was some kind of toast-maker—ah ha, a knife block. And beside it, a bunch of spatulas and mixing spoons in a container. She saw a wooden mixing spoon there. Well, beggars couldn't be choosers. She took it out and cracked it in half over her knee with a loud cough then looked over her shoulder. The Trickster was still reading, not paying attention. She then grabbed a knife from the block and steeled herself, already grimacing before she even cut. She opened her palm up, held it flat, sliced into the skin. Shit, it never got easier, cutting yourself. Bright red blood flooded out from the cut across her palm and she stuck the splintered end of the wooden spoon against it, rolled it around in her blood. This better work. She glanced at the Trickster again, and for a second, felt her stomach lurch. Why did he have to look like Cas? It wasn't going to make this any easier. She grabbed the coffee pot in her other hand, held the wooden spoon behind her back with her bleeding hand, approached him slowly.

He glanced at her, cursory. Alex stood there for a second, staring at him. He really did look like Cas, not exactly, but his face… he looked at her again, this time clearly annoyed. "Are you gonna pour it or not?" he asked, nodding toward his empty coffee cup, his face and tone completely douchey. That was all the reminding Alex needed that it wasn't really Cas, and she whipped out her makeshift weapon and leapt forward, stabbing the splintered, bloody end of the spoon into his chest, purposefully not looking at his face—she couldn't. But she did hear him scream out in pain. She stumbled back, temporarily horrified. All the kids had stopped and were staring at her, and Cas was slumped in the chair, the spoon sticking out of his chest at a weird angle, his eyes staring unseeingly off into space. Alex was breathing hard, staring around in a panic, waiting for the illusion to disappear as her expression quickly became more and more upset. But nothing changed.

"Really, sweets, pro-obably shouldn't kill me in front of the kids. It's not the best example to set." She whirled. Another Cas! He looked exactly the same as the one in the chair—same outfit, same creepy smile. He stepped toward her, and without a second thought, she raced back the way they had come, upstairs, kids clambering after her. She slammed the bedroom door behind her and
locked it, panicking. Why hadn't that worked? And now she was feeling a little dizzy from blood loss. She looked at the gash in her hand—and squeezed her hand into a fist, trying to stop the bleeding. She had cut herself a little deeper than she meant to.

"A-hem."

Alex turned around fast. There was Cas, just looking at her with his hands on his hips, a little smile on his face, as if to say 'did you really think you could lock me out?' He stood in front of the open doors to the balcony, looking pleased with himself.

"Okay, Trickster, good one. Very funny." Alex was practically giving off steam at this point, looking at the impostor glaringly. "This is hilarious."

He ignored her, continued the charade. "You know, I don't want to be critical, but I've noticed you can't keep it together here lately. Ever since the kids… and your weight gain… I just… you don't try. It's not hard to do your job—cook, clean, take care of the kids…" he bit his lip, looked up and down her body slowly with hungry eyes, "please me sexually…"

That was the last damn straw. Alex walked right up to him and shoved him off the edge of the balcony, over the railing where he fell a story down with a huge crash on top of a plastic playground. "I know that's you, Trickster, now cut the bullshit!" She shouted.

He grinned up at her. "Ouch."

There was a sound behind her, like fabric flapping in the wind, and Alex turned around then almost fell over—standing a few feet in front of her—"Cas?" She had gone totally still, daring to hope, but not sure if it could really be him—she wasn't sure if it would be possible to duplicate all those things she recognized about him—the crooked tie, wrinkled, oversized clothes, slightly hunched way he stood, the stern, puzzled, pissy look on his face. He took in her outfit, then the room, an odd expression on his face. Still, she remained frozen, afraid it was another trick, that this wasn't really him. "Is that really you?" She asked.

"Yes, of course it's me," he replied, sounding urgent, which only further alarmed her. "I've been looking for you and your brothers for days—you've been missing."

"What?" He met her wide eyes and then looked off at the space behind her, his frown deepening.

Alex turned to see the Trickster, still in Cas's form, standing behind her, giving her a chastising look. "Now, honey, pushing your husband out of a window is not a very nice thing to do."

"Husband?" Cas repeated with narrowed eyes, and stepped forward putting himself between Alex and, well, himself... looking at the impostor with a deep frown, his physical stance intimidating. "Who are you? Why have you trapped her here?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" The Trickster giggled.

Cas's frown deepened further, and he paused. "Yes. That's why I asked."

There was a sigh, a roll of the eyes. "Oh, Castiel, you always were so awkward," Trickster said, and Alex looked at him sharply—not missing the inference that he knew Cas.

At this point, Cas seemed to decide he was done talking to the Trickster, and turned around, reached for Alex purposefully, said "Let's go." But even before he'd finished speaking, before he could reach her, Cas went flying backwards, yanked roughly into the thin air like a rag doll, slamming into the solid wood dresser behind him. It cracked in half at the impact, and Cas's body
was immediately yanked forward again, where he flew headfirst into the opposite end of the room. Bits of plaster went flying everywhere as he collided with a wall and cracked it, left a huge gaping hole. Alex stared in horror, unable to physically move. Stumbling to his feet, Cas stared at the Trickster, seeming to be confused, almost alarmed. He had a bloody nose. "How—?" he started, but the Trickster cut him off.

"Sorry, bored! Bye bye!" He snapped his fingers, and Cas disappeared. The Trickster turned to Alex, gave her a smile. "He's just precious, isn't he?" Alex just stared back, terrified. How the hell was a trickster doing this? How was he yanking around an all-powerful angel without even breaking a sweat?

"What did you do to him?!" Alex demanded angrily, grabbing the trickster by two fistfuls of shirt. "If you hurt him, I'll rip your head off!"

He looked at her hands, clearly amused. "Aww, are you worried about him? How sweet." Suddenly, he morphed into the familiar face of the Trickster—he was a small guy with big brown eyes, an expressive face—and she hated him.

Alex leveled him with a death glare then let go and backed up. "There you are."

He spread his arms wide, looking pleased with himself. "Here I am!"

Alex could barely contain her rage at this stupid, weird game he was playing. "What the hell is going on here? What did you just do to Cas? And what have you done with my brothers?"

"Ah, relax," he said, waving a hand in dismissal. "Castiel will be fine." He made a face. "Maybe." He grinned, his eyes bright. "And your loser brothers? They're stuck in TV land." He almost giggled at her confused expression. "While I wait for them to do what I want, I figured, hey, why not a little side entertainment, huh?" He paused, pretending to think of something, pretending to be very thoughtful. "Plus, I kinda let them know I had you here to convince them to hurry up the decision."

"What decision?"

His humor, his lightness, was suddenly gone, replaced by chilling resolve. "I want them to stop messing around and say yes."

Alex felt chilled. Surely he didn't mean... "Say yes?" She repeated.

Annoyance came over his features and he rolled his eyes. "Duh, Alex, get with the program! To Michael, to Lucifer. I want your brothers need to quit dragging their feet and play their damn roles already." He made an annoyed, bored face. "It's getting real old."

Alex shook her head, looking at him coldly. "Look, I don't know what weird angle you're trying to play, but they won't do it."

He laughed with great enthusiasm, his eyes crinkling up and sparkling. He shook his head as the laugh faded. "Not even you believe that, babe."

Alex glared, tried to think of something to say. But he was right. And it pissed her off that he had called that bluff. "Why do you care about it? Don't you realize the whole friggin' world will burn if Michael and Lucifer have their little class reunion?"

"Yeah, I know all of that. I just need it to happen so I can get on with my life," Trickster said, further mystifying Alex. "And you need it to happen, too, Al." His use of Dean's nickname for her
made her skin crawl. "You know why? Because you're tired of the whole damn thing. You know just as much as I do." He shrugged, trying to be cute. "One of them has to die. It's that simple."

"Neither of them has to die you dick," Alex growled.

He just smiled softly, crookedly. "Keep telling yourself that. You can't change it. Can't do a damn thing." He raised his eyebrows, looking almost sympathetic. "Is it getting to you? Do you realize?" He was mocking her now. "You don't matter. Sucks, doesn't it? Sam and Dean, they're the ones God and the Devil have grand purposes for. They're Cain and Abel all over again, Thor and Loki. And you? No one cares." He shrugged, feigning concern. "You're just the pretty one. Except..." he gave her a patronizing, wincing smile, "you're really not that pretty."

She just looked away, squeezing her fist, feeling the blood wet in her palm. "Screw you."

He tilted his head to the side, looked at her almost fondly, but the expression was tempered by an underlying amusement at her pain. "You know, I can see why he likes you. Castiel. You've got this vulnerable, not vulnerable, jaded-by-the-world yet innocent-little-flower vibe going. It's cute, it's really adorable." She just glared at him from the corner of her eye, and he stepped a little closer, pleased with himself. "It's funny, Al. You and I are a lot more alike than you think."

Alex didn't bother hiding her disgust at what he'd just said. "I am nothing like you."

He feigned surprised. "What—you don't feel tired of your family bossing you around? Trying to control who you are and fighting over you? Telling you who you're supposed to be? See, I have older brothers, too." His expression darkened a little with a sudden, quiet anger. "And just like you, I'm the third wheel. The black sheep. Difference is, I grew some balls and left because I knew if I stayed I'd forever be the monkey in the middle. Well." He spread his arms wide, grinned. "Baby, look how far I've come! Free to be me!"

Alex rolled her eyes, seriously aggravated with his grand sweeping statements and implications.

"Gosh, would ya look at the time." He put his hands on his hips, acting overly cheery. "I could stand here all day and chat, but... I have other stuff to do." He wiggled his eyebrows meaningfully. "So, here's the deal. While those two loser brothers of yours play my game, you're gonna survive. We're gonna get you in good fighting shape. So, I took care of that for you!" He grinned at her, like he had done her a big favor. "I decided to open the show with a little bit of comedy. Gotta hand it to me, right? It was funny. You, married, with kids. Like that'd ever happen." He smiled as Alex just glowered. "I picked the angel because I've seen inside your mind... saw that little crush of yours. So, so sweet." He looked around the room. "You two have a lovely home here."

Alex lost what little patience she'd had. "You really like the sound of your own voice, don't you?!"

His eyebrows knit together in an overly earnest expression. "In a little while, you'll be wishing I was still here yakking your ear off." There was an ominous quality there that made Alex stop short. Then, he grinned ear to ear, his perky tone back. "So. Survive. I'll be watching! And, hey... I might even make a few guest appearances." He winked.

"What—" Alex asked, then suddenly fell over, onto the cold ground. Wait, cold hard ground—where had the carpet gone?

Disoriented, she looked around. She was in a dark building—a warehouse? An old factory? She
pushed herself up off the dusty floor, looking around, feeling sick and woozy, possibly because of her palm, which was still bleeding. Shit, she really needed to stop the blood loss. She realized she was now wearing fatigue type pants, a tank top, and combat boots—was she back in the real world? She checked her back belt loop for her knife, but nothing was there.

She heard a soft sound somewhere nearby—a footstep? She froze, remembering what Trickster had said. Survive. Shit. She saw that there was a door just to her left labeled control room. She slipped into it, shut the door quietly, turned around—and started. She wasn't even in the warehouse anymore—she was in a dim, dingy old motel room. She could even smell the musty, cigarette-smoke smell. And there, sitting on top of the cheap air conditioning vent that ran the length of the window, a little girl sat. Oh my God. That was her. Maybe seven years old? A couple of Barbie dolls sat nearby, untouched and forgotten. Little Alex just stared out the window silently, her feet, in beat up sneakers, tucked under her. Her dark brown hair was an unbrushed mess, and she sat as still as a photograph. Her expression was so haunted, so sad. Alex watched herself, frozen, remembering how she felt that day. Alone and secluded. Kind of like every other day. Outside, Dean and Sam were playing catch without her, and she remembered that all she wanted to do was go out there and play, too. She tried to walk forward toward herself, but suddenly felt her feet stuck, and looked down. Mud?

She realized that she couldn't move and was sinking down. She struggled, and tried to get free, but to no avail. She looked up, panicking, and saw nothing but marshy swamp and tangles of reeds in all directions. Oh God, she remembered this night. They had been in the swamps hunting a vengeful spirit and she'd gotten separated from her brothers, taken a wrong step, gotten stuck. The whistle around her neck, she needed to blow it. She fumbled for it, clutching with trembling hands, and tried to blow, but she couldn't blow, couldn't breathe right. Help, she wanted to shout, but she couldn't. She blew again, and a weak little sighing whistle sounded. Fear clenched her heart in a fist. She felt herself collapsing backwards, the world spiraling around her, and she couldn't grasp onto anything solid.

Alex fell sideways, the ground giving way into nothing, and then suddenly she was sprawled on short, clipped grass. She tried to stand, managing clumsily. She was in a wide open park. She saw Sam just a few feet away, maybe twelve years old. He was with a bunch of kids around their age, Dean had gone off somewhere with his girlfriend of the week, probably making out behind a tree or something—Alex vaguely remembered this day. She had wanted to play football with the other kids, but they hadn't let her, if she were remembering right.

She watched young Sam, laughing and tossing the football back to another kid. "So, touch football, two taps for tackle," one of the boys said, and then nudged Sam, pointed at Alex, who was kind of lurking at the edge of the park near the swings, out of earshot. "Hey, isn't that your sister?"

"Yeah," Sam said, not sounding very keen.

"Go get her, she can play too," the boy said.

Sam seemed reluctant, then surprised Alex with what he said next. "Nah. She's got problems. She can't play."

"Why not?"

"She just can't, okay? Super disabled, asthma, bad leg." Sam said, lie after lie pouring out to Alex's complete shock. "Be right back," Sam told the other kid.

Sam jogged over to Alex's younger self, and when he got to her, he shrugged. "They said they don't want you to play." Alex's mouth fell open at the complete and total lie—Little Alex tried to hide
her disappointment, but didn't do such a good job. And then Sam had the nerve to pretend to comfort her, put a hand on her shoulder, as if he felt bad for her. She had her notepad out, and scribbled: You go play, I can watch.

"You sure?" Sam asked. And his face looked so concerned. Little Alex just nodded, putting on a brave, I'm okay face. But Alex remembered how she'd felt. Heartbroken. Left out—as usual. Sam left and jogged back to the kids who were waiting for him. Alex watched this scene with totally new eyes. Anger—so much anger. Why? Why would Sam do that? What the fuck was that? How many other times had he lied to her like that? Her whole childhood she thought Sam had been on her side. That he'd protected her from cruel kids and tough moments and bullies. But after seeing that, she had this horrifying suspicion that he been part of the reason she'd thought all of that. Had he manipulated other situations, too? Why? She felt like her heart was breaking in half, and all the trust and love she had left for Sam threatened to shatter completely. On cue, the park seemed to melt away, and she was spinning around, unable to see anything, only feel the sensation of rushing headlong through nothing.

"Come on, can't we just leave her for once? I can help on this hunt, Dad, you know I can—you need me on this one." Alex looked around, confused, recognizing Dean's voice. She was outside a motel room, in the soft haze of twilight, watching a scene she didn't recognize. Dad and Dean were talking there, standing in a mostly empty parking lot. "Having her along will just slow us down, you know it will," Dean was protesting, and Alex felt a cruel sense of betrayal slap her at what he'd just said—was he talking about her? "So why can't we just leave her here? She'll be fine." Dad looked at Dean angrily. A look he had given his children so many times, when they challenged his authority or said the wrong thing in the wrong moment. "Just do what I say, Dean," he said, his expression and tone domineering. "Stay here with your sister. Just watch your damn sister. I'll be back."

As if on cue, a few-years-younger Alex poked her head out of a motel room door, her expression curious as she looked at her dad and brother. And then, with horror, Alex realized she did know what day this was. This was right before Dad had disappeared. A few weeks later, she and Dean would go find Sam and life would fall apart all over again. Alex stared at Dean, who was looking at the other Alex with what she thought was reluctance, even a touch of resentment. Somehow, that hurt worse than anything had hurt her in a long time. She felt tears gathering in her eyes. Tears of pain. She shut her eyes, tried to remove herself from the memory, then heard the sound of screams, shouting. Her eyes popped open, and she was no longer in a parking lot with Dean and Dad.

She was now in an alley way, behind a building. She heard someone shouting an exorcism chant. She didn't remember this—she followed the voice and found Dean, maybe eleven or twelve, holding a young Sam against the wall of the building. Sam looked terrified, and he was covered in blood—his hands, his shirt. Alex was confused—then she looked down. There were these strange furry, bloody shapes littering the ground at their feet. Alex froze, shocked. What was this? What was happening?

"You're not possessed?" Dean asked Sam, sounding beyond horrified, beyond stunned.

Sam was sobbing. "I d-don't know why I did it, Dean!"

Alex stumbled backwards, almost unable to breathe—no, that couldn't be real. That couldn't have happened! Suddenly, everything went dark, and she bumped into something, maybe a table. The lights came on and she squinted, shielding her eyes with a hand. "You can't be serious, John," she heard Bobby say, and she blinked a few times, her eyes adjusting. She was in Bobby's study, and Dad and Bobby were standing in there, alone, facing each other, as if they were in the middle of an
intense conversation. She frowned. This wasn't a memory of hers. Bobby and Dad looked a lot younger than she'd ever remembered seeing them look.

Dad looked upset. "Bobby, come on. Try to understand. This isn't the life for her."

Bobby didn't look upset—he looked downright pissed. "John, if it's that important for you to protect her from the life, then quit the life."

Dad made a face she had seen him make a lot of times. Unwillingness mixed with hesitation. "You know I can't do that."

"Can't, or won't?" Bobby asked, and he didn't sound like this very often—Alex could tell he was very, very angry. "John... I can't believe you're even considering this."

"It would keep her safe, Bobby, and you know it," Dad protested, but Bobby flew off the handle. "She's your daughter, ya damn fool!" Bobby shouted. "You keep her safe! You!" The men looked at each other angrily, shaken. Bobby looked like he was trying to calm down, but was still glaring at the other man. "You're tryin' to duck outta your responsibility."

Dad threw his hands up. "She makes everything harder, Bobby!"

"That's what kids do!" Bobby shouted again, and got in John's face. Alex didn't understand. What was happening? "You really just want to give her up? Abandon her, sign her into foster care and then be done with her? She's not a pet for cryin' out loud. She's your six-year-old daughter. She needs her family. Maybe more than other kids do!"

And suddenly as it had started, the memory faded out completely. Alex was suddenly back in the warehouse, breathless, tears in her eyes. Her pulse was pounding from dizzy adrenaline and fear and grief. Suddenly, all made perfect, heartbreaking sense. The way Dad kind of passed her off to Dean. The way he always had this hesitation when he looked at her. Like he was disappointed in her, or disappointed in himself. Or just disappointed, period. The way he hadn't really given her any credit until her later teenage years. She had tried so hard to just get his attention, but she had always felt forgotten and overlooked. She remembered him telling her he loved her maybe twice her whole life. But maybe that had been a lie like everything else. He hadn't wanted her. He hadn't wanted her. The pain of the rejection was almost physical at this point, and she leaned against the wall, almost feeling like she might be sick. More than anything she just wanted to break down. The pain was literally almost unbearable, her chest hurt.

Sam, ripping apart little baby cats, Dean telling Dad she was only slowing them down, Sam lying and manipulating her emotions and for what?! Was everything she ever thought and believed in a total lie? She sobbed, unable to hold the sound back. And beside her, the doorknob turned.

Alex jumped back, panicking, mad at herself for not finding a weapon, remembering everything she had temporarily forgotten in the wake of emotional distress. She had maybe one second to try and clear herself mentally, remind herself that she had to survive. She stood back tensely, behind the door. A dark head poked in, and she brutally shoved the person head first into the wall, a desperate and stupid move. The owner of the dark head of hair seemed to have expected that, and grabbed her even as she pushed him. He whirled her strongly, shoved her against the wall.

Alex's entire body went limp, she couldn't breathe. Horror and shock came over her features. "D-Dad?!" She gasped out, looking into the face of her father.

"Hi, baby." The sound of his voice—which she hadn't heard in years—sent a chill down her spine.
It's not really him, it's not really him. But it looked just like him, the white hairs in his beard, the dark eyes, the tired wrinkles around his eyes, the crooked smile so much like Dean's. But his expression was chilling, filled with malice. He was roughly pushing her against the wall. His elbow bone was digging into her shoulder painfully and she was grimacing, trying to wiggle free. "You been a good girl for Dean?" He asked casually. Alex was literally shaking, no physical strength left in her body, fidgeting in a panicked, uncoordinated mess. He chuckled, smiling at her fondly. "You thought you got rid of Dad a long time ago, huh?" She looked at him in a mixture of confusion and pain, and he just smiled more. "Oh yes. I know. I know you were relieved when Daddy dearest died."

She tried shaking her head, choking back tears. Wanting to believe that it wasn't true. "No, no I wasn't," she protested Shakily.

"Aw, that's my girl. Living in denial." He smiled, as if proud. He touched the side of her face with the backs of his fingers, and she winced against the seemingly tender touch, tried to pull away.

"Get away from me," Alex protested weakly, and blinked a few times. Her vision was beginning to get foggy.

"You hurt, baby?" he asked, his expression filled with concern. He grabbed her hand, looked at the cut… then ground his thumb into the wound. She screamed, as he got in her face, suddenly terrifyingly angry. "Pain is part of life, Alexandra, now stop being so damn weak! You have been nothing but one let down after another to this family, nothing, you hear me?"

Alex thrashed, trying to get away from his grip and from his words, and he just laughed, let go of her hand, looked at her for a minute, as if trying to figure something out. "So, I guess the question I have for you is… can you find it inside yourself to kill me?"

"Kill you?" Alex repeated, going still in terror.

He chuckled a little. "It's a dog eat dog world, sweetheart," he said, sighing as if tired. "Kill or be killed." His hands were both gently coming against her throat, and then suddenly pressing against her with brutal crushing force. He smiled pleasantly as he choked her.

Alex struggled intensely against the vice-like grip on her throat, but couldn't get her legs to work, as they weren't even touching the ground anymore. Desperate and sloppy, she drew her palm back and smashed it full-force up and against Dad's nose, stunning him—and he stumbled back, she fell down breathing in panicked little gasps. She scrambled to her feet, ran the opposite direction, out the door and down a flickering hallway littered with old wires and trash.

She could hear him following, and she was consumed in all-out terror. She knew, even as she rounded a corner and came into a wide, open, echoing room, that she needed to keep her head, or she wouldn't survive this. She went slack against the wall, struggling to breathe. Beside her foot, a rusty old shovel sat. The second she saw it, she grabbed it up and began wielding it like a staff, wincing against the roughness of it in her cut-up palm. She could hear heavy, running booted footsteps coming closer. She swung madly as he rounded the corner, hitting him in the face with the shovel with enough force to send him flying backwards. He must have had his hunting knife out, because it went skittering across the floor, and Alex dove for it without thinking. Even as her fingers closed around the hilt, she felt herself knocked sideways, and Dad was over her, pinning her down by the wrists. But she'd held on tight to the knife, refusing to let go.

"Now, Alexandra, put the knife down," he coaxed, grinning maniacally. "You wouldn't want to hurt your dad."
"You are not my dad," Alex spat, and with a surge of adrenaline, she brutally drove her knee up into his stomach, and violently yanked her wrists forward and down, breaking his grip long enough, just long enough, to push him over, to kind of pull back, sideways. Even as he was rolling off of her, she was drawing back, without hesitation, still halfway on the ground. She plunged the knife into his chest with a scream. His face showed shock, horror, pain, and Alex just kind of pulled back, stunned, taking the knife with her. She was half sitting, agonized, shaking, watching him fall to the ground, dead. Oh God, oh God, she couldn't breathe—she knew that wasn't Dad, but it looked like him, it sounded like him, and she wanted to vomit everywhere. She looked at the knife in her hand, covered in bright red blood.

She almost dropped it in horror—but then she heard "Oh, A-lex..." in a soft, sing song voice.

She looked behind her, recognizing the voice with dread. Sam. He stood there, completely still as she managed to stand up shakily. He had a soft, chilling smile on his face—it reminded her of Lucifer, and she stumbled back a little, barely able to stand up anymore. Something snapped in her —instinct took over. She knew if she didn't take her chance and attack now, she'd probably die.

Sam opened his mouth to say something, but before he had even drawn a breath, she flipped Dad's knife deftly in her hand, focused, twirling it so that instead of hilt she grasped the blade. She drew back and threw it with a pained grimace and the last of her strength. It sank with a horrible squelching sound into his chest. He looked at the knife, then at her, shocked. Then fell forward onto the ground. She looked at his still body in alarm—she couldn't believe herself. That's not really Sam. You didn't just kill Sam. But that look on his face when he'd looked at her, the knife in his chest—

Alex suddenly jumped back as shotgun blasts kicked cement up just a few inches in front of her feet. Dean was in front of her smiling, slinging a shotgun over his shoulder casually, grinning at her as he loped forward out of the shadows. "Hiya, sis! Now what'd you do that for?"

No, not Dean. Not Dean now. He looked at Sam, perplexed, then kicked his brother's lifeless body over and yanked the knife out of Sam's chest. He looked at her, gave her a 'someone's been a bad girl' look. He dropped the shotgun, and knife in hand, sauntered over.

Alex backed up, hit the wall behind her, momentarily unable to do anything—this was Dean—no, it wasn't! She had waited too long to run away, and he was suddenly right there, and her chance at escape was gone. He pinned her against the wall, smirked, brought the knife up to trace a soft line against the skin of her neck. She could feel the blood on the knife from Sam leaving a wet line on her skin. She stared, horrified and frozen, watching Dean, trying to find it within herself to fight him off. She couldn't. She had nothing left in her. He smiled at her sweetly. "Hmm. Just like I thought. Dean's your Achilles heel, isn't he? It's kind of sweet how much you love this dumb jock."

His chin lowered, his eyes stared at her with malice, and the knife went lower, then he held the point there against her chest, twisted a little, and she sobbed as it broke the skin. Maybe she deserved this. All she knew was she was too weak, there was nothing left. She just looked away, defeated, crying softly, ashamed and in pain. The knife dug a little deeper and she cried out again, like a child, like a coward. And then, behind Dean, Cas appeared—a furious expression on his face like Alex had never seen—Alex started, mouth falling open as he grabbed Dean by the shoulder with crushingly ruthless force, ripping him off of her, appearing enraged. Dean attempted to stab Cas, but the angel grabbed Dean's wrist and bent it down, his grip unyielding, his eyes blazing. With absolute and ferocious power Castiel hit Dean across the face, and Dean went flying across the warehouse and went still.

Alex had fallen down, and was slumped against the wall, dazed, watching Cas in a mixture of
disbelief, admiration, breathlessness. He looked back at her, more alarmed than Alex ever remembered him being. He was already walking back toward her, an urgent pace to his step. "I don't know how he's doing this," he said, talking very fast. "I tried getting your brothers, but—" suddenly he fizzled out again, disappearing completely, just as he had been about to get her. Alex's temporary relief was gone, replaced with despair and anger—she wanted to scream. Suddenly, the Trickster stood in front of her, smirking.

"Damn! I knew this would be entertaining, but really? Killing your own Dad? And Sam? I am impressed, Alex!"

"You son of a bitch," she muttered, trying to summon some fire, but only sounding broken. "Why are you doing this to me?"

He snapped his fingers and she was yanked to her feet, at if held by invisible hands. He looked angry. "Because you need to grow up, Alex! Stop depending on your stupid, selfish brothers who are only going to let you down and tear your family apart! Face it, your family is a sham and you've been falling victim to their lies your whole life!"

"How is any of that your damn business?" Alex asked acidly, summoning what strength she had left to glare at him even through her pain and weakness. She hated him for everything he had shown her. Everything he'd put her through.

He seemed momentarily incredulous. "Did you even see what I showed you? All real. One hundred percent. They didn't love you. They don't care about you! You should be thanking me. They act like you belong to them, like they own you. You let your brothers boss you around, control you, tell you who you are. It's sad, Alex! You're sad."

Alex tilted her head to the side, breathing a little labored, suddenly wondering something, suddenly suspicious. "Is this even about me? I'm starting to think not."

He rolled his eyes, as if he had been waiting for her to say that. "You got me," he said, and sighed dramatically as if he were relieved. "I guess you could say I'm pretty much the Alex of my family. No one thought I'd ever measure up or be anything." He smiled, an oddly cold, ominous quality to the expression. "So, hell, I decided I didn't need 'em. Let them tear each other apart, I don't care."

He huffed, chuckled. "Look how many fucks I give." He paused, then furious anger overcame his voice and face. "Zero! ZERO! I give zero fucks!" He looked at her, glaring. "And neither should you—you sorry, stupid child."

Alex looked at him oddly, not sure what to say. None of the things he was saying were really affecting her, only baffling her. She shook her head, almost feeling sorry for him. Even after all the crap she'd just been through. "You said we were alike, earlier… and you couldn't be more wrong. Because I'm not jumping ship the second things start to go to crap and I'm not walking away, even if everything you showed me was real. If they go down, I'm going down with them. I don't care if we're the biggest walking disaster on earth. We're still family."

Trickster rolled his eyes, groaned loudly. "Oh please, you're pathetic, Alex! Even after everything I just showed you? Really? Damn. I don't know if you're incredibly loyal or just stupid as a rock."

"Put me down as stupid as a rock," Alex said, laughing slowly, darkly. She felt so physically weak, but still managed to raise her hand, point at him knowingly. "You know what I figured out, Trickster? You're not a trickster. There's just no way. Not the way you slammed around my angel like it was no big deal, the way you refuse to die when killed. You're something else. I got no clue what, but I'm gonna find out what. My family, and all those innocent people you've killed? I'm
gonna make sure you rot in hell for all the jacked up shit you've done to us."

He tilted his head to the side, his eyes narrowed, either amused or indignant, she couldn't tell which. "You really think you're in a position to be threatening me?"

Alex just stared at him coolly. "Oh look, I made him mad. Poor baby."

That comment wiped his expression off his face, and he matched her stare for a moment, then raised his chin, a slight smile returning to his face. "Well. I've figured it out, Alex."

She frowned. "Figured what out."

His smile got a little bigger. "Your worst nightmare, of course." He was wagging a finger now, pacing the floor in front of her. "It's not fighting, it's not killing, it's not a normal life, it's not your past…" he paused, looked at her, that soft little smile on his face. "It's your future."

He snapped his fingers, and the dark warehouse was replaced by something else entirely. Under a flat gray sky, she and the Trickster stood in a circle of overgrown grass. Weathered gray stone headstones fanned out in all directions—stretching out in all directions as far as Alex could see on all sides. She looked at the Trickster, who was smiling softly. "Your worst fear. It's being completely, and totally alone." He gave her a knowing smile, pleased with himself. "Oh, I'm good. Now." He gave her a faux-stern frown. "You sit here and think about what you've done. Oh, and try not to bleed to death." He rolled his eyes and disappeared.

Alex looked at the gravestones that surrounded her with increasing alarm, turning in a slow circle, reading the engraved names with panic. John Winchester. Mary Winchester. Dean Winchester. Sam Winchester. Bobby Singer. The gravestones stretched miles in all directions, all littered with names of people she had known or failed to save. Anywhere she looked, she saw a name she recognized.

And then, she saw it, behind her family's gravestones. An obviously shallow grave, marked only with a simple wooden cross. On it hung a silver chain, with her dad's wedding band and her old silver whistle. And she knew, immediately, who it belonged to. Cas, dead and gone in 2014. Forgotten, anonymous. No name on the cross, just something of hers that he had obviously clung to in those last months of his life.

Dead. They were all dead! She stumbled backward, overcome with horror, panic, grief. The world seemed to be spinning and dissolving around her, and the feeling of death and dying and being alone forever punched into her like a nail. She fell onto all fours, suddenly sobbing out in fear—and she thought about the future, about losing her brothers, her anchors—she thought about Cas in 2014 and she thought about everything the Trickster had shown her and she was petrified, scared out of her mind, overcome with unmanageable amounts of panic. Her chest felt tight, too tight to breathe, and her heart raced so fast that she almost passed out. Her vision began to swim as her head became light and the full-blown panic attack shook her to the core. In her hands, she clenched onto the grass as hard as she could, afraid she'd fall off the face of the earth if she didn't. She tried shutting her eyes. It's not real, it's not real. But it was real. Everyone was dead and she was dying too and she sobbed out again. Someone help me!

She heard a soft sound in front of her and heard him speak her name in a soft, worried voice. Heard footsteps coming toward her, felt herself being drawn up by the arms. Her heart seemed to spasm in her chest out of relief when eyes bluer as the sky stared at her in dismayed concern. She didn't even think about it, she just sobbed his name and crashed into him, crying and humiliated but unable to do anything but hug him, hold onto him. And with her arms circled as tight as she could manage around his middle inside the trench coat, she felt how warm and solid and real he was. Her chest
loosened, her breathing calmed, and she shut her eyes, pressed her cheek against the front of his shoulder, feeling her dizziness fade. She tightened her arms even more, until it hurt her arm muscles, because she was terrified that he'd disappear again.

For a couple seconds, Cas remained sort of frozen, not sure what was happening. Alex was just crushing him (not literally, of course, that would be impossible) with her arms. She was shaking with tears, sobbing sounds wracking her entire body. He did not like this sound, or this sensation. In fact, he quickly realized that he detested it. It made him anxious and tense to see her this way.

He looked down at her, the way she had circled her arms around him. He had seen humans do this before, and knew it was a hug. He carefully, calculatingly brought his arms around her, gently, then a little tighter, matching it to the way she was holding onto him, only not as hard—he felt the need to be gentle. He paused, wondering if he were doing it right even as he noticed how it felt, her smaller form there against his. He could hear and feel her breathing like this. Even through the layers of clothing, there was a steady little thumping rhythm against his chest, her heart beating. It was a fierce little beat. Cas noticed the way her hands felt there against his back, the fingers taut, digging in, and he wondered why she held on so tightly. Did she assume he would disappear again? The longer they stayed like that, in the circle of each other's arms, the calmer she became, and Cas felt himself relaxing a little as she became quieter, less panicked. The top of her head was right there, in front of his face, and without entirely meaning to, he leaned down, just a little. His nose brushed her hair. He could faintly smell shampoo, some kind of soap. She shivered in his arms, sniffed. There, enveloped in his arms, she felt so small, smaller than she looked.

Her head was shifting onto his shoulder now, and the tip of her nose brushed against his neck. The little grazing touch startled him. He could feel her uneven breathing hitting the skin of his neck. A sensation that once he felt, he couldn't stop focusing on. His vessel flushed with warmth, and a surge of protectiveness overcame him. His arms tightened around her on instinct. Not because of calculation—but because he responded on some raw, human level that was still buried deep inside of the vessel, he guessed. Or was it something else?

Somewhere in the back of his thoughts, he was fighting to remember who he was—an angel of the Lord, holding a human girl in his arms. But he didn't let go, even though he knew he should. At the current moment he was somehow giving her comfort and he wouldn't refuse her that or take it away. He couldn't. And so he did not let go, despite knowing better. He thought about how he had watched Alex for more than a year, had seen her sorrows, had seen her crying. He knew the sadness she hid from others. She almost always cried alone, when she thought no one else could see. The sight of her crying had always unsettled Castiel in the past, had bothered him, even when he'd been in his true form. But her grief had never affected him as deeply as it did today. He felt angry that she had been made to feel this way, and angry because he didn't know how to fix it... and helpless, because he wasn't sure if it could be fixed. She was so much more torn apart than he had ever seen her.

After a few moments Alex, quieted, pulled back a little bit, slowly, hesitant to look at him. Her expression was ashamed and so very grieved. He hadn't even noticed how it happened, but now both of his hands gripped her right above the elbows, and hers mirrored his, resting lighting in the crooks of his elbows.

Her face was streaked with tears, completely covered, and her eyes were reddened. He had been experiencing intense helplessness for the past few days, trapped in the Trickster's world, but this sight made him feel utterly powerless. It was as if her sadness seeped out of her, and into him. How could that be?

With the pad of his thumb, Cas wiped her right cheek, removing the tearstains there, his touch
whisper-soft and hesitant. She seemed to stop breathing for a second, looking at him in what appeared to be something like fear. He stilled—had he done something wrong? Then her head tilted just to the side, a little bit, almost as if she were leaning her face into his hand. His vessel felt a strange reaction in the vicinity of his chest at her actions and Cas withdrew his hand, not understanding. He was a little suddenly apprehensive, suspecting himself of something, but he didn't know what. Alex looked up at him somberly. Her eyes were so dark and big and filled with an emotion he didn't recognize.

His eyes traveled her entire face, the face he knew so well now. His eyes stopped, resting a beat on her soft, parted lips. And for a moment, he imagined himself leaning down and touching his lips to hers, conveying the gentle and paradoxically strong things he felt for her with his mouth. He wondered how the touch of her skin against his would feel. The thought shocked him as soon as he had it. He realized the pulse in his body had picked up, his breathing was shorter, his nervous system felt jittery. Panicking slightly, he let go of her completely. What was happening to him?

She looked down, seeming disappointed, or conflicted, like she were gathering herself mentally. Her eyelashes were darker than usual, wet with tears. She looked back at him pleadingly. "Cas, please say you can get us out of here. Please."

An odd lurch in his vessel's stomach. "No. I don't know the way out. This trickster is very powerful." He looked down, then noticed the palm of her hand—bloody and raw. More than just a little scrape. "You're bleeding," he said, stunned that he hadn't noticed sooner.

He looked down at himself, looking for something, then pulled some of his shirt out of the waistband of his pants, and ripped the fabric. He held her bleeding hand in his larger one, wrapped the strip of white fabric there with his other hand. She winced a little as the cotton touched the open cut skin there then looked at him uncertainly, watched him as he concentrated. He met her eyes, just for a second, then looked back down, tying a clumsy knot. He looked pained, and Alex remembered, offhandedly, when he had told her to count her scars. He was still looking at her hand, still holding it in both of his hands. And then, she almost thought she had imagined it, he brushed the exposed skin where her fingers met her hand. A completely unnecessary action. She looked at him, unsure. He was now staring at the spot on her chest where fake-Dean had dug the knife into, just above where her heart was. His fingers brushed against it, his eyebrows knit together further. He breathed out, dropped his hand away, looked at the graves and let go of her hand. He looked like he were in deep, serious thought. After a moment, he looked back at her, grim.

"I saw the things he showed you. He tried to keep me out completely, but he couldn't stop me from watching. I saw everything. What Sam did. What your father did. Everything."

Alex looked away, ashamed, hugging her arms around herself even though it wasn't cold. She sniffed a little, looking down, feeling like a lost little girl. She was feeling sick again, weak, but she refused to sit down or admit how near to passing out she was. She looked back at him, not even sure why, but suddenly spilling everything in a self-loathing monologue, sorry for herself—just like Dean said. She just needed to say it all, to try and get rid of all the crap she was trying to deny. "All my life I've been trying to survive. And I have survived. But why? So I get to see this? Everyone I ever loved or cared about, dead?" She felt manic suddenly, enraged. "Why did the Trickster do this to me? I don't understand. I mean yeah me and Dean and Sam tried to kill him a couple years ago after he jacked us up, big friggin' deal. So this is his idea of revenge?" She looked around, suddenly breathless and pained. "I would have preferred he just kill me and gotten it over with instead of dragging me through this shit."

"No," Cas said intensely, but she was continuing, not really seeing him, not listening.
"And now I find out Dad didn't even want me, that I was nothing to him?" She swallowed painfully. "And maybe I already suspected that." She shook her head slowly, sad because that was true, and it hurt to admit out loud. "But Dean—thinking I was a burden. Sam, lying to me, manipulating me, making me think he was looking out for me—ripping up little kittens in an alley for kicks..." she was getting pissed again, and dizzy too. "I lived my life blind, not just mute. How did I not know all these things? They were staring me in the face and I didn't see."

She kind of staggered sideways, and would have fallen down, but Cas reached out, grabbed her, a somewhat forceful, emphatic expression on his face. "Stop. This is exactly what the Trickster intended."

She looked at him, really looked at him, for a moment normal, not crazed or manic. "You're gonna die in twenty-fourteen, Cas, a horrible, stupid death. And what's worse..." her eyebrows were slamming together, "I think you wanted to die. You wanted it." She paused, went quiet.

Cas frowned, opened his mouth. "I don't—"

Alex laughed, an airy sound, turning loopy once again. "My god, I'm convinced now, Cas. Zachariah's right," she laughed hollowly, went limp, almost falling down, but Cas held her up. She looked at him in fear, sort of falling apart, unable to stop herself from giving all of her fears a voice. "Sam will say yes, because he's dark inside, he'll say yes, and the world will burn, and Dean will try and stop it and he can't, and I can't do anything about it, obviously—my brothers are tearing the world apart, and God, what am I supposed to do, or can I do anything, ha, I can't, cuz I'm nothing—"

"Alex—" Cas tried to cut her off sternly, but she was just laughing at herself, a drunken kind of sound.

"It's so funny. Me thinking my life mattered, and you saying God had some purpose for me, it's a joke Cas, all lies—"

"Alex, stop!—look at me!" He almost shook her, his face furious, confused, alarmed at the way she was behaving. "Look at me!"

She did, she did looked at him, suddenly vulnerable and clear eyed, her breakdown cut short. He didn't seem to know what to say, and she looked at him desperately, like she was waiting for him to relieve her fears, to tell her everything was going to be okay.

And suddenly, they were not there anymore.

Dean and Sam stood with the "Trickster" in front of them—encased in a ring of burning holy oil; because they had realized after he dragged them through an odd TV reality, slung Cas around like a rag doll, refused to die, that he was something else entirely—an angel, and probably a pretty powerful one. Their hunch paid off. In the just-lit circle of fire, the Trickster clapped slowly, his bluff called. "Well played, boys. Well played. Where'd I screw up? How'd you know?"

Sam answered. "Nobody gets the jump on Cas like you did. Only another angel could slam him around like that."

Dean leveled the Trickster with a superior little smirk. "Mostly it was the way you talked about armageddon."

"Meaning?" Trickster asked, not following.
Dean shrugged. "Well, call it personal experience, but nobody gets that angry unless they're talking about their own family."

Trickster seemed mildly irritated by that statement. "So which one are you?" Sam asked. "Grumpy, Sneezy, or Douchey?"

Rolling his eyes at the terrible joke, the Trickster sighed. "Gabriel, okay? They call me Gabriel."

Sam's forehead wrinkled. "Gabriel? The Archangel?"

"Guilty."

Dean sauntered forward a couple of steps. "Okay, Gabriel. First things first. You are gonna bring Cas and Alex back here from whatever hell you stashed them in."

"Oh am I?" Gabriel asked, smiling coolly.

"Yeah. You are," Dean said calmly. "Or we're going to dunk you in some holy oil and deep-fry ourselves an archangel." Gabriel's smile faded. He waited a couple seconds, and then, clearly pissed, he raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

Dean looked behind himself to see a slumped, bleeding, half-conscious Alex being held up by Cas, who was breathing heavily, blood running down his nose and the side of his face. His hands on Alex's arms seemed to be the only thing holding her up. "Alex! What happened?" Sam asked, rushing to them as Dean rounded on Gabriel. Angry was putting Dean's disposition lightly.

"Gabriel, what the hell did you do to her?!

The archangel just smiled, shrugged innocently. Cas was glaring daggers at Gabriel. "He put her through a series of hells for his own personal amusement."

Dean's expression was murderous as Gabriel smiled nonchalantly. "What can I say, she delivered—I laughed, I cried, I learned new things about myself."

"You son of a bitch!" Dean shouted.

"I should have known this was you, Gabriel," Cas said with no shortage of gravelly disgust.

Gabriel held up his hands in defense, acting like he didn't know what the issue was. "Hey, before you deep fry me, consider this. I didn't really do anything to her. It was all inside her already, I just... nudged a few feelings around. Brought a few things to the surface." He looked at all three of the men in turn. "You're the ones who did this to her. You."

Dean stepped closer, his expression dangerous. "Why?"

Gabriel rolled his eyes. "Why not? She and I are practically the same person, and I'm tired of her blind loyalty to your dumb, sorry asses. All the two of you do to her... all my family has done to me... is tear apart everything worth loving. You wondering why I became the trickster? My own private witness protection. I skipped out of Heaven, had a face transplant, carved out my own little corner of the world so I didn't have to deal with the shit my family surrounded me with." He wagged his eyebrows. "Sound familiar? Remember when Alex ran away, Dean? Too bad she crawled back."

"Of course she came back, this is her family," Sam said, almost snarling as he took a step toward Gabriel from where he'd been standing beside Cas.
"What family?" Gabriel asked in humored disbelief. "Turned against each other, tearing at each other's throats? Why the hell do you think I brought you here and did this to you and am trying to get you to play your roles? Because I am tired of my family tearing itself to shreds." His good mood was gone. He was suddenly, intensely angry. "I need it to be over!"

Dean shook his head, lips in a thin line. "You are something else. You got some nerve, involving my brother and sister in your douche-nozzle family drama. You're all a bunch of assholes." He glanced over his shoulder, thinking of something. "Uh, no offense, Cas."

"None taken," Cas said darkly.

Gabriel looked positively ruffled at Dean's comment about his family. "Shut your cake hole. You don't know anything about my family. I love my father, my brothers. Love them. But watching them betray each other, slowly kill each other? I couldn't stand it! Okay? So I left. And now it's happening all over again."

"Then help us stop it," Sam said, trying to appeal to reason.

Gabriel scoffed. "It can't be stopped. This has to happen."

"You wanna see the world end?" Dean asked in angered disbelief.

"Haven't you been listening?" Gabriel shouted. "I have to sit back and watch my own brothers kill each other thanks to you two! Heaven? Hell? I don't care who wins, I just want it to be over!"

Sam shook his head, desperate. "It doesn't have to be like that. There has to be some way to, to pull the plug."

Gabriel looked at Sam patronizingly. "You do not know my family. What you guys call the apocalypse, I used to call Sunday dinner. That's why there's no stopping this, because this isn't about a war. It's about two brothers that loved each other and betrayed each other—and guess what, there was nothing anyone could do about it. Not me. Not your sister."

"What are you talking about?" Sam demanded.

Gabriel's expression fell. He shook his head blankly. "You sorry sons of bitches. Why do you think you two are the vessels? Think about it. Michael, the big brother, loyal to an absent father, and Lucifer, the little brother, rebellious of Daddy's plan. Their younger sibling they fight over and don't even realize they're driving away or damaging in the process. That was me. That's her."

Dean and Sam both looked at Alex, who was apparently a little lucid again. She was staring back at them, her expression pained and tired, clutching onto Cas weakly. Gabriel wasn't done. "You were born to this, boys. It's your destiny! It was always you! As it is in Heaven, so it must be on earth. One brother has to kill the other, and it's to the point where I don't care who dies. Can't say the same for her, though." He looked at Sam, smiling a little. "Somehow, Sam... I think you already know that."

"What the hell are you saying?" Sam demanded, getting more aggravated by the second.

"Why do you think I've always taken such an interest in you boys? Because from the moment Dad flipped on the lights around here, we knew it was all gonna end with you. Always. This is real, and it's gonna end bloody for all of us. That's just how it's gotta be. Accept it."

Dean came close to the edge of the ring of fire, his glare unrelenting. The flames reflected in his dark eyes, a menacing effect. "No. I won't accept it. And you know what? We're out of here."
Dean turned and walked away, over to Cas, reaching for Alex. "I got her," Dean said tersely, giving Cas a look. Cas let go.

"Uh. Okay. Guys? You're just gonna, you're gonna leave me here forever?" Gabriel asked, stock still, stuck inside the ring.

Dean turned, and Sam took Alex from him, helped her out through the door as Dean hung back. "No. We're not, 'cause we don't screw with people the way you do. And for the record? This isn't about some prize fight between your brothers or some destiny that can't be stopped. This is about you being too afraid to stand up to your family!" Dean pulled the fire alarm roughly, and the sprinklers and alarm went off. "Don't say I never did anything for you," Dean shouted over the noise, and Gabriel glared angrily, the water raining down over his head. Dean left and didn't look back.

Sam had Alex sitting on the trunk of the Impala, and he was checking her for injuries as she kind of swayed unevenly, stared at nothing. "Cas, what the hell happened?" Dean demanded.

Cas ignored the question—he was looking at Alex intently. "She really needs to be taken to the hospital. Her physical injuries are worse than I thought. Meet me there."

He reached out and touched Alex's shoulder, even as Sam protested, "Wait—"

But the angel and their sister disappeared, and Dean swore violently, gave Sam, who shrugged as if to say 'not my fault' a dagger glare. "Are you kidding me?!" Dean bitched, and slammed his hand on top of the car in frustration.

Alex stared at the shiny hospital floor, hearing the nurse ask Cas, "Okay, and are you her husband?"

He had an arm around her waist, holding her steady, his other hand was grasping her forearm. "N —" Cas began.

Alex cut him off, her speech a little slurred. "Yes." She wasn't even looking, but she guessed he was looking at her like she had three heads at that point. But she knew the hospital rules about family, and she didn't want to be alone. She would explain to him later, if she could remember… oh, look, that person was wearing crocs. The stupidest shoe in the world...

"All right, follow me," the nurse's voice said. "What happened to her?"

Cas's low voice rumbled through her, since she was practically attached to him at the moment. "She was dragged into an alternate dimension created by an archangel and subsequently forced to relive painful memories and face inner turmoil."

Alex looked up, pitched forward a little. Cas's grip tightened on her. Just as Alex predicted, the nurse was frozen, looking at them oddly. "I tried to commit suicide," Alex lied, weakly flopping her bloody hand out. It was the best lie she could come up with at a moment's notice. "Uh, okay," the nurse said, looking at Cas oddly, who was looking at Alex, frowning. She just looked down again, so dizzy and sick. She heard someone say, "We'll take her from here."

Immediately, she felt Cas's fingers tighten against her waist, her arm. "No, I will not leave her side."

Oh, that's nice, she thought dreamily, floating forward. She spaced out again, not really sure what
was happening or how much time had passed or which direction was up or down. Eventually, she realized she was laying in a hospital bed, and being hooked up to things, poked, prodded. Cas stood beside the bed, watching her with a grim expression. She felt lucid again, at least for right then, as his eyes met hers. "I should have known when I couldn't get to you," he said. "That he wasn't simply a trickster."

Alex sighed a very long sigh. Her head felt like it was three feet outside of her skull. "He's called the trickster for a reason. He fools everyone." Cas didn't look reassured at her statement. In fact, he looked even more depleted. "I'll be fine, Cas," Alex said weakly, because she knew she would be. "I get knocked down a lot, yeah. But I always get back up." She paused, her face blank, her mind ghosting over the new wounds that were fresh in her mind from the scenes Gabriel had showed her from her younger years. "I always survive," she murmured, half to herself, then glanced at Cas. She remembered how she had broken down with him earlier, unleashed the floodgates on him. She suddenly felt very stupid and weak, and unable to look at him.

He, however, wouldn't stop looking at her, that frown of his deepening. But instead of stern, he looked bothered. "I'm supposed to be your protector," he said. He sounded disillusioned.

She looked up at him appraisingly, her vision going double for a second. "Even after you're cut off from Heaven and kicked out of the angel points club?"

He looked at her, his eyebrows moving down just slightly. "Yes. Still."

Something about the way he said that made her want to jump out of her skin, made her feel like—ouch! She winced as one of the nurses stuck another IV needle in her arm. A muscle jerked in Cas's jaw. She watched them hang a bag of saline solution and hook it up to the newest needle in her arm. She then glanced at Cas, suddenly worried. "You're not gonna just disappear or leave, are you?" Her gaze faltered—she had sounded way, way too desperate just then. "I just—I don't wanna be alone." But after the graveyard… he knew that, didn't he?

His eyebrows moved just a little closer together. "I will not leave your side," he said. And that small statement made her feel so much better.

She almost smiled. "Thanks, Cas." She watched as he pulled up a chair beside her and sat there with his hands clasped in his lap.

Growing somber, she remembered everything that had happened in the graveyard and looked away, into her lap. She had thought, just for a moment, when he had touched her face, wiped her tears away, his eyes meeting hers so soulfully that maybe, maybe there was something there. That maybe the way he had felt about her in 2014 was already there, or someday would be there, below the surface. The way his arms had wrapped around her, then tightened… had she imagined that? She'd been so distraught that maybe she'd imagined it. Sidelong, her eyes swept over his face that was becoming so familiar. He had such a simple, open face, yet something about it stuck with her, etched itself inside her mind.

His face wasn't the only thing etched in her mind. She couldn't even begin to think about the memories she'd been shown about Dean, Sam, and Dad. She refused. Not now. It was too much and she just couldn't. Instead, she focused on her hospital wristband. And without even wanting to, thought of kissing Cas again. The heart rate monitor suddenly sped up a few beats, and Cas looked at it, frowning in concern, then looking at her. Alex kind of shrank back into her pillows, knowing her face was giving away everything—he just didn't know what that everything was.

She had to let that kiss go and just focus on the present moment, stop over-thinking everything and tricking herself into hoping that could happen again. Offhandedly, she thought of the weird reality
where the Trickster… or, Gabriel, she guessed, had made her think for a split second she was married to Cas. She felt a little embarrassed, wondered if Cas realized the significance of that or… she glanced at him. He was leaning forward over his knees now, his fingers laced through and face intense.

She cleared her throat, a little timid. "Cas, can you do me a favor? Don't, just don't tell my brothers. About the husband-Cas thing with the Trickster. They'd never let me hear the end of it, and I just… it's weird. Please." She hoped she didn't have to say more, or explain further.

He looked at her a moment. "Of course." He paused, then seemed to have an idea, the smallest little smile coming over his face. He held out his hand, the pinky extended. For a split second, Alex looked at his hand, confused. Then, she realized what he was doing with a surprised little smile. She followed suit, held out her pinky and they wrapped their smallest fingers around each other's. "I am forever bound," he said, clearly pleased that he had remembered this and applied it in the proper social context. Oh my god, it was too cute and funny, the way he looked so proud of himself for making a joke and remembering a gesture she'd taught him. Alex couldn't help it. Even after everything today—all the pain, all the horrible pain—that sight of him smiling, his eyes bright with a pleased, boyish twinkle warranted no other reaction from her—she smiled too and the smile reached her eyes.

Dean and Sam rushed into the hospital room to find Cas, sitting beside Alex's bedside, watching her. "Oh my god," Sam breathed. Dean, a fist to his mouth, stood still, physically trying to contain himself at the sight of Alex in the hospital bed, eyes closed, hooked up to all the monitors and IV drips.

"She's sleeping," Cas explained, standing when he saw them. He came and joined them at the foot of the bed.

"Son of a bitch," Dean managed, his expression almost terrified, although a little less than before Cas had said the part about her only being asleep. "Will she be all right?"

Cas's frown deepened, his eyes went to Alex's sleeping form. "Physically, yes." 

"And… not physically?" Dean prompted.

Cas's eyes slid to Dean's. "I don't know." They all looked at her small, sleeping shape there on the hospital bed. Cas's expression was unreadable. "Something is wrong with Alex."

"No shit, Sherlock—she just got torn to shreds in Gabriel's little house of horrors!" Dean almost shouted.

Cas glanced at him, perturbed. "No. I—" he paused, searching for words. "It's not that. It's something else."

"What do you mean?" Dean demanded, getting even more agitated.

Cas seemed frustrated, and answered Dean with an air of aggravated shortness, staring at him cynically. "I'm not sure, Dean."

Dean made a face and rolled his eyes, then huffed, letting it go, but mad about something else, of course. "Fine, oh and by the way, next time maybe let us know which hospital you decide to beam up to, Scotty. We went to three other ones before finding you here." He brushed past Cas, went to Alex's side, put his hand on the side of her head, looked down at her and stroked his thumb across her hair, a pained expression on his face that Sam and Cas couldn't see.
"Okay, well can you tell us the details of what happened to her?" Sam was asking Cas, oblivious to what Dean was doing.

Sam got a sidelong glance from Cas, who seemed to be thinking deeply. "Yes," the angel said momentarily. "Gabriel showed her memories that were intentionally chosen to make old pains resurface. And he made her kill your father—at least, someone who looked like him. And then you, Sam, as well. And he tried to make her kill Dean. If I hadn't been able to get there... I believe she would be dead right now." Both the brothers looked at him, understanding perfectly, horrified. Cas's expression, too, was unusually terse.

"Son of a bitch. I should never have let that asshole go," Dean said, glaring daggers at the space in front of him.

Sam, however, was tilting his head to the side, eyes narrowed. "So she killed someone who looked like Dad? And me? But... not Dean?" he asked. He got a little smile on his face. The kind he got when he was pissed about something.

"Why do you sound so surprised?" Cas asked, drawing a startled look from both of the Winchester boys. Cas looked at Sam with what could only be called a glare. "I saw her memories, Sam. What you've done." Sam's face went blank, and then Cas stepped a little closer. "And I know what you did to her recently."

There was a darkness to Cas's voice that was making Sam look nervous. "Uh—yeah, I—"

Cas stepped a little closer, pivoting his chin down, staring at Sam unflinchingly, levelly. "Do not ever make the same mistake. Do you understand?"

Sam was frozen, staring, mouth half-open. Dean, however, was looking at Cas incredulously. "Whoa, dude—are you seriously threatening my brother right now?" He approached Cas with a glaring frown. "Is that any of your business?"

Cas turned, looked Dean straight in the eyes. "Yes. As a matter of fact, it is."

Dean's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, really?" He was beside himself, indignant. "Last time I checked, this was my family, not yours. Did you forget to take your Prozac today or something Cas?"

Cas's eyes narrowed. "I don't know what Prozac is. I only want to be clear with Sam that I will not allow him to physically harm Alex like that again."

Sam looked reluctant, guilty. "Well, I won't. Trust me."

Just then, a nurse came to the door and looked directly at Cas, tapping lightly on the doorframe with her knuckles, a chart in her other hand. "Excuse me, sir, we have the pathology on your wife."

"Your wife?!" Dean asked, his face twisting in disbelief and offense. Sam's eyebrows had shot up high.

"Your wife?!" Dean asked, his face twisting in disbelief and offense. Sam's eyebrows had shot up high.

Cas merely glanced at the brothers, then looked back at the nurse, who was looking between the two of them uncertainly. "Go ahead."

"Well, she's severely dehydrated and it kind of looks like sunstroke, or heat exhaustion. But, all of her labs are fine. She just needs some rest and fluids. We already got the stitches in her palm wound, so basically, we'll discharge her in a couple days, once we make sure she's shipshape. Nothing to worry about. Your wife is going to be fine."
She smiled pleasantly at Cas, who nodded. "Thank you."

The nurse left. Dean was practically fuming, but Cas turned and spoke to him before he could sound off. "Alex lied to the staff so that I could stay with her. It's the hospital rules," he added, as if they wouldn't have known that.

"What, you couldn't have been her cousin or uncle?" Dean asked hostilely, and Cas frowned, not seeming to understand.

Even Sam looked at Dean oddly, maybe embarrassed or annoyed with his brother's seemingly erratic behavior. "Calm down Dean... maybe you're the one who needs some Prozac." Dean just glared at Sam, who gave him a weird look and tried reasoning with him. "You heard the nurse. Alex is gonna be fine. Just relax." Dean almost rolled his eyes at the suggestion.

Cas looked at Dean. "Never mind, look, the reason I was trying to find you and realized you three were missing is because I had news to share. I have it on good authority that a demon named Crowley has the Colt." At this piece of news, both Winchesters looked surprised, intrigued. Cas continued. "I've gotten close to finding him. I think I've almost... 'got' him."

Dean nodded gruffly. "Good. Good. Okay. Well, let's get Alex rested and okay and back to Bobby's. Then, we find this Crowley dude, get the Colt, kill the devil. Sound like a plan?" He was being a little facetious, obviously still mad.

Sam rolled his eyes, but Cas was stoic. "Agreed. You two go rest. I'll watch over Alex tonight."

Dean got a crazy look on his face. "Oh no. I am not leaving this hospital, and I am not leaving you alone with her." Cas frowned, not understanding as Dean continued angrily. "That chair over has my name on it. And Sam, you're not going anywhere either. I want you all where I can see you."

Sam rolled his eyes, his jaw clenched, but he said nothing. Even Cas looked annoyed at Dean's domineering attitude.

Ignoring them, Dean sat down in the chair beside Alex's bed and slouched down into the seat, kind of sullen and pissy. No one said anything else.

Eventually, the brothers fell asleep, leaving Castiel as the only one awake. The hours ticked by, but he stayed there at Alex's bedside, unmoving, listening to the "beep-beep-beep" of the heart rate monitor. Watching the night shadows shift and move across Alex's sleeping form. The blinds on the window filled the room with stripes of darkness and soft slats of moonlight.

After staring at it for hours, around four in the morning, finally, he reached out and brushed the strand of hair that lay across her forehead away with his fingertips. She looked so peaceful as she slept.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to develop the idea of Sam having a darker side. I've always felt his backstory was lacking something, so I took matters into my own hands... PLEASE GUYS DON'T FREAK OUT I AM NOT CHANGING SAM TRUST ME PLEASE I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING WITH THIS-keep in mind, things may not be what they seem... I pinky promise you it will all be okay and be explained further.
The Next Morning

Beep, beep, beep… the sound faded in as Alex slowly came out of a deep and dreamless sleep. She groggily opened her eyes half way, for a second not remembering where she was or what had happened—and then she saw the hospital room ceiling above her, felt the uncomfortable pressure where IV needles were shoved into her arms, was aware of a dull throbbing pain in the palm of her hand where stitches criss-crossed her flesh. And with these physical pains as a reminder, she recalled yesterday. And the days before it. And whatever peace she’d had while asleep was immediately gone.

"Good morning, Alex," came a deep, husky voice above and beside her. Startled, Alex snapped awake, sitting up halfway then cringing, sore everywhere, but looking to where the voice had come from. Castiel's familiar countenance stared down at her from where he stood beside the hospital bed—but his ever-present frown softened as their eyes locked.

"You're... still here," she said clumsily, both a question and a somewhat stunned comment. She vaguely remembered falling asleep last night, totally exhausted but feeling at least a little okay because Cas was there and hadn't left her alone. But she remembered even as she drifted off just knowing Cas would be gone in the morning—he always disappeared, after all—so seeing him still there made her stomach feel odd. Alex heard a soft, familiar snore at that moment and looked around the room, realizing that her brothers were there. Sam was in one of the corners, his giant body crammed into a hospital chair, an elbow on his knee and his face propped awkwardly on his hand as he leaned into the wall. And there on the other side of the room, Dean was slumped down uncomfortably in another chair, head awkwardly lolling back, mouth gaping widely.

Cas must have seen her looking at Dean, because he spoke up. "I don't think he meant to fall asleep. He was very irritable last night."

Of course he was. Alex glanced at Cas, feeling bad—there was no telling what Dean had said or done last night. She could only imagine. Lately it had been nothing but mood swings and authoritarian rampages from her oldest brother, who was under daily-increasing levels of stress and didn't seem to know how to handle it any other way but to rip into his siblings and anyone else who dared get in his way. That, combined with his general weird attitude toward Cas more recently—well, it had all probably come to a bit of a head yesterday. And sure, it didn't help that Castiel had just spirited her away to a hospital without a second word to Dean, but for God's sake, her brother was really being a nightmare lately. She actually kind of wondered how exhausted Dean had to have been to fall asleep with Cas standing there—or maybe Cas had left and just returned a few minutes ago… she frowned a little and kind of cocked her head to the side, looking at Cas intently. "Have you... just been standing there all night?"

His answer was simple and immediate. "Yes. I watched over you."

The second the words left his lips, Alex's mouth dropped open slightly in surprise; she was more than a little flustered at the thought of him standing there just watching her sleep all night—that plus his earnest expression and the simple, open way he'd said the words blindsided her, made her feel oddly bare and exposed. And the silence that hung there after it seemed to demand she say
something, anything. But she literally felt that she'd forgotten the entire English language. Couldn't think of a single damn thing to say. An eloquent "uhh..." escaped her, and Castiel just continued to look down at her, his expression concerned again. Then he surprised her again by drawing in a deep breath, simultaneously sitting on the edge of the bed as his eyebrows knit together in a thoughtful, troubled expression. Alex was frozen, noticing helplessly how close he was at that moment sitting against the side of her hip. The end of his trench coat bunched up over the top of her thigh.

Pensive, he looked at her intently, oblivious to her sudden inability to breathe deeply. Alex was abruptly and intensely anxious not only because of his close proximity, but also because something about that look on his face. He took a long time to speak, clearly struggling. His troubled eyes searched hers in silence, then fell away. "Seeing you in torment was..." his eyes flicked back to hers, "unbearable to me."

Her chest tightened. Their eyes remained locked and the air in the room seeming to be thin, hard to breathe. Cas's forehead was wrinkled deeply and he looked like he was waiting for her to say something... but she was completely speechless, so much more than before. It was because she knew that he meant what he'd said, and what's more, that he didn't know what to do with it. He had said it almost as if he were asking her what to do about it, how to react. And it was clear that he had been thinking about it, long and hard—waiting all night to tell her after maybe gathering the courage, or trying to decide how to say it. Alex swallowed. He had essentially confessed that her pain affected him on a level that frightened him. And that, in turn, scared her—because... what the hell did that mean for them, exactly? He looked down, just for a second, at her hand where it rested palm down beside her on the bed—his hand moved slightly where it rested on his knee—was he thinking about touching her hand?—and then his eyes jumped back to hers again, waiting, anxious. His vivid blue eyes held so much honesty and pain and confusion.

He'd seen her come apart completely—in a way that felt shameful for her. He'd seen Gabriel fling painful memory after painful memory at her, tear her down piece by piece and leave her a lost, crying, slobbering mess on all-fours. Somehow Cas had broken the divide and come to her in one of her darkest, most terrifying moments. And without a second thought, she had reached for him and he hadn't turned her away. He'd quietly held her and unknowingly anchored her in the middle of the storm of pain. As she looked at him right now, she didn't know how to tell him what that had meant for her. And actually, she felt like she shouldn't confess it at all. It was too revealing of her innermost conflicted feelings—feelings that instinctively she believed must be wrong to have. The things she thought of him, the way he'd gotten so close, so far under her skin—it alarmed her. She had never felt these things about anyone else.

Her thoughts achingly went back to how Castiel had held her like no one else ever had. Right now as they looked at each other wordlessly with bated breath, she wanted it again so badly. Just to be inside the warmth of his arms, to be close and feel his heart beating, hear him breathing steadily next to her. Feel the gentle pull of his fingers against her back like yesterday, when he'd experimentally and hesitantly pulled her close. The way that he'd held her had momentarily banished her fears and pains. It had just been for a moment. But the moment had been long enough. Long enough to pull her back from the edge of obliterating, mind-numbing pain that threatened to shatter her apart.

She remembered being struck oddly as she cried into his shoulder that he smelled faintly like fabric softener. She'd been mystified as to why he smelled that way. Been comforted by it too because it seemed so common... so everyday. She hadn't expected it. He'd wiped tears from her face, the gentle and seemingly tender touch of his fingertips scarred into her memory forever. Cas had done so much for her—too much for her, not only yesterday. It all seemed to suggest one thing, that she had known all along, but not really fully believed. He cared. Much more than she had imagined or
understood. Was 'cared' the right word?

Beside her, his hand again moved and left his knee to rest palm down on the bed, fingertips pointing toward hers, and his hand inched forward just slightly toward her hand. Was that... was he doing that on purpose? All that Alex could think, desperate and afraid and so confused was why would this angel care about me like this, let alone at all? If it was because he had some kind of feelings for her, that was the most frightening thought of all to Alex. Not just because of everything that might happen in 2014. Because it was scary as hell to think of him seeing her in that way. It intimidated her to wonder, was he in a place where he cared about her past the point of friendship? Because when he looked at her in this way, holding her locked in a gaze, searching her eyes, his hand inching toward hers, everything inside of Alex seemed to scream at her that he must, he must—his fingertips gently hit up against hers on the surface of the bed, the faintest touch. Alex's eyes were big and staring into Cas's in breathless uncertainty. What are you doing, Castiel?

There was the sound of stirring to their left and the moment was suddenly over, their gaze breaking and hands jumping apart, but not before they realized Dean was awake, looking at them. He seemed cranky, groggy, but was quickly becoming alert. "The hell... what time is it?" he managed, voice gravelly and a little disoriented. Cas stood up from where he sat, and even as Dean got out of his chair, there was a glare on his face aimed at the angel. "You're still here?" The question was accusing and hostile, and Alex was surprised at how Dean just automatically went there—didn't even bother with unpleasant or cranky, just went full speed ahead to asshole.

Cas, however, didn't even blink, just met Dean's eyes evenly. "Yes."

Dean stared pointedly for a second, then gestured at the door to the room, rudely demanded, "you wanna give us a minute?"

Cas looked at Alex briefly, then to Dean, frowning a little, then, under Dean's scowl, seeming to understand the implication. He somewhat grudgingly stepped out into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

Alex looked at Dean, upset. "What's your problem?"

"Was he here all night?" Dean demanded, ignoring her question, his eyes narrowed as he pointed an errant finger in the general direction Cas had just gone.

"I don't know," Alex lied, immediately, automatically; feeling a twinge of guilt the second she said it.

Dean was looking at her in a very intent, judgmental way she didn't like, and she scowled back at him, sidelong, a lot more pissed off than she was letting on. He came a little closer, towering over her, arms crossed. "So you wanna tell me what went down in Trickster Land?" he asked.

She gave him a full on glare, tired of his crap and enraged that he was acting this way after everything she'd been through yesterday. "No. Screw off."

"Excuse me?" he asked, incredulous, as if he couldn't believe his ears.

She grabbed the TV remote and switched it on, not looking at him purposefully. "You heard me."

Dean stood there a second, completely ready fight with her. A million sarcastic comments and retorts ran across his mind, all perfect for pissing her off and hurting her feelings and putting her in her place. But even as he thought that, he kind of did a mental double take, realizing that geez, she was in the hospital and had been put through hell yesterday—he wasn't even really sure about what
exactly had gone down, all he had to go on were some vague details that Cas had mentioned. Dean stayed silent, stewing even as he realized that he was being an absolute douchebag.

But speaking of douchebags, Dean's mind turned to someone he didn't mind picking a fight with. The guy who had taken Alex, zapped off with her and not even let Dean know where to. The guy who saw no problem posing as Alex's husband, who had spent all friggin' night there in the same room with her, and was even sitting on Alex's bed staring at her intensely when Dean had woken up. The warning he had given himself in 2014 seemed to be screaming through his mind anew like a blaring alarm, danger, danger!

Dean left Alex's room and barged out into the hallway, looking both ways for the angel in question. Cas was a few doors down, looking into a patient's room through the open door, staring curiously at the flowers at the patient's bedside. Dean marched toward him, every freaked out, scared shitless thought compelling him forward.

He hadn't thought much of the warning he'd given himself in 2014, not after asking Alex about it a month ago—it had sounded absolutely ridiculous—junkless dweeby Cas and emo awkward Alex, a couple? He would find it funny if it wasn't starting to legitimately worry him. When he asked her about it when they got back, she'd smacked down the idea immediately, which had settled him, assured him, effectively sent the worry packing in Dean's mind. Until yesterday.

The image of Cas holding a woozy Alex up fleetingly passed over his mind's eye—the sight had freaked him the hell out; both of them bleeding and battered and clinging to each other in a way that seemed too close, too personal. He'd remembered his words to himself in 2014, when he'd warned about Cas being Alex's death sentence.

He thought again about how Cas held his sister, protective and invested, not stoic, not blasé. Cas held Alex like he meant it—there was no other way to describe it—like a man held a woman. And Dean remembered how Alex was clutching to the angel by handfuls of shirt for dear life, as if she were depending on him completely. It had unsettled Dean in the deepest way possible, but he'd tried to tell himself it was nothing, tried to believe the best of both his friend and his sister, but was still left wondering when the hell this had happened. Last time he checked Alex was annoyed by Cas, didn't trust him much. Maybe he should have paid closer attention, because now he was beginning to suspect the worst.

The scene he'd witnessed when he'd woken just a few minutes ago flashed across his mind again: his sister, propped up in her bed, Cas sitting on the bed, entirely too close to her as they gazed at each other, their expressions so intense and disappearing the second they realized Dean was awake. Cas, standing up, as if trying to hide something from him. And all of it was setting something off inside Dean, some raging fear that everything he'd warned himself about was true, was possible, and maybe already happening.

Dean had reached Cas in all of ten seconds, his jumbled, chaotic thoughts making him physically shaky. He roughly grabbed the angel by the shoulder, demanding his attention angrily. "Okay, Cas, you tell me right now—what the hell is going on with you and my sister?"

Cas seemed perplexed by the sudden assault, looking at Dean's hand with a disapproving frown, then at Dean with narrowed eyes. "I'm her protector."

"Yeah? What, you don't have a thing for her?" Dean pressed angrily, not letting go of Cas, instead grabbing a fistful of the trench coat covering Cas's shoulder.

The angel's head tilted slightly to the side in perplexed bewilderment and he ignored Dean's physical escalation. "What kind of... thing?"
Dean was disgusted, impatient with Cas's stupidity. "You are such a pain in my ass," he griped through tightly clenched teeth, and then his voice raised into a near shout, and he shoved Cas slightly with the hand that gripped his shoulder. "Like, a romantic thing!"

At that, Cas's expression darkened, and he stepped further into Dean's space, voice lowered, as he grabbed Dean's hand off of his shoulder and pushed it back to Dean's side, his superhuman strength overpowering Dean's attempt at resistance easily. "You should watch your tone with me," Castiel almost growled. "I have tolerated your disrespect toward me for a very long time, Dean." The angel was clearly angry. "I have proved myself again and again to you. Why are you angry with me?"

"Because in twenty-fourteen, I found out you're the one who gets Alex killed, okay?" Dean spat out, and there it was, out in the open.

Cas looked as all the air had left his lungs. He went completely still, his face screwing up in disbelief. "What?"

"Yeah, apparently," Dean said sarcastically. There was general horror on Castiel's face, an expression Dean hadn't seen there before.

"Why didn't you mention that when you told me everything?" Cas asked, sounding genuinely upset, almost angry. Dean met his demanding gaze haltingly. He'd taken the angel aside when Cas had checked in a couple weeks ago and told him, in general terms, about 2014, but he hadn't exactly known how to bring up that little part about Alex. He also hadn't really seen the point, because he had honestly believed it was a bunch of weirdo crap, mostly, until yesterday and today. At Dean's silence, Cas relented, his face softening. He touched Dean's shoulder gently, imploringly—the same shoulder that held the angry red hand print Cas had burned onto him in Hell. Dean looked at him harshly as Cas spoke. "It can't be true, Dean. You know that I would never let her die," Cas reasoned, but he sounded disturbed, unsure, as if he didn't know what to believe. He took his hand off of Dean's shoulder.

"Well it wasn't exactly in your control anymore, was it, Cas?" Dean asked him bitterly. "You weren't an angel anymore, remember? You were a friggin' human, and twenty-fourteen me warned me to keep you two apart."

Cas shook his head, either not understanding, or flat out refusing. "We can't be apart, I'm her guardian angel." Dean's expression darkened as Cas continued. "I've been charged to watch over her for her lifetime."

Dean laughed humorlessly, seeing the irony right away. "If memory serves, you were also charged with being obedient to Heaven, and I don't see you following that little rule anymore."

Visibly caught off guard by that statement, Cas was momentarily silent, almost guiltily so, and Dean looked at him in superiority. Then, Cas raised his chin, face neutral again. "Dean, I promise you. I will never let harm come to her."

"Then why is she in a hospital bed right now, huh Cas?" Dean raged. "Cuz you did such a damn great job protecting her yesterday!"

Hurt shimmered across Cas's face before his eyes lowered in shame. Dean regretted his words, just a little bit. But then even more when Cas spoke, not looking at Dean. "I suppose I did fail her. And you. I couldn't rescue any of you from Gabriel. He was too powerful for me. Especially now." His eyes flicked up, pained, and Dean knew he meant now that he was cut off from Heaven. "I'm deeply sorry, Dean."
Dean had to clench his jaw to hold back his annoyance that Cas had just made it so much harder to be angry with him. He relented, remembering everything Cas had ever done for him, how much he owed the guy. And truth be told, Dean was tired of being angry at everyone. In fact, he was beginning to feel kind of desperate. But he couldn't admit to that. He took a deep breath, trying to reconcile his anger and suspicion to how much he liked and wanted to trust the angel. "Listen, Cas, buddy. I appreciate everything you've done for us. I do. I'm just—up against a whole hell of a lot, you know?"

"Yes. I do know," Cas replied, surprising Dean. "That's why I'm trying to help you." He looked at Dean meaningfully, the expression tinged with guilt. "It's the least I can do. After all we've been through together."

Dean couldn't hold his gaze, and let out a heavy, guilty, ashamed huff of air. Why was every damn relationship in his life like this? Full of angry fights and guilt that never let go. It was exhausting. It felt terrible. Cas was right—they had been through a lot together. Cas had done more for him than most ever would have. It was easy to forget that when angry. This angel had raised him from Hell. Restored Alex's voice. Saved their asses multiple times. Defied Heaven and died for them. Dean really did have no right to fly off the handle this way at Castiel. And he knew it. Dean looked at Cas grudgingly, feeling like an ass.

Maybe he was reading into a situation that wasn't even there at all. Cas hadn't answered him, exactly, about Alex. But was it because Cas didn't even understand that possibility? Didn't understand the question because it was so unfathomable to him? Maybe the things Dean had been upset by—the way Cas had held Alex, the way he'd been gazing at her in the bed—maybe he was overreacting and just misinterpreting it. Cas was a pretty intense, unaware, awkward guy, right? And hell, to a passerby, the way Cas had touched Dean's shoulder a minute ago could have been misinterpreted. Dean really wanted to believe it was as simple as that. But after the warning he'd given himself... after everything... he would never be able to let it go completely, and he knew that. But today, he needed to just drop it instead of allowing this wavering friendship to break apart. Cas was waiting patiently for Dean to speak again, watching him silently, somberly.

Dean shook his head and shrugged mildly, spreading his hands. "I'm sorry man. It's just, you told me, once upon a time, that all roads lead to the same destination, that destiny can't be changed." He felt at a loss. "So, I mean, what the hell am I supposed to do? Just let you and Alex pal around, become best buds and then whatever else? That's me signing her death certificate, if twenty-fourteen me was telling the truth. Can I take that chance?" Cas's eyebrows moved together just slightly.

Dean was swallowing, staring at some unfocused point. "I can't let her die. Not her, ever. And not Sam, not again. They're all I've got left, and I can't lose them, Cas, not after everyone else. And basically, I've seen the future where they both die. So the only option I got left is to fight like hell to make sure that doesn't happen." He looked at Cas openly, not sure what else to say.

Cas looked empathetic, once again surprising Dean. "I understand."

Dean looked at Cas fully, letting himself be real for a just a moment. To sound the way he felt. Broken and scared and desperate. "Do you still believe it, Cas? That fate, destiny, whatever, can't be changed?"

Cas met his eyes with a grim hesitance, a muscle in his cheek jumping, his brows furrowing. "Truthfully... I'm not sure anymore."

Dean went still, looking at Cas intently, unsure why the answer struck him as oddly ominous. Maybe it was because for a flicker of a second, he wasn't sure if Cas were telling the truth or not.
Later That Day

The TV had been off for awhile now. Silence just sounded better. Alex stared out the hospital window from where she sat in the bed. She couldn't really see anything out the window except some tree branches. Sometimes, squirrels ran along the limbs, stopped, beat their tails in the air, then darted onwards. She watched idly, disinterested, not really seeing with her eyes, just thinking.

Dean had come back in a few minutes after he'd disappeared. He'd ignored Alex and shaken Sam awake. He'd been sort of quiet and grumpy, but at least not a total douche like before. He'd apparently run Cas off, too, because the angel never reappeared. Maybe that was for the best, but it made Alex feel a little sad at the same time, too. She had wanted him to stay. However, the intense thoughts his presence had put her through were still there, in the back of her mind bothering her, confusing her, which is why it was probably best for him to be gone. He'd probably show up again in a week or two, like he always did. In the mean time, she'd be left to her own devices... second-guessing everything, as usual. Wondering if she were crazy and imagining things. But the thing was, she really didn't think she was. She thought about Cas reaching out to touch her hand. Thought of it over and over again.

Sam and Dean had stayed with her for awhile, but it hadn't exactly been the Brady Bunch. They'd sat around in tense silence, watching TV halfway, ignoring the elephant in the room. Sam tried asking her at one point if she were okay, implying he wanted to know what had happened—but she had told them she didn't want to talk about it, more or less. And after that, they left, saying they were going on a supply run, and then Sam texted to let her know they were grabbing lunch, too, and did she want anything. No. She hadn't.

Alex was using the opportunity of solitude to mull over everything that Gabriel had put her through. In truth it all seemed kind of like one of her bad dreams. Like it couldn't have actually happened, that it was all in her mind. And well, she needed to remind herself that it hadn't happened, not really, and it hadn't been real, not actually. But her pain? That had been real. And Cas, he had been real. The way he'd held her... that had been real. That had been real.

More disturbingly, the memories of her family... those had been real. She wished they weren't. She'd pushed the ones she remembered away on purpose. And the ones she'd never seen before, well. They hurt on an entirely new level. They scared her—made her want to be far away from her brothers—made her feel like she literally couldn't trust anyone ever again. But underneath the negative feelings and the strong desire to bash their heads into a wall and leave, never come back... she refused to let herself think like that. Because she was deeply suspicious, after some thought, that maybe Gabriel was playing an angle where he wanted her to fall to pieces and break the brothers apart so they would 'play their roles.' He had said he did all that crap to her because she was like him and she needed to see the truth. But she really didn't buy that crap. She refused to be tricked. And he did call himself the Trickster, after all. But that didn't make sticking with her brothers any easier after feeling betrayed, rejected, and lied to by them.

She heard an increasingly familiar sound—Cas arriving, and she looked away from the window, startled out of her thoughts. Castiel stood there at the foot of her bed, his hands clasped behind his back. That was new. "Hello, Alex."

"Hi Cas," she said, glad to see him back (surprised, too). He looked handsome as always, solid and comforting. There was a noticeable spike in her anxiety level at his arrival. After a second of silence where he didn't say anything further, she cleared her throat softly, feeling awkward. "What are you doing here?"
"I came to check on you," he said, as if that should have been obvious. He glanced around the room. "Where are your brothers?"

"Went to go get food. They, uh, hate hospital food." She glanced at the tray of untouched food beside her. And so did she.

Cas didn't notice the tray, he was looking at her with an expression that was something like hopeful or uncertain, but also nearly excited. "I… have something for you." He came to the side of the bed, and his expression reminded her of when he'd been so proud of himself for remembering the pinky promise. "I noticed other patients, in other rooms, had flowers…" from behind his back, he produced a little bundle of yellow wildflowers. He held them out to her and she felt her face go slack when she saw a crappy little twine knot held them together. She stared, suddenly incredibly upset. Cas was saying, "I found them in a meadow right in the middle of a highway—"

Alex couldn't look at him—oh my god. Yellow wildflowers, tied in a shitty knot, just like Cas had left on her grave in 2014. Cas had stopped mid sentence, confused, taking in her sudden crumpled face. "What's wrong?" He looked at the flowers, still in his hand, confounded, almost alarmed. "Are they the wrong kind? Is this an inappropriate gesture?"

Alex tried to compose herself, but it didn't really work. "No… they're, they're, very nice, t-thank you."

She couldn't stop staring at the flowers, realizing that all the times she'd been in the hospital, she'd never been given flowers. Now, she felt emotional for different reasons. She was genuinely touched that Cas saw other patients with flowers, thought of her sitting in a room without any, decided she should have some, went out into a highway median and picked her some damn wildflowers. Gathered them into a bunch, tied them together with twine he got who knows where. Knotted them together in a horrible excuse for a bow, like a little kid might. She must have seemed entirely depressed as she stared at them, because Cas looked positively devastated as his eyes went from her face to the flowers uncertainly.

"I... don't understand—I thought you'd find them pleasing," Cas said, fumbling, and growing more confused by the second. His distress made Alex feel even worse. "Are they... the wrong color?"

"No," she said, half to herself, looking at them, almost physically pained at the memories they stirred inside. She saw a wooden cross etched in her initials, flowers just like these sitting there at the base. "They're... the right color." She reached out, took them, feeling horrible, not wanting him to think she was crazy or ungrateful. She knew she couldn't make him understand why—she refused to tell him about all of that. It was too painful, and he wouldn't know how to handle it.

He was mystified at her comment that they were the right color, but the moment was interrupted as Dean and Sam walked through the door. "What're you doing here?" Dean asked, not exactly friendly, but not as rude as earlier, either. Alex had quickly dashed away the expression on her face. Dean hadn't noticed, too busy giving Cas the evil eye. But Sam was looking at his sister intently, his eyebrows furrowed.

Cas seemed to take Dean's question as a 'get lost' because he straightened and told Dean, "I was just leaving. I still have much work to do tracking down this demon Crowley." He glanced at Alex, then back at Dean. "I'll be in touch." And he disappeared.

Dean looked at Alex, eyebrows raised, not exactly short on attitude. "Nice flowers."

"Why are you being such an asshole?" Alex asked pointedly.
"Because it's a Monday," Sam joked, attempting to lighten the mood. He got a sharp glare from Dean and a little, forced smile from his twin, who just couldn't summon a real one.

"I'm not being an asshole, I'm looking out for you," Dean said, addressing Alex gruffly. "Future me told me Cas is the reason you died, remember?" He made a face and threw his hands up. "Sorry for caring."

"They're just flowers," she grumbled.

Sam looked at his brother sidelong. "Dean, to be fair, do you really think that was a real future Zachariah showed you two? I mean—"

"I'm not taking that chance," Dean said, cutting him off sternly. "On either of your lives. Okay? So call me an asshole, I don't care." His pissy expression and general attitude didn't really convince the twins, who looked at each other at the same time, as if to say 'yeah, sure.'

Sam, a little uncomfortable, visibly pushed aside the retort he was holding inside and looked at Alex, cleared his throat. "Uh, so listen, we stopped and talked to the doc. They wanna do your psych evaluation in a few minutes."

Alex's eyebrows shot up high, and then she began sitting up in the bed. "Oh, forget that." She ripped the IVs out of her arms even as both of her brothers gaped in horror, Sam kind of springing forward, arms outstretched, trying to stop her, but it was already too late.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dean demanded, totally aghast, like she'd lost her mind.

"I don't need a shrink asking me twenty questions about my life and my brain, okay? It wasn't a suicide attempt and I don't care if it's standard procedure, I'm ready to get out of here anyway."

She shoved her shoes onto her feet unceremoniously, and Sam's plea of "Stop, Alex—" fell on deaf ears.

"No. I'm fine," she pretty much spat out, ignoring the stabbing pain in her side and the lightness in her head. "Let's go. Before they figure out the health insurance stuff they got from me this morning was fake."

Dean and Sam looked at each other, kind of grudging to admit that she did kind of have a point… and besides, Alex was already at the door. She looked back at where the wildflowers Cas had brought her had been forgotten on the bed. She glanced at Dean, who was watching her closely. And without much other choice, she turned, walked out, leaving the flowers there, because taking them felt like a loud exclamation of how much she was beginning to feel for Cas. And she didn't want anyone to know.

Twenty Minutes Later Mama Q's Diner

Dean shoved the plate of pancakes and sausage at Alex, who was practically glaring at him across the table. "Eat it."

"I'm not hungry, Dean, I told you," she said.

She didn't appreciate this—she didn't want to eat, but Dean had insisted they stop to get her something. And then she had insisted that she didn't want anything, and besides, Dean and Sam had already eaten, so it was pointless to go if she wasn't going to eat either. But Dean was set on her eating something, and had ordered her a huge breakfast plate and kept pressing, like right now.
"Just eat it, will you?" He barked, losing whatever patience he'd had. "You need your strength!"

She was getting more angry by the second, and she kind of lost it at this point. "Stop telling me what to do!" She shot back heatedly, and they glared at each other. At this point, she wouldn't eat even if she were hungry, just to spite him. Sam glanced between them, uncomfortable, as Alex pushed the plate back to Dean slowly, purposefully, speaking slowly, her voice dripping with attitude. "I'm fine. Just stop it, Dean. Everyone, but especially you, need to stop acting like I'm about to break in half or like you can boss me around all day long."

At that, Dean smiled in superiority, leaning back in the booth casually, knowing exactly how much that would piss her off. "So, Gabe really got to you, huh?"

He wouldn't have that stupid, smug smile on his face if he knew exactly what that all entailed. "Yeah, he did, okay Dean?" Alex replied angrily, and his smile disappeared at her brash tone. She scowled at her brothers across the table. One was giving her the 'I don't understand' puppy dog eyes. The other was giving her the threatening 'make me understand' glare. And Alex was outraged, her anger driven by the things Gabriel had showed her about them yesterday. "Gabriel, Trickster, whoever he is, showed me some messed up stuff. Made me do some pretty messed up stuff."

"Yeah, Cas gave us the Spark's Notes last night," Dean said, and his word choice and asshole tone got an even more agitated glare from Alex.

"Well thanks for your concern," she said snidely, to which Dean just rolled his eyes. Alex could have punched him in the frigging mouth. He was the worst. He was so heartfelt and caring with her usually, but if you didn't give him what he wanted, he threw temper tantrums better than any four year old ever could.

Sam leaned across the table, intent, concerned, and focused on Alex—polar opposite of Dean right now. "What happened, Alex?" He asked gently. "What'd he show you?"

Alex glanced at him fleetingly, kind of dodging his inquisitive, caring stare, her rage ebbing off a little. She felt exposed and sad suddenly instead of pissed, not sure how Sam could always be so calm and placating even when she was being purposefully bitchy. "You don't wanna know," she answered quietly, looking down at her lap.

"Oh, we don't?" Dean asked rudely.

"Dean—" Sam said, giving his brother an exasperated, pointed look.

"Shut up Sam!" Dean retorted.

Alex's furrowed brow returned as she leveled Dean with an angry stare, her hackles raising. "Don't talk to him like that, Dean!" He seemed surprised she was standing up to him again, but Alex had just had it with the shitty attitude, the domineering crap, and the bullying. "God—what is your problem?" she asked, disgusted.

She looked Dean dead in the eyes, coldly. She wanted to get back at Dean, make him feel as crappy as he'd made her feel, and she knew exactly how. She was already talking before she could really stop herself. "You wanna know so bad about the absolute hell I went through? Which part, Dean, just had it with the shitty attitude, the domineering crap, and the bullying. "God—what is your problem?" she asked, disgusted.

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She pointed at the place where gauze was taped to her chest, and Dean looked stunned. "Or maybe you want to know about the shitty memories Gabriel made me go through again. Or the crappy things
things you two did and thought I'd never find out about." Sam looked especially nervous at that statement, but Dean looked unsure, like he couldn't imagine what she was talking about.

Alex was like a train going full steam at this point, no possibility of stopping. "I saw you Dean, telling Dad I was only gonna get in the way of that last hunt he went on. You begged him to leave me behind because I was gonna hold you back." Dean looked startled, and Alex gave him a facetious little smile. "Real heartwarming memory, right? I thought so."

She turned her attention to Sam, who looked pained by association, and a little nervous, because he knew he was next. She couldn't muster the same fiery, lecturing tone. When she spoke to him, she sounded more heartbroken and confused than anything else. "And Sam. Like, twelve years old and straight up lying to some kids and telling them I was disabled and asthmatic and that I wouldn't want to play football with them… then coming over to me and then lying to me, saying the kids didn't want me to play. I mean, what the hell? Why?"

Sam looked positively shocked, and in quick succession, guilty. Dean, highly uncomfortable, was looking at Sam oddly. Alex chuckled sardonically, momentarily getting small, dark satisfaction out of seeing them squirm, out of seeing their guilt. "But guys, that's not even the best one. Picture this, right? Sam, like, killed some kittens in an alley—ripped them to friggin' shreds, and Dean was there too, you guys wanna explain what the hell that was?"

"That—" Sam stumbled verbally, horrified. "I—you have to believe me. I don't understand how it happened, or why. It was almost like I was possessed."

"But you weren't," Dean said, giving Sam a harsh look. "I checked." Sam looked chastised and repelled.

Alex looked at Dean piercingly. "Dean, you knew about that all these years and never told me. Why?" she asked, to which Dean gave her a disbelieving look, like she was crazy to even suggest that.

"Because you were a damn kid, and a pretty friggin' fragile one at that, don't you think it would have, uh, like freaked you the hell out to learn your brother was like doing serial killer crap behind motels?" He almost seemed to think it was funny at this point. "Why would I ever tell you, huh? At any point?"

"That makes sense," Alex said, believing it herself, getting intense. "Think about it. Maybe it's the angels trying to screw with us, or demons, even. Trying to turn us against each other. It wouldn't be the first time they've messed with our heads."
Dean snorted, his momentary intrigue gone. "Come on, Al. That'd be nice to believe it didn't happen, but from where I'm sitting, it sure as hell did. I was there. It's not like the glove doesn't fit—Sam's got a dark side, and we all know it." Sam's jaw tightened at that thoughtless comment, but he said nothing, letting Dean continue on his tirade. "Sam's the demon blood junkie. The one who set freakin' fires for kicks."

At that comment, the twins exchanged a terse look and then Alex looked at Dean long and hard. Sam's gaze dropped into his lap and he remained silent. Alex wet her lips and clasped her hands on the table, looking Dean dead in the eyes reluctantly, jaw clenched tightly as she hesitated. She should have known this day would come when she'd say these words aloud. "Sam wasn't the one who started fires, Dean. That was me."

Dean stared at her, completely blindsided. "What?"

"Yeah," was all Alex said, looking away, uncomfortable. This was something she wasn't proud of. And had tried to forget. And succeeded, too, until a few minutes ago.

Dean wheeled on Sam, turning himself physically to stare at his brother. "You covered for her?"

Sam returned his brother's stare, not backing down. "Yeah Dean, I did."

Dean looked confused. He was looking back at his sister, still too shocked to be pissed off yet. "You wanna tell me why you would do that crap, Alex?"

Alex wasn't really sure, and had to think about it a minute. She remembered the thrill of watching flames lick, devour, and destroy objects. It had started with balls of paper and scraps of cloth. And then, daring herself one time, she set a library book on fire, just sat and watched it burn. Wondered if everyone would think she were a hero and an amazing person if she secretly started a fire, let others see it, then put it out herself, made it seem like she saved everyone. She liked that idea a lot. She'd started fires in school bathrooms and libraries and one time, even the cafeteria, but always alone, not brave enough to really burn anything big or that could get out of hand. She remembered Sam, finding her several times and freaking out and then making her hide when Dean showed up. Telling Dean he'd done it. Sam had never told anyone the truth—ever.

Dean was currently staring at her, waiting for an explanation. She shrugged briefly, embarrassed. "I guess, I dunno." She paused, realizing the irony of all of this, realizing the possibility. "Maybe I'm dark inside, too," she murmured, a little frightened at the thought, but also really, really sure it was a good theory. She thought of their whole lives. The monsters they had faced, the things they had done in dark places, things they wanted to forget. She glanced at Dean, the man who had tortured souls in hell and confessed he'd enjoyed it. "I think maybe we all are," she said cynically, and for a moment, the table was silent and somber.

Out of nowhere, their washed out, forty-something waitress reappeared in her cherry-red apron. "All right, folks, how ya'll doin'?" She asked, grinning at them as she chomped and smacked loudly on some gum. "Get ya anything else?"

"No. We're good," Sam said hollowly, and the irony of his words wasn't lost on Alex.

The waitress's her smile fell as she took in the dejected occupants of her table. She seemed to realize she'd had some poor timing. "Uh, okay, well just holler if ya need anything," she said, and attempted a cheerful smile. But no one was looking at her.

After the waitress walked off, Alex looked up, caught her twin's eye. "Sam, you covering for me like that was one of the best and bravest things you've ever done for me. I knew it then, and I know
it now." There was a temporary lull, in which the twins looked at each other anxiously, all their
colorhood closeness remembered mutually. And then Alex continued. "But… we gotta talk about
that lying, manipulating crap. You made it seem like those kids didn't want me to play… you lied
straight to my face. And I get the feeling that wasn't the only time. Cuz I remember you telling me
stuff like that a lot. That the other kids didn't want me around or didn't want to play with me." She
almost didn't want to know the answer to her next question. "How often did you do stuff like that?"

"More than I should have," Sam admitted, agonized.

Alex shook her head slowly, despondent, not understanding. "But why?"

Her twin almost looked at the point of tears now, shaking his head and barely able to look her in
the eye. Even Dean looked openly affected, like he was dreading the answer, too. Sam struggled.
"It's not that I didn't want you to have fun—I just thought—in a weird way, that I was keeping you
safe, because I mean, kids did make fun of you. They called you horrible stuff, and maybe some of
them might not have, if I gave them the chance to let you into their circles, but—I hated to see you
hurt. I still do." Sam drew a deep breath. "And, also, I just—I just wanted you to look up to me."
His jaw tightened. He was clearly ashamed. "I wanted you to love me like you loved Dean. And
you loved Dean because he did protect you, and he made you feel safe, and he comforted you
when you were sad." At Alex's confused, almost hurt expression, Sam shook his head, humiliated.
Dean had put an elbow on the table, and was scrubbing his face with the palm of his hand—his
guilt and frustration and disbelief was almost palpable.

But Sam wasn't done, even though he was clearly upset. "And it's so stupid. I don't know, it's like I
just figured out a way to make you like me more, depend on me more, and I did it. It was pathetic,
it was crazy." He put his head in his hands and stared at the tabletop. "God, I really am a
psychopath."

"No, you're not," Alex said immediately, passionately, because she knew exactly what he meant—
how freakish and stupid he felt for his mistakes, same as her. She huffed a frustrated breath. "I
mean, well, we're all messed up, there's really no getting around that, right? But I mean, how could
we even hope to be normal, especially when we were kids and teens? We barely had a parent. Dad
was gone, constantly. We moved, constantly. Everything changed except the three of us. It was
always us three. And maybe we were a lot more dysfunctional than we thought, and I mean, we
already knew we were dysfunctional, but..." she trailed off, looking at Sam, who looked like he
was waiting for her to tear into him. "Sam… you didn't have to do all that stuff to get me to love
you. I mean, me loving you was… always just a given."

Sam could say nothing. He looked so deeply regretful. Silence stretched out between them. "God,
Sam," Dean said finally, sounding tired, empty, and maybe a little disappointed, too.

Sam looked at his older brother in earnest, broken sadness. "I know. It was stupid and pitiful of me.
I know. But I lived my whole life in your shadow, Dean. I mean, Dad loved you the most, because
you were the most like him, and I always felt second or third best."

Dean's eyebrows shot up in genuine wounded surprise. "Are you kidding me? You were Dad's
favorite, Sammy. You were the most normal one of us, like with good grades and a nice little
future—no matter what I did, Dad just..." he trailed off, his eyes ghosting over years of pain. "I
always disappointed him." Dean looked directly at Sam, pushing past his inner demons. "He didn't
see you as a failure, okay?" There was a self-deprecating smile playing on Dean's mouth. "That
was me."

"Dean," Sam appealed, "Dad might have been hard on you, but he loved you, and you know he did.
I was the odd one out, or, at least, that's how I felt." He looked miserable. "I was jealous of you
Alex looked at him like he had two heads. "Wait… I get why you might be jealous of Dean, but me, too? Me?"

Sam didn't meet her gaze. "I was jealous because I just never felt like part of the family—you and Dean were close, it's like I was an outsider in my own family. I felt like a freak no matter where I went."

Dean irritably crossed his arms, half rolling his eyes. "Oh my god. Well boo hoo. We're all pretty much freaks at this point, why do you get to bitch and moan about it?"

Sam looked at Dean hostilely, but waited a second before replying, clearly keeping himself calm. "I just know I wanted a life outside of hunting and paranormal crap and you all gave me hell for it." He looked stone-faced. "It was like I was damned if I did, damned if I didn't. Sometimes still feels that way."

"So why are you here now?" Alex asked softly, sort of dreading the answer.

Sam did one of those little airy laughs, trying to cover up his real feelings. "Well, what else is there for me? Every time I try to have a normal life, it falls apart. It doesn't work. I guess I'm meant to do this. Even if I don't really want to all the time." Dean looked at Sam, having the audacity to look somewhat hurt. Sam backpedaled a little. "Don't get me wrong. I know it's important. I know that."

Dean huffed at Sam, his angry fire gone, replaced by darkness. "But if your heart's not in it… why bother?"

"Because you guys are in it," Sam said earnestly. "Yeah, I spend half the time being annoyed and pissed off with both of you, but at the end of the day… even though I'm not so sure about the rest of everything else in life… I'm here for you guys. You're my family." He shrugged a little, grimly. "Also, I kinda raised Lucifer. I need to put him back down."

"We," Dean corrected tersely. "We are gonna put him down. Family affair."

"But—" Sam started.

"You know the drill, Sam," Dean cut him off. "We stick together. Even if everything in the damn universe is trying to tear us apart. We've tried to do it separately, and it never works." The brothers fell silent. It wasn't a comfortable, amicable silence.

Alex had felt hopeful, a minute ago, that they were going to reconcile something here. But of course not. She wanted to kick something. She looked at the two of her idiot brothers, and hard. "You know, it's like every damn thing in our lives—angels, demons, even the three of us—are working together without even realizing it to tear us apart and turn us against each other so that the showdown between Michael and Lucifer is a shoo-in." Dean's expression was snide and Alex looked at him dangerously, daring him to say something. "Gabriel was trying to tell me that I should just give up and let the whole thing play out however it will, walk away from you guys. Kept going on about how I didn't have a part to play… but, you know what?" She paused, then spat out, "I don't accept that. He gave up on his family, decided he would let fate do whatever it wanted with his brothers. Well, that's his problem. I'm not about to make the same stupid choice he did. I'm not walking out or disappearing on you two jerks."

Dean and Sam looked at her silently as she continued, her voice rising a little in impassioned conviction. "Who cares if fate wanted to have it be Sam and Dean in the end, battling it out as..."
Mike and Lucy? Fate, prophecies, screw it. They forgot about me. I'm not just a bystander. I refuse to be. This is my family, too. And I'll be damned if I let you two kill each other, now or ever. We are gonna stick together, stop fighting each other and start fighting the devil." She grabbed the untouched plate of now-cold pancakes and sausage, yanked it to herself. "And when we hand fate its own ass on a silver platter, let's see who's laughing then." She stabbed into a sausage link with her fork, leaving her brothers in pensive silence.

And that was the Winchesters in a nutshell. Always fighting, always at odds. But when it came down to it, willing to lay aside their differences for the greater good. Never willing, not completely, to walk away from each other. Still, Alex felt like she'd been run over by an emotional stream roller, and sullenly chomped the tasteless bite in her mouth. She felt riled up and shaken.

With an exasperated huff, Dean got up and left, presumably headed to the bathroom. Sam watched him go, appraisingly, then looked at Alex, watched her silently for a minute.

"Hey, so..." he began. She chewed her sausage, looking at him guardedly. He pulled out a bent out of shape bundle of yellow wildflowers from his jacket pocket, and she stopped, mid-chew. "You, uh, forgot something." Alex stared blankly at the flowers, then at Sam, who shrugged. "Got the feeling you didn't want them left behind," he said. He didn't say anything except that. But there was genuine care and maybe even understanding there.

She took the flowers from him slowly, looked at him fully—she was touched deeply by the kind, thoughtful gesture. A soft, hesitant, surprised smile was on her face. "Thanks, Sammy."

He returned the smile, but a guarded sadness remained. Alex looked at the wildflowers pensively, and put them in her jacket pocket before Dean came back. She looked at her twin closely, wondered if he had any clue what those flowers meant to her.

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One Month Later
Bobby's House

"We're about to go in now. If you don't hear from us in the next couple hours, then you come," Dean's voice said in Alex's ear.

"I should be there with you guys right now," she replied into the phone sullenly.

"Well, just didn't work out that way, did it?" Dean asked, then didn't give her a chance to reply. "I'll talk to you soon," he said, and she rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, fine."

They hung up.

This was a crazy idea—stealing the Colt from some kind of super crossroads demon, this Crowley guy. And crazier still that Alex wasn't there with them. It almost seemed too convenient how Dean and Sam had gotten the heads up on Crowley's location and how Alex had gotten left behind. And maybe what was harder is that Jo was there in her place. Ellen and Jo Harvelle had joined them at Bobby's a couple days ago, ready to help take down Lucifer, and they had been happy to have them. It was obvious to Alex that Dean liked Jo a lot, but really, did he have to take Jo in what felt like Alex's place? After the whole memory about Dean telling Dad Alex would just slow them down, it added insult to injury to feel replaced, even if it were just for one day.

Dean had just been acting weirder and weirder ever since Alex got out of the hospital, freaking out
over her safety, trying to get her to eat more, losing his temper more and more frequently and with less provocation. He hadn't really been doing the same to Sam, which irritated Alex and made Sam kind of uncomfortable. Sam had even said something to Dean about it in Alex's defense, then gotten verbally bitch slapped.

The thing about it all was they had known the location on Crowley was coming at any time—Cas had been tracking the demon for the past two weeks. Earlier that very day, Alex and Bobby had gone into town on a supply run, leaving Sam, Dean, Jo, and Ellen behind. When they got back, just Ellen had remained. And then Alex got a call from Dean, saying they were an hour away, that Cas had called with the location of Crowley, that they had been out checking out a lead when they got the call, that they were just going to go ahead and go, they didn't need to drive the hour back. They were just going to go. Without her. Naturally, she'd loved that. It smelled like a setup to her, which is why she was feeling so crappy right now.

She'd been stuck here all day, useless as Ellen and Bobby spent time shooting the shit as they laughed about days gone by—which kind of upset Alex, who was worrying about demons, angels and her brothers, who were probably going to get themselves killed trying to get the damn Colt. She'd skulked around the house all day, trying to busy herself—fiddling with her shotgun (cleaning it three times), sweeping the kitchen and taking an hour to do it, having spur-of-the-moment target practice with some especially loud crows in the salvage yard, switching on the TV (hating everything on there), trying to reorganize Bobby's pantry. She gave up on that after awhile. Basically, she wasted time all day, her anxiety level creeping up as time went by. Around sunset, she'd gotten the second call from Dean, the 'we're going in,' call—that had been about forty minutes ago. So now, more waiting. Alex felt like a caged animal, restless and pissed off. She was pacing the study now, listening idly to Ellen and Bobby in the other room. An abandoned whiskey bottle and a couple of shot glasses were on the desk where she'd left them.

She turned, paced the short length of the study again. If Dean had done this, left her behind on purpose, she was seriously going to strangle—she bumped into someone and she never finished the thought.

Cas's familiar face was in front of her. Her eyes widened in surprise. "Cas!" She hadn't seen him in two weeks. As usual, his sudden appearance caught her off guard.

"Hello Alex," he greeted neutrally, all business. "Your brothers have the Colt and are on their way here. They should be here in about twenty minutes."

"They got it?" Alex asked, relieved but also a little surprised.

"Yes. Apparently Crowley just... gave it to them," Cas said. "And told them where Lucifer will be tomorrow. It's not far from here." And that's when she saw the signs of suspicion and apprehension on his face, which counteracted the relief she'd felt a second ago. He sounded very, very grave. She opened her mouth to ask what was wrong, but behind her, she heard a voice.

"Who's your friend, Alex?" Ellen was leaned against the door frame, smiling, a beer in hand.

Ellen probably already knew who it was, but Alex humored her, a little impatiently. "Ellen, this is Cas."

"Ah, the angel—heard a lot about you." Ellen sauntered forward, stuck her hand out for a handshake. Cas complied, remembering. Alex smiled a little, watching him. "You must've seen my daughter Jo if you were just with Sam and Dean," Ellen said conversationally.

Cas looked distracted. "Yes, the blonde one," he said dismissively.
Ellen kind of chuckled at that comment, and Alex could tell she liked him, was fascinated.

"Ellen, get your ass in here! I can't reach the damn top shelf," Bobby complained from the kitchen, and Ellen rolled her eyes in good humor.

"I'm comin', old man." She left.

Alex plopped down into one of the chairs at the study desk, motioned for Cas to take a seat opposite her. She leaned forward over an arm, speaking lowly, her face serious. "Okay, Cas, so why would Crowley just give them the gun? And tell them where the devil is gonna be tomorrow?"

He sat opposite of her, still distracted. "Apparently he wants the devil dead as much as we do," Cas said. "Dean said Crowley claims that if Lucifer succeeds, he will obliterate demons." He paused, dismal. "Well, after he annihilates the human race first, of course."

Alex blinked. "Well." What did you say to that? "Uh, can't let that happen."

He glanced at her, sort of grudgingly. She could tell he was thinking, and hard. He seemed so much sadder and heavier than she remembered him ever being before. She didn't like it, and wondered why he seemed so distant, so closed off. Maybe she'd hurt his feelings with the whole being upset when he'd presented her with flowers thing. She swallowed, remembering how awkward that had been. The whiskey bottle in front of her was looking better and better. Alex grabbed the bottle decisively.

"You know what? I think we could both use a drink," she said, pouring whiskey into the two shot glasses. Cas looked at her appraisingly as she pushed a full shot toward him with the tips of her fingers. "It's time for you to try some of the good stuff," she told him, and held her shot glass up in the air. He hesitated, then took the shot glass, did the same, frowning, watching her. She clinked her glass up against his, then demonstrated by lifting it to her lips, throwing her head back, and then slamming it down on the desk. She grimaced as it burned sweetly and made her muscles feel softer and more relaxed. She motioned to him. "Now you."

Cas didn't look enthused, but he raised the shot glass to his lips and just like she had, threw his head back, downing the amber liquid. He hesitated, then took the shot glass, did the same, frowning, watching her. She clinked her glass up against his, then demonstrated by lifting it to her lips, throwing her head back, and then slamming it down on the desk. She grimaced as it burned sweetly and made her muscles feel softer and more relaxed. She motioned to him. "Now you."

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"Feel better than what?" he asked, and her amusement, her lightness faded.

She looked at him fleetingly. "Than normal. I guess." She raised her shot glass, suddenly feeling a lot less amused than she had a moment ago. "Bottoms up."

He took his shot up in his hand grudgingly, and they downed the shots at the same time. Alex thunked her glass down onto the desk and hissed—it burned really good, and was starting to take effect. Damn, she loved whiskey. "Feel anything?" she asked Cas, who paused, then shook his head. What a shame. Maybe he just had a super high tolerance—she looked at the whiskey bottle almost lovingly, then at Cas, wondering something. "Hey, they have whiskey in Heaven? Cuz if they don't, I'm not going." She grinned—that was funny. But he took her question seriously, pondering, eyes narrowed. He'd gently set his shot glass down even as she poured and took another shot.
"It would depend on the soul. Heaven isn't how the human mind traditionally imagines it. It's not one place. I suppose you could explain it as being a series of heavens. Each soul has its own heaven, a heaven that reflects that person's spirit."

"So Heaven's not like some shiny mansion in the clouds?" Alex asked, tilting her head to the side.

He seemed faintly offended or perturbed by her question. "No."

"Everyone gets their own?" She surmised, grabbing the bottle of whiskey.

"Yes." He paused, looking at her oddly as she drank straight out of the bottle. "Well. Some souls share a heaven, but that's extremely rare."

She felt her eyebrows raising and paused, bottle hovering near her mouth. "What, like soul mates?"

He glanced at her. "Yes."

She set the bottle down, smiling to herself. "I like that. Always wanted to believe in soul mates."

She didn't mean to, but let out an embarrassing little laugh. She realized she was starting to feel a little more tipsy than was probably okay—she'd been drinking an hour ago and it would probably be pretty easy to get drunk right now. Her telltale sign had always been feeling really happy and relaxed, silly. Which is how she was starting to feel now. She shook her head a little, attempting to clear herself and be more serious. Cas was looking at her with a veiled expression as she continued asking her questions. "So if Heaven is like, a celestial melting pot of tiny heavens… where do you guys hang out? Do you guys get heavens of your own, too?"

His eyes darted to hers, then fell away. "Angels aren't privileged to have personal heavens. We share a communal space, I guess you could say."

Alex felt a prick of interest. Somehow, he sounded like he were talking about an office, not like, a home. Did he think of Heaven in that way? "But Heaven's home to you, right?"

"Home," he repeated, testing out the word. "I don't think so."

Alex sat back, mildly surprised. "Then where were you before you were here? Before you were in your vessel?"

His eyes crimped slightly. "Why are you asking me so many questions?"

Alex blinked at him a couple times, looking off and thinking about it. She looked back to him and threw her hands in the air. "Because... I wanna know?" She asked and pulled an innocent, puppy-dog face. "You know everything about me, right? And I know jack squat about you. Come on, Cas, just answer the damn question, *pleeease.*" She heard herself say that and made a face—*shit* that whiskey had really taken effect fast.

His frown just deepened a little, then he shrugged lightly, looked away. "It's difficult to explain where I existed before I was in this vessel. Your human mind is too small to grasp these things."

Alex chuckled throatily at that—the would-be insult that she was pretty sure was just him being factual. Well, maybe he was trying to insult her. Or dodge the question. Either way, her reply was, "try me."

He took a deep breath. He seemed reluctant. "I existed in a transcendent form. Able to traverse time, space. I wasn't really in one place. I was in millions of places. I saw everything."
"Because you were a watcher," Alex said, remembering what he'd told her before.

"Yes," he confirmed.

"For, what… like since the beginning of the world? However many thousand years?" she asked.

His eyes again slid to hers briefly. "More or less."

"That's a really long time," she said. Thank you Captain Obvious, she thought, struck by how she was sounding stupider and stupider. And then, another thought struck her, and she got quiet a minute. Looked at Cas thoroughly. "Do you miss it? The existence you had before, all those years."

He was silent, but he looked startled by her words. "I think about it sometimes," Alex said. "Well, actually, a lot. How you lost everything you ever knew. For this." She spread her hands out a little. Whiskey made it really easy to talk and to say whatever the hell was on her mind. "You get cut off from Heaven… have to search for God all on your own… you must feel pretty crappy. Alone." He said nothing, just looked back at her, expression unreadable. Alex searched his face, growing somber. "You look sad sometimes. I think maybe that's why." She laughed a little, trying to cover up her grim feelings. "And it's all for some lame excuses for humans who have, so far, kind of treated you like crap. Thought the worst of you. Accused you of all kinds of shit." She couldn't keep the laugh up, and her smile faded. "It's you against heaven, hell, and earth. With a little handful of us puny humans on your side." She stopped talking, feeling self-conscious, and pressed her lips together so much that they disappeared. "Sorry, it's the alcohol. Makes me chatty."

At that comment, she saw him hide a smile. Pleased with herself, she poured him more whiskey, but none for herself. "Drink up."

He did, and Alex looked at him hopefully. "Feel anything?"

He shook his head, maybe disappointed. "Nothing."

Alex's stomach suddenly took a dip toward nauseated and she leaned forward, grimacing. Cas's frown was wiped off of his face, and he leaned toward her, concerned. Alex moaned, humiliated, because her stomach was all-the-sudden not having it. "Uh. Well, suddenly I'm feeling a little too much," she said, standing up, clutching the desk for support. Cas stood up in tandem with her, one of his hands hovering near her arm, as if he expected her to fall down. Alex looked at him, recognizing this expression—the worry. It was the hospital all over again, and she suddenly felt so—oh god, her stomach. She stood and brushed past him, throwing a, "gimme a second," back his way.

She practically burst out onto the porch, feeling like she was about to be sick. Shouldn't have mixed beers and whiskey or something like that, right? But she was fine after a minute. She felt a little ill and a little lightheaded, but okay. If she'd looked behind her, she might have seen Cas, through the window, go to Bobby, and point toward the porch.

A minute later, the door opened behind Alex. Bobby, in his wheelchair, rolled out. "You okay, kiddo?"

Embarrassed, she grimaced, looking at him reluctantly. "Guess I can't hold my liquor like I used to."

"Might be cuz you're skinny as a rail and never eat anything but damn crackers," he said irritably. There was a fondness there, but also disapproval. He looked at her carefully from under the brim of his hat. "S'going on with you?"
She leaned onto the railing, feeling suddenly glum. "End of the world blues, I guess."

"Yeah, that'll do it to ya," Bobby commented, a rueful little smile hidden under his beard.

Alex glanced at him sidelong, unable to feel anything but good things when she looked at him. This man, her *quote unquote* uncle—more like the dad she'd never had—meant so much to her. Especially now that she'd seen him stand up for her in that memory Gabriel showed her. It proved that he cared about her, that he really, really loved her. And she would never, ever doubt that. Maybe she would doubt everyone else in the world, but not Bobby Singer. She remembered their months together when Dean died. Yeah, they'd had their little spats and hadn't exactly gelled immediately—different hunting styles and all that—but he had been there for her completely. Let her live with him, hunt with him. He'd let her lean on him when there was no one else in the world left to depend on. He'd bought those crappy little Hostess Cupcakes for her when she'd been sick with a cold. Handed them to her and muttered "I know ya like these, so, uh, here." It made her smile even now to think about.

He'd been there for her when she was a kid, too, more than he really realized. Some of her best memories were with him. Maybe it was because he'd always taken genuine interest in her. When she'd been with him she'd felt like she mattered to him. And that feeling was irreplaceable. She smiled, thinking of her favorite memory. "Do you remember..." she asked aloud, reminiscent, "that time you took me to some kind of stupid princess puppet thing at the library... and we both hated it so much that we left half way through?"

He chuckled, a little embarrassed. "Yeah, I remember. Then you asked to go to the shooting range instead." He had this little smile, just for her, as he said, proudly, "that's my girl."

Alex literally could feel her heart swell in her chest at that. She breathed deeply, maintaining her composure. And after a minute, she looked at him again. She had to let him know—she might never have the chance again. "Uncle Bobby... I've really never told you, but... um... I just..." she didn't know how to word it without sounding sappy. It was just gonna have to sound sappy. "Having you in my life has meant a lot. Some of my favorite memories are right here, in this old house. With you."

He looked at her fully, obviously deeply touched. Then, he shook his head and he became warning toward her. "Now don't you do that. Don't do this last night on earth speech crap to me, Alex Winchester."

Alex's mouth curved into a lopsided smile as she looked down at him. "Loud and clear, boss."

Bobby sighed out long and hard, as if in defeat. "Ya'll are like the kids I never had." He reached over and put his hand on her back. "Always did want a daughter." His eyes were soft and kind and Alex felt her heart grow a size. A familiar sound met their ears, and they turned to see the Impala's headlights cutting through the dark, further down the driveway. "Good," Bobby said, turning to business mode again, "those idjits are finally back."

Alex watched the car approach, her feelings turning to worry and dread again. "Do we actually have a chance at this, Bobby?"
"Looks like," he said, but he sounded about as uncertain as she felt.

Sam, Dean, and Jo got out of the car. Jo had been sitting in Alex's seat. Jo grinned at them as she loped up. "We got it," she announced, glancing from Bobby to Alex, looking like she'd won the Olympics.

"I heard," Alex replied, looking past her and at Dean, who was purposefully ignoring her gaze.

Bobby was wheeling himself back inside the house, and Jo held the door for him, then went in after. Dean followed them inside, glancing tersely at Alex for the briefest of seconds, but basically ignoring her otherwise. Sam brought up the rear. The door slammed behind Dean and Sam stopped, looked at Alex. "Hey," he said. "Sorry you got left behind. It really wasn't intentional."

She looked at him crankily. "How'd you know I'd think that?"

He grinned crookedly at her and pointed at himself. "Come on. Your twin?" He put an arm around her and guided her inside, told her to stop being such a loner. It reminded her of when they were teenagers, and lifted her mood a little.

Inside, Ellen had latched onto Cas in the dining room, and had set up rows of double-shot shot glasses on the table. At Alex and Sam's arrival, Cas looked up at them. "We're playing a drinking game," he told them.

"Ellen, I don't think you're gonna win this one," Alex said. Cas looked at her carefully, which she didn't see, because she was too busy grinning at Ellen.

From the study, Dean's voice bellowed. "Sammy!" Sam frowned a little, let go of Alex, who took a seat next to Ellen. Jo sauntered over to them from the kitchen, a bottle of beer in hand.

Ellen picked up a shot glass that was in front of her and drained it, then put it down, upside down, next to four other empty ones. She looked at Cas challengingly, a smile playing on her lips. "All right, big boy," she said.

Cas looked at the woman and then reached for the first shot glass—downed it, set it down, upside down, just like she had—then did the same for the other four in rapid succession. Ellen and Jo looked highly impressed as he did so, and Alex, sitting back, arms crossed, had a crooked little smile on her lips as she watched him with those dark eyes.

He set down the fifth shot glass, and paused, trying to ascertain his level of sobriety. There was a slight tingling sensation in the fingertips of his vessel. "I think I'm starting to feel something," he said, strangely almost excited.

Ellen gawked, then grinned at him. Alex was smiling at him in that way she had where she was pressing her lips closed to keep from grinning. Beside Alex, Jo was pouring a shot and then put it in front of Alex, who shook her head. "Uh, yeah, no more for me. I'm definitely feeling something," she said. She pushed her shot glass at Cas, indicating he drink it, too. He took it, downed it, waited, then shook his head.

Alex kind of chuckled. "You'd probably have to drink a whole store I guess."

"Sounds ill-advised," he said. And then he realized she was joking and allowing a smile to cross his face.

"Yeah, a trashed angel is all the world needs right now," Jo said, grinning at him widely. "But hey, why not?" She was pouring him more whiskey. Cas looked at Alex, who silently gazed back at
him across the table. He had been away from her, from the Winchesters, for almost two weeks, and at first when he saw her again, he had been guarded. He still didn't understand what was happening, at all, with her and with him. The way he always felt so much when they occupied the same space together. It worried him.

Jo set the shot in front of him, said something—he wasn't listening—then walked off. He was still looking at Alex, whose gaze followed Jo in half-interest. Dean had come out of the study and followed Jo into the kitchen. Cas watched as Alex looked at them. She was frowning a little, then seemed to drop it mentally, and looked back at him.

She seemed to be all right again, after everything that happened with Gabriel. He had noticed that she had a scar on the palm of her hand where the stitches had healed. A reminder of how powerless he'd been to save her, to protect her. Maybe she was angry about that. There was an odd, niggling sense that he couldn't seem to put his finger on that she was acting differently. Something to do with the flowers he thought, but what? He didn't understand and couldn't identify what had changed, or what he had done. She seemed to grow a little fidgety under his gaze, and she looked away, her expression gone blank, or perhaps tense. In the past month, he'd seen her twice, glancingly. And she'd looked at him with these strange expressions he couldn't quite decipher. They were indescribably uncomfortable, or tense, or pained. Afraid? He wasn't sure. Human expressions were so very subtle and shifting. He had a difficult time piecing together what they meant.

Truthfully, Alex had been on his mind more, and more, and more in the recent months. But especially this past month. Especially since everything that happened with Gabriel. And the fact that she remained in his thoughts was something he thought about, too. Grappled with. In human terms, agonized over. The more time he spent in his vessel and on earth, the more he felt. The less he could clearly remember how it was to be what he had been for the thousands of years before.

"Right Cas?" Ellen said, laughing.

"I'm sorry, what?" he said, looking at her and frowning. She didn't say, just kind of got a strange smile on her face, looked at him oddly.

Jo came back, pulled up a chair, leaned on the table and leaned toward Alex. "Your brother is such a loser."

"Which one?" Alex asked, because she honestly felt like it could go either way.

"Dean, duh," Jo said, grinning.

"You just realized this?" Alex asked playfully.

Jo started pouring more shots, handed one to Alex. "Have some more," she coaxed.

"Nah. I've had enough," Alex said. "I'd rather not be hung over on the day we kill the devil."

"Lightweight," Jo teased. Alex looked at her sideways, but said nothing.

"Everybody get in here!" Bobby called from inside the study. "It's time for the lineup. Usual suspects in the corner."

Ellen led the way into the study as everyone else shuffled in. "Oh come on, Bobby. Nobody wants their picture taken."

"Hear, hear," Sam agreed.
Bobby was fiddling with an old camera that was set on a tripod. "Shut up," he said. "You're drinking my beer." He rolled his wheelchair back, where everyone was piling in for the photo. "Anyway, I'm gonna need something to remember your sorry asses by."

Alex stood in front of Sam—Ellen on her left. Cas came and stood to her right. Their shoulders just touched.

"Ha!" Ellen guffawed at Bobby's snark. "Always good to have an optimist around."

Beside Alex, Castiel straightened, deadly serious. "Bobby's right. Tomorrow we hunt the devil. This is our last night on earth." Alex made a slight face. The camera flashed.

"Well. That's a happy memory," Ellen said sarcastically, and headed back to the dining room where the alcohol was.

Alex was looking up at Cas in trepidation, but could find nothing to say, feeling entirely overwhelmed. She went back outside onto the porch. What, he really believed that? Last night on earth?

She heard the door open and close behind her. "Whatcha doing out here all alone?" Ellen another beer in hand. "Still a loner?" she asked fondly.

"Yeah, guess I am," Alex said, to which Ellen shook her head, leaned against the porch railing, thoughtful.

"Just don't know when you grew up, kiddo. You and Jo both. Happens too damn fast, and here I am just realizing how short life is." She sighed. "Specially when I think about tomorrow."

"Yeah. This may be the stupidest thing we've ever done, huh?" Alex commented heavily. She hadn't meant it to sound so pessimistic.

Ellen nodded slowly, thoughtfully, speaking like she was talking to herself. "Might be. Might not. That's the beauty of the gamble." She looked at Alex appraisingly, a little smile crossing her lips. "So that angel buddy of yours. What about him?"

Alex looked at Ellen uncertainty, frowning slightly. "What do you mean?"

"Come on," Ellen nudged, looking slyer by the second. "Don't be coy with me. I saw the way you look at him. And, hell, the way he looks at you."

Alex was shocked and couldn't believe the words that had just come out of the older woman's mouth. "Uh—I don't know what you're—" Alex began, but Ellen was already giving her the 'don't even try lying to me' look, and Alex stopped. Closed her mouth. Gave up, looked down. Not sure how to answer, really. "I dunno. It's... complicated?" Now if that didn't sound high school. She fumbled a little, not sure how to explain it. "I didn't even like him at first, at all. I actually kind of hated him. But... I dunno. He's done so much for my family. For me. And I don't know. He's... he's different. It's stupid."

Ellen chuckled, took a swig of beer. "You got it bad, girl."

"I do not," Alex said weakly. Even she didn't know why she was denying it right now.

Ellen looked at her meaningfully. "Trust me. I recognize the look."

Alex shifted, feeling put on the spot. "And so what if I did? It would never go anywhere."
"And you know that how?" Ellen asked, a little on the sarcastic side. "You've decided you already
know, when you really have no way of telling. Hell, it's our last night on earth, apparently. No time
like the present."

"What are you suggesting?" Alex asked.

"Ask him! Or make a move, hell, see what happens." Ellen said simply, then shrugged. "And then,
you'll know." Her expression shifted, suddenly suspicious. "Unless you don't want to." She looked
at Alex piercingly, her beer forgotten. She seemed to be able to see right through Alex. "You don't
think he'd be interested in you?"

Alex dodged the question. "He's an angel."

"So what? Do you really think that little of yourself, Alex?" Ellen sounded almost disheartened.
"You're a very beautiful girl."

Alex was shocked to hear that. Literally shocked. And Ellen frowned, looking at her intently.
"Doesn't anyone ever tell you that?"

Alex shook her head, shrugged just barely, feeling awkward. "No."

Ellen sat her beer down and took Alex by the arms, her expression concerned. "Honey. You are.
You hear me? And not only are you beautiful, you're smart as a whip—clever as hell—tougher
than most people I've met—been through more than most people have in their lifetime. You're a
damn good hunter and a damn good person. I don't think it's stupid to think an angel could be
interested in you. Cuz trust me, that one is."

Alex looked away, trying to cover up her increasing emotions with a soft laugh. Because
everything Ellen was saying was appealing to the worst thing she held inside: hope. Alex pulled
herself out of Ellen's grasp, looking at the woman pointedly. "You're drunk, Ellen."

"After all those shots, I better be," Ellen said, grinning lopsidedly.

Jo suddenly appeared, a huge new bottle of whiskey in her hand. "Mom! I need your help."

Ellen looked at her, eyebrows high. "With?"

"Opening this stupid bottle."

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"Opening this stupid bottle."

"You serious, Joanna?" Ellen chuckled, and looked at Alex. "We'll talk later," Ellen said, and gave
Alex a motherly squeeze on the shoulder. Alex was left alone again, in what should have felt like
peaceful solitude. But she just felt more anxious than before, and a little sick. Ellen's words had
given her a momentary surge of hope. But it was ridiculous to think what she'd suggested was true,
wasn't it? But if this were her last night alive… maybe she should at least consider…

Suddenly, she sensed someone next to her. Cas. His face was relaxed, he wasn't looking at her. He
didn't say his usual "Hello, Alex." Instead he said, "here you are." He looked at her at that point,
looking perplexed. "Ellen just told me she would snap my wings in half if I ever hurt you." Alex
felt like she might die as Cas continued. "I think she was attempting humor. But such a feat is
literally impossible, as my true form is incorporeal." He thought a moment. "I think she has
imbibed too much alcohol."

"You say things funny," Alex said, then promptly looked away, mouthed 'wow' to herself—did she
really just say that? She chanced a glance back at him—he was now looking out at the junkyard
with mild interest. "So, uh, you really think this is our last night on earth?" Alex asked.
He turned his head slightly and looked at her. *God almighty in Heaven, he is absolutely gorgeous,* she thought despondently. "Yes. Killing the devil is an insane plan." He was looking away again.

"Way to be an optimist, Cas," Alex said, attempting to be light. She was studying his profile longingly.

But his frown just deepened. "There's not much to be optimistic about. Tomorrow is the end."

_Geez. "So, what are you planning to do with this last night of yours?" She had a sudden, funny thought. "You just gonna sit here quietly?"

She tried to bite back her grin. He looked at her at this point, tilted his head to the side slightly. "You're referring to the last time I thought I was going to die." He didn't seem to share her amusement. "This time is different." A muscle jerked in his jaw, and he looked down, put his hands on the railing of the porch, very serious. "I don't want you to go. It's going to be too dangerous."

Alex's smile had faded and she looked at him unhappily. "Are Dean and Sam going?" she asked bluntly.

He looked her way. "Yes—"

"Then I'm going," she said, leaving no room for argument, shrugging as if to say 'too bad.'

He didn't look thrilled, in fact, he heaved a little dark sigh. "You are..." he looked away, "very stubborn."

"Yeah, and it's one of the reasons you like me," she said, joking, but then wishing she hadn't said it at all, because he looked at her squarely at that point, finally. Even in the dark, his expression made her go still. Maybe it was the alcohol, or the thought that this might be her last night alive. But it emboldened her a little, and she thought about how he'd touched her fingertips to hers in the hospital. She glanced down at where his hand rested on the porch railing. Alex hesitated and her heart slammed to the top of her throat. But bravely she reached out, lowered her hand, laid it over Cas's. He looked at their hands, then back at her, and she inched a little closer, curled her fingers around his, her heart beating wildly in her chest. He didn't pull his hand away, he didn't pull _himself_ away, but his eyebrows moved together just slightly. It was now or never—

The door swung open behind them. "Hey Alex, have you seen my—" Sam paused, stopped, looking at them oddly.

Alex had literally jumped away from Cas at the sound of the door. "Your what, Sam?!!" she demanded too loudly.

"My, uh, laptop," he said, eyes narrowed, looking first at her, and then Cas.

"Geez, Sam how would I know that?! What am I, your laptop babysitter?" she exclaimed, and brushed past him, completely mortified.

In all fullness of the word, she fled the scene, dashing into the house and down the hallway without looking at anyone. _God, what had she been thinking?_ She wanted to disappear completely—hide away—so she went the only place she could think of. Downstairs, into the basement, into the panic room. She couldn't believe herself. For a second, she had intended to kiss Cas. _Kiss_ him. God, Sam interrupting it was the worst thing ever—had he seen her hand on his? The desperation on her face as she leaned close uncertainly? Maybe Sam interrupting was a blessing in disguise, though, because now that she thought about it (the surge of adrenaline and shame had sobered her
up, and fast), she was letting herself live in a fantasy world to believe Cas thought that way about her.

Alex paced the dim panic room, rubbing the back of her neck in agitation. She wished she hadn't even tried making a move on Cas, but she also kind of wished she had just gone for the kiss, too. He probably would have gone all stiff, stared at her like she were Satan incarnate. Or maybe he would have melted against her, wrapped his arms around her…

She heard a soft sound behind her and turned to see Cas standing there in the doorway of the panic room, an odd expression on his face, arms hanging at his sides. Her heart rocketed into her throat. She went completely still, and realized she was completely cornered—no running away. Cas almost looked like he were breathing heavier than normal, and his head was tilted to the side. The he asked what was possibly the most awkward, mortifying question in the world. "Why did you touch me like that?" he asked.

Alex swallowed. And then lied. "I don't know."

He stepped closer, seeing right through her. "That's not the truth."

"Romantic feelings," she asked, as if he didn't understand the implication.

Oh god. He was making her spell it out. She looked at him, like, give me a friggin' break!

"Holy shit. His confession froze everything. Her lungs suddenly felt incapable of functioning and she felt her mouth drop open in complete, stunned astonishment as her heart slammed up against her ribcage. She breathed it out before she could stop herself. "Me too."

At those two words, she saw his eyes flicker up to hers. He looked pained, almost. He closed his
eyes for a second, then reopened them. "We can't."

Alex was speechless, because it had suddenly all gotten so real, and everything she thought she was kidding herself about, well, it might be true after all... and 'we can't'? Had he thought about this? Was he saying he'd considered... them? Together? Like she had? Alex felt dizzy with surprise, relief, apprehension, and frantic desire to know more. Cas turned and walked away a few feet. For a minute, she thought he was going to walk out, and she panicked. "Why?" she asked, desperate for him to stop.

He stopped, turned slightly. "It's too dangerous. For both of us. But... especially you."

"I don't understand," she protested softly. Dangerous?

Regretfully, he turned around to face her fully, his whole face tense. He didn't really look at her. "Angels are forbidden to have romantic relationships. Our devotion is solitary. To God alone. And when an angel devotes themselves to anything or anyone other than God..." he trailed off, his frown deepening, his gaze far away. "Horrible things happen." Alex was shocked. Cas looked grim. "I have to protect you, Alex... even if it's from me."

"Protect me from you?" She asked automatically, because it sounded so bizarre.

He looked back at her, halfway, seeing her speechless confusion. Then he began to tell her a story, the reason why he claimed he had to protect her from himself. "Almost two thousand years ago, an angel named Mariel walked the earth. He fell in love with a human woman named Helen. But Helen rejected Mariel when she saw his true form and nature. He became... unstable. Possessive. Volatile. And in his anger, he destroyed the entire vicinity of Pompeii. The place where Helen lived."

He stopped at that point, and seemed to somehow think that neatly wrapped up everything, explained it all, when all it did was further confuse Alex, who didn't really care about some human however many thousand years ago and an angel she'd never heard of before. She cared about Cas and herself. Cas however, was looking reluctant and he turned as if to leave. Seeing that, Alex desperately spoke up, because this was not over for her. "Cas, please—you can't just say all that and leave!" She caught him by the shoulder, turned him around to face her, said, "don't walk away!"

His expression, which had been so blank a moment before, was wretched and startling. "I have to, Alex!" His voice was loud and shaking, and it stunned her, scared her just a little. She froze, wide-eyed. He looked at her, seeming taken aback at himself, then shook his head, grew quiet and reserved again. "I've—I've said too much already."

"No you haven't!" Alex protested, shaking her head. He hadn't said enough—she didn't understand at all, and wasn't sure if he meant that he could—that he felt—dammit! He was being so vague and she couldn't take it.

Cas looked apologetic. And then, almost as if he were talking to himself, he let out a soft breath of air. "This was better when you were afraid of me. When you didn't trust me."

"What are you talking about?"

His eyes snapped back up to hers, no longer soft and yielding, but harsh, and she froze all over again. "I am not the gentle being you believe me to be." He stepped close, intimidatingly, his gaze reminding her of the ones he'd given her when they first met. His voice lowering dangerously until he was almost snarling. "I could end you, right now, in the blink of an eye," he growled. "Turn you
to dust with a mere thought."

Alex shook her head just slightly, but couldn't hide her trepidation. Still, she just raised her chin a little, an action meant to be defiant, tell him she didn't buy it. "You would never do that."

He looked at her pointedly, hard, eyes narrowing, and then with a sudden surge of speed and shocking power, he grabbed her by the back of the neck, fingers gripping hard against her scalp, literally holding her there and as he breathed down on her menacingly. "What makes you so sure of that?" he asked dangerously, his eyes narrowed and intimidating.

And for a brief second, she almost was afraid, not just startled. But as she stared up at him, wide-eyed, she couldn't be afraid. Not afraid that he would hurt her. Because she remembered everything he had ever done for her, and she knew he would never. Never. And expression softening, she looked at him unflinchingly. "Because I know you never would," she replied, softly. His expression changed, stilling, and his eyes flickered down to her lips, then back to her eyes. He was breathing harder—he was so close she could feel the warm breath from his mouth hitting her lips. The way he stared into her eyes was unrelenting. Like he was waiting for her to get scared, or pull away. But she didn't. She refused, and that forceful look in his eyes was fading into questioning curiosity. And god, if this wasn't him threatening her, it could have been the lead in to a kiss, she thought torturously, suddenly filled with overwhelming desire for him, for the touch of his lips on hers.

Castiel stared at Alex, who remained unmoving in his grip. A moment ago, he had been the one in control, using his command, his strength, his words to intimidate and threaten her. But whatever influence he'd had was completely gone. Instead, he felt entirely affected and overwhelmed. He couldn't stop himself from noticing how her hair felt under his fingertips, the sensation of the warm skin of her neck as he grasped it, how her chest rose and fell faster than usual, brushing against the front of him so lightly. Her soft, parted lips were so very close to his. What would it be like to touch his mouth to hers, to let his lips speak wordlessly and impress upon her what he felt for her? Her wide, dark eyes were looking at him without fear. Just… desire. He felt his expression fade as he realized. Desire.

Castiel swallowed, his grip loosening slightly as he tried desperately to ignore the way every cell in his vessel and his mind seemed to be screaming, begging for him to tilt his head down and put his lips against hers. It was wrong, and he knew it was wrong; his inner dialogue was deafening, shouting you can't do this, this can't happen, it's abominable under Heaven! If he knew nothing else in that moment, he knew that every law in the universe forbade this and that he should go—run—get as far from right here as physically possible. But it was too late. With every breath he took he could feel the distance between them closing, could see her eyes widening as they searched his. He could hear her heartbeat quickening, and with it felt himself losing ground, this deafening desire was overriding every fail-safe he'd ever had, and in a moment of clarity—or maybe it was a moment of weakness—he gave in, no longer able to deny his urges. He closed the distance between them, brushing his mouth loosely against hers, unsure of how exactly to give a kiss.

She showed him—pressing and pursing her lips to his with softness and care that floored him completely. Oh. His stomach turned over inside of himself at the feeling and he mimicked her, pushing his lips against hers tentatively, kissing her. Even as a surge of pleasure and shock and wonder came over him, the lights above their heads burst, showering them in sparks like flecks of lightning, and Alex's arms were wrapping around his neck, he felt her hands going into his hair, fingers curled tightly, sending little zinging sensations all over his vessel—why did she do that? He wasn't sure, but it felt good—she led him into the kiss, guided him into it more fully, and he followed her example. He wondered: were the two of them melting into each other? Castiel was overcome. Of their own accord, his eyes fell closed, his senses were all tuned in to this moment, these newfound sensations. Her body was pressed against his, warm and soft, impossibly
overwhelming in the way it made him feel. His hand that had gripped the back of her neck threateningly now grasped tenderly, pulling her to him, his other hand rested against her waist, holding her carefully. Alex was clinging to him like he was a strong tower, like he was something she held in esteem. Her mouth pressed against his all over again and he felt as though he'd had some kind of everlasting epiphany in this moment, here with her. He began to kiss back the way she was kissing him, trying this soft pressing and drawing away, this hesitant, soft-mouthed exploration.

What a wonder it was to kiss her—he'd seen humans kiss and it had looked uncomfortable and strange. But now, to actually partake in the activity... Castiel's opinion was changed. He felt the kiss in every atom of his body—every cell and fiber was under her spell. It seemed as though they were communicating without words, it felt like they were breathing each other in, and her mouth, her mouth... it was like the choicest wine. He was sure that this was what it was like to be drunk: hazy, swept away, in a world of warmth and good feelings. He never wanted it to end... this touching and feeling and intimate, wordless language of their mouths. Lost in her, Castiel couldn't find an end to things to focus on. His nose was pressed into her cheek and he felt how her hands were touching him softly, how her breaths were noisy and close to him, inside of him sometimes, how her body seemed to fit against his. Was he imagining things? It seemed like she needed him, like she wanted him in a way he could not name. The feeling was so resplendent and good, so overwhelming, that he wondered, briefly, how he'd ever thought it could be wrong for them to be together, not if it were like this. But, in the furthest reaches of his mind, he knew why, remembered. And suddenly, he stopped, pulled away, realizing himself and his actions—the absolute danger in doing this with her and going down this path—he looked at Alex in the beginnings of fear.

But then he saw how she looked stunned and close and breathless and beautiful and he again felt helpless, unable to deny what his body and mind wanted—and with even greater urgency than before, he pulled her back to him, kissing her again with passion, like he'd seen so many humans do. It wasn't just imitation, though. He felt the passion flooding his body and mind, passion that was created by everything he thought of her and had felt for her for so long now. Castiel was internally shocked in the background of his mind at his own behavior and the ease with which this came to him, but it came to him all the same. He was desperate for more of this and more of her; he was unable to reconcile Heaven's laws with his feelings, these sensations, the knowledge that he was in the arms of Alex Winchester, the human being who had somehow become the pinnacle of his thoughts, motivations, and desires. He was stunned all over again when something soft nudged his mouth—her tongue? His vessel seemed to love the sensation and warmth spread over him with dizzying speed even as a soft little helpless sound came out of Alex's mouth. Startled at the little whimper, Cas pulled back, a little short of breath.

It hit him all over again. You shouldn't be doing this, Castiel. It rang in his mind over and over again like a bell, like a quickly-rising alarm. You shouldn't be doing this, Castiel!

Horror quickly fell over him as they stared at each other breathlessly. What right did he have to do this? What sort of hellish audacity had gripped him to selfishly do what he had? Cas pulled out of her arms, anguished, guilty. He almost stumbled as he took two steps backwards, horrified at himself, confused, still in the throes of the physical effect she'd had on him. She stood there where he'd left her, looking small, alone, questioning. Hurt. "I... I shouldn't have done that," Castiel said, finding it difficult to speak. What kind of miserable hypocrite was he? A minute ago, he had told her that they couldn't be involved romantically and why. And then he had kissed her. What sense was there in it? None! He remembered what Dean had said, the warning about how his closeness to Alex would be her undoing. Terror shimmered through him, body and mind. What had he done?

Alex tried haltingly to move closer to him, but he stepped back, not allowing her to be close—it
was too much for him. "That was a mistake," Cas said forcefully. Rejected, Alex stopped. He looked at her, and they were both pained—had he done that? Caused the grief on her face? He had. He struggled, realized how ashamed he was. "I'm sorry," he said slowly, agonized. "I've hurt you."

Her face crumpled, she looked away. And with sudden, intense abhorrence for himself, Cas realized that she was in even more pain than she had been when he'd found her in Gabriel's final hell—and that this time he was the cause. How could he have done that to her? If he'd known, he wouldn't have done what he did. How would this affect things between them now? Would she always be hurt and reminded of this when she look upon him in the future? Had he broken some sacred trust? He had certainty overstepped his bounds. If only he'd had the strength to resist kissing her, if only he hadn't given in. He looked down, thinking how if he could take it back, he would—his eyes flicked back up as he realized. He could. He could take it back. This whole mess he'd created. The pain on her face. He didn't know what other choice he had. It was the right thing to do. He would remove this memory, make it all fade away for her. She never had to know the mistake he'd made, the kiss he'd stolen.

He stepped forward, hand outstretched for her forehead, and she stepped back, eyes going wider. "W-what are you doing?"

"Making this right," he said, grasping her by the shoulder.

She already seemed to know where he was going with this and tried to pull away, her face crumpling even more. "Cas, no, what are you—"

"I have to," he said, holding her easily. She struggled against him, and he looked at her, sadly. "I am much stronger than you, Alex."

She fought harder, trying to get away from him, and tears of panic made her eyes shine. "Please, no, Cas, don't do this!" She begged, and he couldn't bear to look at her.

"I'm sorry," he said, and he was. He touched his fingers to her head.

Her expression went blank, eyes glassy, and she looked at him oddly. "I'm—wait, what was I saying?" she asked, woozy, then went limp, still, silent. Cas gently lowered her to the floor—she would be unconscious all night, he'd made sure of it. A twinge of guilt and darkness ran across his mind—surely this wasn't the best way. Her face was peaceful, smooth. He touched the side of it with the palm of his hand, for a minute, just looking at her. Then he pulled his hand away, as if bitten. He couldn't. If he was going to keep her safe—even from himself—he couldn't allow himself to think of her in that way. Ever. At all.

And yet… he didn't know if he could stop.

He stood up, with every intention of leaving her there in the panic room. The others would assume it was from the drinking, no one would ask questions, really... but Cas stood there, unmoving, unable to walk away. She was crumpled and alone, on the cold hard floor, and Castiel realized that he couldn't bring himself to leave her like that. It wasn't right. He crouched again, gathered her slack form up into his arms and carried her upstairs. Every step he took seemed heavy and guilt-ridden and he questioned himself over and over. Looked into her peaceful, unaware face and cursed himself for being such a fool.

Dean looked up from his laptop to see Alex's limp form being carried by Castiel. Her eyes were closed and she wasn't moving, one of her arms dangled slackly. He almost shoved the laptop onto the floor, he stood up so fast. "Oh my god, what happened?" he demanded, panicked, rushing over—did she fall down? A demon? Some kind of monster?
"She, uh, passed out," Castiel said. "From alcohol."

Dean froze, suddenly embarrassed. "Oh." He was kind of glad everyone else had gone to sleep so they hadn't seen that display.

Cas was looking at Dean grimly. "Where, uh, should I put her?"

Really? "How about a bed, genius?" Dean asked—not sure if Cas was hilarious or brain dead.

"A bed. Yes, of course."

Dean stepped into the hallway, adjacent, opened the guest room door, yanked back the blanket on the bed and Castiel, with surprising gentleness, laid Alex down, settled her into the bed. Dean watched hawkishly as a little stiffly, Cas pulled the blanket back up over her and then stood back. "Is that sufficient?" he asked. He sounded almost worried.

Dean looked at Cas sidelong. "That girl could sleep standing up. Don't worry about it." He turned to leave, got to the door, glanced back, and huffed. Castiel just stood there like a dumbass, looking at Alex's sleeping form. Dean looked at him, waited a second. Then cleared his throat. "This is the part where we leave, Cas."

"Oh. Yes," Cas said. "Of course."

They left the room and Dean shut the door quietly behind them, then turned to Cas, looking at him hard—the angel was acting extremely weird. "You sure there's nothing going on you want to tell me about?"

Cas looked at him sharply, eyes narrowed. "What would be going on?"

Dean gave him a pointed look. Cas might be thick, but was he really that clueless? "I mean, a friggin' angel takes special interest in my little sister—you better believe I'm gonna make sure it's nothing…" he searched for a word, "inappropriate." Cas's confused expression made Dean roll his eyes, and clarify awkwardly. "Meaning romantic, Cas!"

There was a pause, and Dean saw a muscle jump in Cas's cheek. "I don't possess the ability to be involved in that kind of situation," the angel said vaguely, not looking at Dean anymore.

"Meaning what?" Dean demanded, receiving another glare from Cas.

"Meaning stop accusing me of it," Cas said darkly, and brushed past Dean, clearly over the exchange.

Dean watched him go, annoyed. "Dick."

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**The Next Day**

In the backseat of Ellen's Wagoneer, Alex sat in silence. She glanced at Cas, who was still avoiding her gaze. They had just passed the sign that said *Welcome to Carthage*. They were almost there.

They had been driving most of the day and it was nearing sundown. Most of the way there, Jo had been talking about hunting—the hunts she'd been on, the hunts she'd heard about. Alex had tuned it out mostly, trying to figure out why she felt so friggin' weird. She felt really out of it, like hung over, except she was pretty sure she shouldn't be. She hadn't had *that* much to drink. She couldn't
remember, and the details of last night were really fuzzy. She wasn't sure why. There was an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach that stuck like glue.

She thought maybe for a minute she felt off because of the fight she'd had with Dean. They had basically yelled at each other in front of everyone when they left from Bobby's—she'd made to get in the car with Ellen, Dean had pitched a fit about her riding with him and Sam, she'd told him to cram it—so there was that. But that was everyday stuff. Not enough to make her feel so strange.

Ellen glanced back at her in the rearview. "You okay, honey?"

"Fine," Alex said offhandedly. "Just feeling a little off."

Beside her, Cas looked at her sidelong, and she gave him a thin little smile. He looked away, frowning. She felt her smile fade. She did remember trying to make a move on him before everything got hazy... so, was he angry? Had she upset him? It would seem so. Everything about his body language and expression seemed tense and disturbed and repelled by her. Alex was disappointed in herself. She couldn't do anything right—first she'd pissed him off with the flowers, then she'd gone and effed everything up yesterday. She looked out the window blankly as they entered the town. Carthage was empty.

"Where is everyone?" Jo asked.

"At least we know we're in the right place," Alex muttered. It was nice and spooky. Her stomach twisted as she hoped against hope that this would work, that it wasn't some kind of horrible trap.

Dean and Sam pulled up alongside them, and Ellen rolled down her window to talk to Dean. "Place seem a little empty to you?"

"Yeah. We're gonna go check out the PD," Dean said. "You guys stay here, see if you can find anybody."

"Okay," Ellen confirmed, and the boys drove off as Ellen parked the car. They all got out, except Cas.

Jo tapped on Cas's window. "Hey! Ever heard of a door handle?"

Suddenly, Cas was standing outside, beside her. "Of course I have," he said, blasé. He was looking around, an intense look on his face.

"What is it, Cas?" Ellen asked, watching him attentively.

"This town's not empty," he said, his tone foreboding.

Alex tried looking where he was looking, but saw nothing. "What do you see?" she asked.

"Reapers," he said.

"Reapers?" Ellen repeated. "As in more than one?"

"They only gather like this at times of great catastrophe. Chicago Fire, San Francisco Quake." He paused, frown deepening. "Pompeii." He glanced at Alex, then stepped forward. "Excuse me, I need to find out why they're here." He paused, looked back. Ellen and Jo were looking around, but Alex still stared after him, frowning a little. "Stay together," he said to her. "I'll be back."

And he turned and walked away, weaving through the countless reapers. None of them
acknowledged him, they were all standing and facing toward a single point—which was exactly where he headed. They were all gazing up toward a single point on an apartment, or motel building—in the window, a reaper with cloudy white eyes stared back at him… then turned and disappeared.

Castiel followed him, slipping through the distance and up into the building in an instant. He was in a dark hallway, and he could see the reaper at the end of it. He followed him, entering a dark room, intent on finding out why the reapers were here. Then, beside him, he heard a soft voice. "Hello, brother."

The dark room was suddenly lit up in a blaze of light, and Castiel looked down—saw that he stood in a ring of fire. A trap. He had been trapped. He looked up, seeing the other person in the room. "Lucifer," Cas said.

Obscured by shadows, Lucifer walked slowly toward him. "So I take it you're here with the Winchesters."

Castiel felt something jump inside him. He clenched his jaw. "I came alone."

"Loyalty," Lucifer commented mildly. "Such a nice quality to see in this day and age. Castiel, right? Yes, Castiel. I'm told you came here in an automobile."

A little caught off guard by the comment, Castiel narrowed his eyes. "Yes."

"What was that like?" Lucifer asked, further confounding Castiel.

"Um. Slow. Confining."

Lucifer finally came close enough that Castiel could see him. "What a peculiar thing you are," he said, looking at Cas with interest.

Castiel, however, was looking at Lucifer's face—there were peeling burns dotting the man's fair face. "What's wrong with your vessel?" Cas asked suspiciously.

"Ah, yes," Lucifer said, chuckling softly. "Um. Nick is wearing a bit thin, I'm afraid. He can't contain me forever, so—" he looked at Castiel meaningfully.

"You—" Castiel started, stepping forward, then stopping as he reached the edge of the fire. He was breathing heavily, enraged at what Lucifer was implying. "You will not take Sam Winchester. I won't let you."

Lucifer seemed mildly perplexed. "Castiel. I don't understand why you're fighting me, of all the angels."

Castiel looked at him, glared. "You really have to ask?"

Lucifer looked at him openly, appraisingly. "I rebelled, I was cast out. You rebelled, you were cast out. Almost all of Heaven wants to see me dead, and if they succeed, guess what? You're their new public enemy number one."

Lucifer seemed almost amused by that suggestion. "And why should you need to die?" he asked
softly. "Wouldn't it be much more poetic... if it were someone else's life on the line? Someone you
cared for more than yourself?"

Castiel felt something in him jump again. Fear. "What—"

Lucifer raised his hand into the air, snapped his fingers once, and Alex was suddenly there,
inexplicably. She looked confused, out of breath, and there was blood on her—she caught sight of
him even as he realized it was someone else's blood.

Castiel strained at the edge of the fire in alarm, as Lucifer smiled at Alex calmly. "Hello,
Alexandra."

"How did you bring her here, Lucifer?" Cas demanded lowly, dangerously, his vessel trembling
wrathfully. Lucifer smiled ever so slightly as Castiel's voice raised. "How did you know where she
was?"

Lucifer looked at him, smiling chillingly. "You give me so little credit, Castiel." He circled Alex,
who looked so small and vulnerable next to Lucifer. "So, Alexandra, we were just talking about
you," the devil said to her. "And forgive me for the thuggish tactics, but—" he produced a pair of
handcuffs from behind himself— "I just don't want you to leave quite yet."

Cas's fists clenched and his breath caught as Lucifer grabbed Alex, snapped one end of the cuffs
onto her left wrist, threaded the cuff chain around one of the smaller pipes on the wall then
snapped the second cuff onto her right wrist, effectively trapping her there. Lucifer gently traced
his fingers down Alex's neck—she squirmed, repulsed and scared—the room shook slightly as
Castiel stood there in helpless rage. Lucifer's fingers went lower, lower, then grabbed at the sliver
of chain there, yanked her lock pick necklace off her neck. She looked shocked that he had known
about it—he just smiled, his eyes twinkling as they caught the glow of the holy fire.

"Leave her out of this," Castiel demanded, catching Lucifer's attention once more. "I'm warning
you."

Lucifer ignored the idle threat, walked the edge of the ring of fire with a slow, measured gait. "Do
you know, Castiel, that in order for me to summon Death tonight... as part of the ritual... I have to
kill all the women in town? And, well, I've killed all of them already. All except three. Jo. Ellen."
He paused, looking at Alex. "And this one." He smiled sympathetically even as Castiel glared,
angered, realizing what was happening. Lucifer shrugged mildly. "I'm sad to say, Jo and Ellen will
be dead within the hour. However... I can spare Alex. For you, brother. If you agree to help me."

Castiel glowered, his jaw clenched tightly. Across from him, Alex was shaking her head, resigned.
"Don't do anything he says, Cas, don't."

He looked at her, pained, and Lucifer went to her, put a hand on her shoulder, his thumb stroking
over it slowly. She shuddered in revulsion and Castiel swore that if this fire didn't separate him
from her...!

Lucifer smiled at Alex, then touched the side of her face in something like tenderness. He forced
her to look at him. She looked like she wanted to spit in his face. "We'll give him some time to
think it over, Alex, what do you say?" He let go, nodded toward the doorway. "But, Castiel... look."

Cas followed Lucifer's eye line and his expression went cold.

Alex saw nothing there. "What is it?"
His chin jutted slightly forward in anger. "A reaper."

"Waiting," Lucifer said, and tapped Alex under the chin. "For you." He looked back at Cas. "Midnight," Lucifer said calmly. "Castiel. Make a wise choice. She doesn't need to die."

Castiel glared at him. "You're trying to manipulate me by threatening to murder her if I don't comply."

Lucifer put a hand over his heart, as if he were hurt. "I'm being reasonable, Castiel. Offering you a kindness."

"It's not kindness," Castiel bit back. "You want to burn the world and everyone in it."

"You make me sound so very dreadful," Lucifer said, shaking his head. "You and I? We're on the same side."

"I am not on your side," Castiel growled, and Lucifer shrugged, almost rolled his eyes.

"That's your choice. You see, unlike God, I don't see the point in forcing anyone to do anything against their will."

He seemed to tire of Castiel, and turned back to Alex, who immediately shrank back. "Alexandra. Why are you looking at me like that? We're going to be friends, you and I. You don't need to be afraid of me."

"Oh, okay then," she said acidly. Even though she didn't look it, Cas could tell she was afraid—very afraid.

Lucifer chuckled a little, like she was cute. "So much like your brother Dean. And more like Sam than you think." He sighed, a long, high sound. "Well. That's neither here nor there. Castiel holds your life in his hands right now, and I honestly do hope he chooses to save you."

"You're full of shit," Alex spat, and suddenly, Lucifer grabbed her tightly, shoved her against the wall with a loud thud—she cried out in surprise or maybe in pain. Castiel was furious at the scene.

"And you're far too confident," Lucifer told her while smiling. He looked back to see Castiel practically fuming at the edge of the ring. "Look. How protective he is of you," the devil said softly. His eyes were catching the flickering flames. He looked so pleased as his sinister gaze took the other angel in. "You've fallen so much further than you're willing to admit, Castiel."

It was almost midnight, and nothing had happened or changed—Alex was getting frantic. When she'd been separated from Dean, Sam, Ellen and Jo, there were hellhounds after them, and Jo had gotten hurt, pretty bad too, she thought. God almighty, what if they had all been killed by those things?

As if on cue, Meg walked in, and Alex's hatred could have almost blinded her. "I got the Winchesters pinned down," Meg said to Lucifer, pleased with herself. "For now, at least. What should I do with them?"

Lucifer paused. "Leave them alone."

Everyone in the room, even Meg, looked at Lucifer in confusion. "I—I'm sorry, but are you sure? Shouldn't we—" Meg started, but Lucifer just shook his head.

"Trust me, child. Everything happens for a reason." He stroked Meg's face, and the demon smiled,
leaned into his hand.

"Well, Castiel," Lucifer said. "You have some time. Not much. But a little. Time to change your mind?" He waited. Castiel said nothing, just glared. Lucifer sighed, and made to leave the room.

"Where are you going?" Alex demanded.

Lucifer shrugged. "Things to do. Don't worry...I'll see you again." She was chilled by that statement. Lucifer turned and looked at Cas, spoke softly. "Time's running out, Castiel." He left, and Meg looked at Castiel and then Alex, frowning.

"What, is this some kinda trade? Sam for Alex?" She smiled. "Gotta say, I always liked Sam better. Then again, I was inside him."

Alex struggled against the handcuffs. "Screw you."

Meg giggled, looked at Alex suggestively, a single eyebrow arching up. "Anytime, sweet cheeks." She turned her attention to Cas, looked at him with a coy little smile. "I don't believe we've had the pleasure."

"That's not the word I'd use for it," he said, and her face broke into a smile. She laughed heartily.

"Oh, I like you," she said. "But, I gotta ask—you're honestly going to sacrifice yourself for the Winchesters?" She gave him a pouty face. "Come on, Clarence. It would be no fun if you missed our party. You're getting a VIP invitation and you're gonna say no?" She turned to Alex. "I mean, isn't that a crazy thing to turn down? My feelings are hurt." She swaggered a little closer to Alex, barely able to hold back a grin. "How's the fam doing? Dean looked so surprised to see my hellhounds, didn't he?"

"You bitch," Alex growled, so angry she was shaking.

Meg rolled her eyes, that stupid smile never leaving her face. "You know, normally I might resent your tone," she drawled. "But today, I'm in a good mood. I'll let it slide."

Alex stared back unblinkingly. "Oh boy. Gee whiz. Thanks."

Enjoying the control, Meg laughed, threw her head back a little, flexed her neck, then fanned herself with her hand. "Mmmm. Is it me, or is it kind of hot in here?" She laughed at herself, and Alex looked at Cas dismally.

He was looking at her intently, eyes flickering down, then up, down, then up. She realized that he was trying to tell her something. Giving the impression that she wasn't looking at anything at all, Alex let her gaze drop a little. She saw the pipe that her handcuffs were attached to. The screw was moving, slowly untwisting. Her eyes flashed back to him, and she saw his hand moving, just slightly. She saw exactly what he was doing and then knew what she had to do. She looked back at Meg, who was still laughing.

Alex demanded her attention, baited her. She needed Meg to be close for this. "Hey ugly, what's so hilarious?"

"We're gonna win. Can you feel it? These cloud-hopping pansies lost the whole damn universe. Lucifer's gonna take over heaven." She grinned at Cas now. "We're going to Heaven, Clarence."

"Strange, because I heard a different theory from a demon named Crowley," Castiel said.
Meg stopped, eyes narrowed. "You don't know Crowley."

"He believes Lucifer is just using demons to achieve an end, and that, once he does, he'll destroy you all."

Meg's smile was gone. Alex egged her on again. "You're cute when you're delusional, Meg."

"Me? Delusional?" she looked at Alex, came a little closer. "I'm not the one with a crush on an angel, sweetheart."

"No, you're the one who thinks the devil's gonna let you live to see daylight once he's used your pathetic skank ass up."

Meg came a little closer still, smiling again, so confident and egomaniacal. "You're wrong. Lucifer is the father of my race. My creator." She jerked her head at Cas. "His god is a deadbeat, but mine walks the earth."

"Not for long, bitch," Alex said, matching Meg's narcissistic expression, clearly pissing the demon off with that last comment.

Alex heard the screw drop to the floor, a little metallic ping even as Meg was getting in her face, saying, "you arrogant, ugly piece of—" Meg would never finish that sentence. Alex reeled back and knocked Meg in the forehead with hers, grabbing the pipe with both hands as she kicked Meg in the stomach—she yanked the loose pipe off the wall in both hands and using it to club the stumbling-backwards Meg across the face. The barrage of unexpected hits knocked the demon back into the ring of fire, and Cas caught Meg roughly, slammed his hand to her forehead—and… nothing. Meg gasped, panting, and then, realized nothing had happened. She laughed. "You can't gank demons, can you? You're cut off from the home office and you ain't got the juice. So what can you do, you impotent sap?"

"I can do this," he said, and threw her down across the fire, strode out over her as she screamed. Cas reached for Alex, his hand grabbing her by the wrist. And they were suddenly outside, in the dark, on a road. Next to them, the sign that said Welcome to Carthage.

Alex looked at Cas in alarm—he was looking at her breathlessly, demanding her attention. He grabbed the handcuffs, and easily ripped them off—she wasn't sure exactly how—she looked down, surprised to see the twisted metal laying on the ground—he'd done that with his bare hands. He was gripping her by both arms.

"Are you all right?" he asked in such distress that she was frightened.

"I'm... fine—" she stuttered. He seemed to be only mildly placated.

"Do not move—" he said intensely. "I'll be right back." And he disappeared again, leaving Alex blinking, shocked, without anything to do but wait. About a minute passed, where Alex kind of stood there, in shock, in fear. What would Cas find? What if Lucifer found him or hurt him?

She didn't have to wonder for long—Cas was back, Dean and Sam on either side of him. Dean and Sam only. Alex looked at them, shaking her head in dread. "...Ellen and Jo?" she asked. Sam shook his head, looking away, and Dean looked positively wrathful. Alex stared, in shock. "And… the devil?"


Beside herself, Alex looked at her brother. "Are you sure that you—"
"Yes, I'm damn sure!" he shouted. "It didn't work, and he raised Death, and now we're all new levels of screwed!"

Sam looked at Castiel, whose face gave away nothing. "Cas? What do we do?"

"What do we do?" He repeated, as if that were a ridiculous question. "What can we do?" he asked bitterly. "It would seem nothing. Destiny is unwavering," he said, his voice becoming acidic. "Michael and Lucifer will fight. It's just a matter of when."

"They can't fight if neither of us says yes," Sam argued.

Cas looked at him sharply, anger like Alex had never seen on his face. "You will. Both of you. It's inevitable. Destiny cannot be changed, and we shouldn't try to go against it. It will always end in death and destruction." He looked between the three Winchesters, his face etched in harsh lines. "Tonight should prove that to you."

"It proves nothing except we can't kill the devil with the Colt," Dean retorted. "So we find another friggin' way!"

"There is no other way, Dean," Cas said furiously. "You should accept it." Castiel looked at Dean as if in disgust. "Why do you insist on being so shortsighted and stubborn?"

"Because this is my family we're talking about!" Dean shouted. "I am not saying yes, because I refuse to kill Sam or leave Alex behind. You hear me, Cas?" Dean looked at them all, waving an angry arm. "We have lost too many damn people to walk away from this now. I am ending what I started, you all got that?" He looked like he wanted to murder someone. "I gotta go get the car. Stay here, all of you," he said, and turned, began to march down the road, back toward town.

Cas, Sam, and Alex watched him go silently. "He's not even the one who started it all," Sam said after a moment, sounding defeated. "I mean, maybe he broke the first seal. But I'm the one who set Lucifer free."

Castiel's jaw worked oddly, the heated anger fading away into an implacable expression. "And I'm the one who didn't warn you when I could have. I could have stopped it all." Alex tried to search out his gaze, but he wouldn't look at her.

"Are you all right, Cas?" Alex asked, trying to see into him, past his defenses and anger.

He glanced at her. "No. Lucifer shouldn't have been able to summon you like that. This requires investigation." She opened her mouth to say something else, but without any warning, he was suddenly gone.

Sam let out an exasperated puff of air. "Why does he always do that?"

She didn't know.

All around them, crickets chirped, as if it were a normal, peaceful night.

They rode back to Bobby's in complete, dead silence. Depressed, sad, reflecting. Each on their own private hells and torment. All thinking about the loss of Ellen and Jo. Before Dean had come back with the Impala, Sam told Alex about what the women had done, how they had sacrificed themselves for Sam and Dean. She cried then, wept because they had died for nothing—Lucifer was still alive, and the Colt, their only hope, hadn't worked. Sam had held her tight and she'd cried all the tears she had left. And now, she was silent. She felt like if she cried in front of Dean, it would set him off, too. She could tell from looking at him how hard he was taking it. How much
he didn't want to face it. And it was heartwrenching.

When they got back to Bobby's, Dean got out of the car wordlessly and walked off a ways, into the salvage yard. Sam hung back, then shook his head, went inside, probably to tell Bobby the news. Alex hesitated, then followed Dean, not sure if she should or not, if he needed to be alone or what.

He had his hands in his jacket pockets, facing away from her. She came to his side slowly. "You okay?" It was a stupid, ridiculous question.

Dean overlooked that though, just looked down, his face etched in sadness. "All these people we love keep dying, Alex, and I keep thinking… is it my fault? Did I cause this somehow?" He looked at her then, grimacing, and then looked straight ahead. "I'm a joke, Alex. I can't protect anyone. I always think I can." He seemed so hollow as he repeated himself. "I always think I can."

He was tiredly rubbing his forehead with the palm of his hand now as his voice wavered with emotion and a broken quality. "I couldn't keep the two of them alive—I couldn't keep Lucifer from digging his talons into you—I don't think I can protect Sam from his future. From Detroit. I'm losing everyone and I'm starting to get that I can't do a damn thing about any of it." He dropped his hand, expression blank. "Maybe I should stop trying."

Alex crossed her arms, rounded on him, putting herself in front of him. "Dean Winchester. Look at me and shut up." He did. His eyes shone with tears. "Don't you dare give up on this," Alex said fiercely. "You can keep blaming yourself, or you can accept that you don't control life. You don't. And I know it hurts like hell. But don't you dare let their deaths be in vain. We are not giving up on this. We are not letting Lucifer get what he wants."

He looked down, his voice passionless. "I'm tired, Al. I'm tired."

"We all are," she said softly, not really knowing what else to say.

He wet his lips, a self-deprecating smile on his face, that faded into grief once more. He struggled a minute, vulnerable. "And, the crazy things is… I thought… in the back of my mind… Jo and me, someday… maybe…” he trailed off. There was very rare, real emotion in his voice, and she saw a tear run down his cheek, the moonlight glinting off of the streak left behind. It completely broke her already aching heart.

Alex slid her arms through his, thinking of an angel who she felt the very same way about: someday… maybe… but probably not. She understood it so well. Dean kept his hands in his pockets, not really accepting her gesture of affection in any way except leaning his head sideways slightly against hers. He was trying to hold himself together—she could feel him struggling to breathe normally, against the threat of tears. They just stayed there like that awhile, silent, each unwilling to break down.

Dean pulled away finally, muttered something about going inside, avoiding her gaze as he did so. Alex was left alone to watch her big brother walk away. She suddenly thought how cold it was that night, and how she hadn't noticed until right then.

Later That Night

Alex walked by moonlight down the main road, watching the yellow lines under her feet as she went. It was late enough that she didn't even have to worry about traffic. Not a single car had passed so far, and she'd been walking for awhile, maybe thirty minutes. She was lost in her thoughts and trying to forget everything, trying to clear her mind. After following Dean inside of
Bobby's house, she'd quickly realized she just couldn't be there, not right then; that that she needed to get out of there. She was probably a mile from Bobby's by now, but she kept walking, one foot in front of the other. Staying in motion helped her forget, just a little bit.

But she couldn't run from what was inside. She was conflicted, grieved, and hollow. She stopped and listened to the sound of silence. Everything that had happened tonight discouraged and wrecked her. The Colt failing to kill Lucifer had been like a punch in the gut. That had been their single hope. If it couldn't kill him, what, if anything besides Michael, could?

Her mind turned to Ellen and Jo, and Alex closed her eyes tightly for a second. Alex had lost count of how many friends had died in her lifetime, but she had never imagined having to add the Harvelles to that tally. It was another reminder that hunters pretty much always met bloody ends, violent deaths. And if she were honest, she felt her end approaching, too. That was the one certainty of this life—that death could come any day, and probably would.

There was a soft sound to her right.

"Miss Winchester," came a pleasant, accented voice. Alex whirled, startled and on guard, to see a dark-haired man in an all-black suit. He was sauntering toward her slowly, smiling pleasantly. "Out for a walk awful late aren't you, love?" He stopped a couple steps away, looked at her meaningfully. "Could be dangerous for a young lady to be traipsing about after dark, don't you think?"

"And who the hell are you supposed to be?" Alex demanded, looking him up and down, her hand hovering over her back pocket where her hunting knife was sheathed.

"Name's Crowley," the man said silkily. Alex's face dropped, and he nodded, as if he weren't surprised. "Right-o. I see you've heard of me." He lowered his chin, looking at her slyly. "Have to say I was disappointed when you didn't come along for the meet n' greet with your brothers."

Great, this was just awesome—a mile from Bobby's, no weapon to use against a demon, no one nearby to help—still, none of it stopped her from mouthing off. "Screw off or I'll kill you."

He sighed, seeming disappointed with her. "You lot are so predictable." He took in her expression and his face screwed up. "Oh stop looking at me like that, would you? I'm not the enemy here, Alex."

At that comment, she raised her eyebrows, matching his attitude blow for blow. "Uh, you know who I am, right? I'm a Winchester. The simple fact that you're a demon makes you my enemy."

He rolled his eyes. "Right. Well. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Or some tripe like that."

Alex crossed her arms, not taking her mistrustful eyes off of him for a second. "Yeah, my brothers told me all about how you want Lucifer dead. But that doesn't exactly make us buddies."

"No, I suppose it doesn't," he said, chuckling softly, then without any notice, he flew into a fit of rage. "Especially since they couldn't hold up their end of my friggin' deal!" Alex kind of leaned back when he blasted off, and he stopped, pressed his mouth closed, and when he spoke again, it was calm, pleasant. "I gave them the Colt to kill the devil. Look where that's gotten me."

"News travels fast," Alex commented suspiciously, not sure how he could know that so soon.

"Indeed. And since your blithering idiot brothers couldn't kill the devil today… I'm forced to get desperate."
"I'm waiting for the punch line," Alex said mistrustfully.

Crowley chuckled, looked down at the ground briefly, then back at her. "You are a pet, aren't you?" His amusement faded into semi-seriousness. "The punch line. Well. There are rumors." His eyebrows raised briefly. "That you, my dear, have a part to play in this thing."

Her eyes narrowed. "What the hell do you mean?"

He sauntered a little closer. "Word on the grapevine is that you're the one who'll kill Lucy."

The air left Alex's lungs. "What?"

"Yes, I know," Crowley said dramatically. "Didn't believe it at first myself, thought it was absolute bollocks, but now that your oaf brothers have gone and mucked it all up—well, I'm starting to consider the validity of what I've heard."

"Dean is Michael's vessel," Alex said emphatically, her mind spinning. "Not me."

"Never said anything about Michael though, did I?" Crowley asked, smiling mysteriously. "Think about it a tic, darling. You're a Winchester. Your blood line ties you to this whole situation by association. How remains to be seen. But I'm going to find out."

"Because I know you want Lucifer dead just as much as I do."

She stared at him, hard, pretty freaked out overall, not sure if he were trying to screw with her or what. He seemed entirely amused by her confusion, his eyes crinkling up in another smile. "Ah, me, look at the time," he said. "Things to do. Places to be. Hell to raise." But then, his eyes narrowing a little. "Hmm. Interesting."

"What?" Alex asked suspiciously, not liking the look on his face.

The smile was back, sly this time, knowing. "That angel on your shoulder? He's a tricky little devil..." he chuckled lowly, looking at her as he knew something she didn't. Then with no fanfare, he raised his hand up beside his head and moved his fingers up and down twice, waving. "Laters."

In a single blink, Crowley was gone, leaving her absolutely reeling from the exchange. Unsure what to think, or if he were really gone. For a second, she wanted to open her mouth and call Cas. She almost did. And then she shut her mouth, decided not to.

Because something deep inside was telling her she shouldn't share what Crowley told her. With anyone. Not yet, anyway.
In every direction the arctic tundra stretched pristine and untouched. Snowy white mountains marched along the horizon, rising up from icy plateaus, the frozen oceans that stretched into what looked like infinity beyond. The sun shone down from a crystal blue sky onto a solitary figure wearing a trench coat.

Castiel breathed in the sharp and icy air, his eyes scanning the distance. It had been two days since everything happened at Carthage.

There was no logical reason for him to be here. And yet there he stood in a vast, empty wilderness of ice and snow, removed from anytrace of humanity. Currently, he couldn't bear the sight of people. They all reminded him of her. Of what he had done.

Never before had his mind been such a disaster of overwhelming, chaotic thoughts. There was regret—confusion—guilt. And there was a deep seated fear because of what Lucifer had been able to do with Alex; how helpless Castiel had been to defend her—how weak and ineffective and unprepared he had been for what had happened. Had Azazel done something to Alex that night in the nursery? Had Castiel overlooked some mark, some sort of tracking charm or blood spell? Or was Lucifer far more powerful than he’d thought? How had the devil known what Alex meant to Castiel? He could still see Lucifer's hand touching Alex's face as if in tenderness. The memory still inspired rage inside of him.

It was easier to face the rage than the other things: the shame and horror, the creeping suspicion that he had done the wrong thing. The self-hatred for his momentary lapse in control.

A simple touch of her hand on his had set in motion a series of actions that Castiel couldn't quite explain. It had only been her hand gently resting on top of his. Anna had touched him that way, once. But it hadn't been the same, not at all. There had been much more meaning and revelation behind Alex's hand coming to rest atop his. The instant their skin brushed, her fingers curling in between his hesitantly—he'd been suddenly aware that maybe he wasn't the only one who had these indescribable, confusing feelings. Her hand, her eyes, they had fleetingly confirmed the hope he'd buried deep down. And then she had run away and he'd had to follow, had to know why she'd done that, needed to hear it from her—why she had touched his hand like that. It hadn't been his place to pursue that line of questions. It had been a huge mistake. And still, he remembered the feeling of her mouth against his, her body so soft in his arms...

It was easy now—not in the panic room, not with Alex who had been so warm and close—to tell himself he had been weak and foolish. To tell himself he should have been able to physically walk away, that he shouldn't have even followed her in the first place. But he remembered, clearly, how impossible that had been. His body, his mind, his every impulse and function had failed him and had pushed him forward into her arms, where he had given a kiss that he never should have even thought about, much less participated in. He cursed himself for not having the willpower or the strength to stop it from happening, even as, at the same time, he desired a thousand more moments like it with her.

All of the jumbled thoughts in his mind were overpowered by the memory of Alex's face when he had forcefully taken her memory. The sheer horror and fear when she had pleaded with him not to
take it away haunted him. *Haunted him.* Tore at him inside. *He had done that to her.* No one else. Him—the one who had made her whole, restored her voice, was supposed to protect and guard her. He had taken something from her, intruded on and manipulated her mind. It wasn't his right, and he realized that, but what other choice did he have? Let her remember? He'd said too much, revealed too much. *Done* too much. Endangered her. He almost wished he could erase it all from *his* memory, because he remembered, in torturous detail, every second, every *millisecond* of what happened in the panic room. The way she'd looked at him, asked him, tripping over her words, if he felt things for her… how she'd embraced him, kissed him in a way that made him feel physically weak, touched him and made him feel alive in a way that he'd never felt before and then begged him *please no, don't*…

A cold breeze whistled across the surface of the frozen ocean he stood on, stinging the skin of his vessel, whipping his trench coat around his legs furiously. But his thoughts persisted despite the momentary distraction. How could he have done that? Any of that? A few months ago he never would have imagined himself capable of any of the recent things he'd done, said, felt. His selfish desire for answers and closeness had caused the entire mess and he hadn't known any other way to fix it except to take the memory from her entirely.

Even if she wouldn't remember it… *he* would always carry the moment with him and be left wondering what it all even meant: the consuming nature of his thoughts toward her, the way he wanted physical closeness, the anxiety that seemed to pit itself in his stomach when he didn't know where she was. He wondered, briefly, unintentionally: What if he hadn't taken the memory from her? What would have happened with them? She had asked if he had feelings for her. He had essentially said yes. And when she had said she felt the same—it had ignited something that still remained, smoldering deep within. The way she'd looked at him, full of desire and need and affection was comparable to nothing else he had ever experienced or seen on earth or in Heaven.

He almost physically shook himself at where these thoughts were going. These were dangerous musings. It was impossible. Not only were angel human relationships forbidden, but Lucifer had already shown Castiel that his worst fear was true. Alex would be used against him because of how much he cared for her. Any perspective he took, he saw himself as a danger to her. The best way to give her safety was to stay far away. He disliked the thought very much. He couldn't leave her completely. Not now. Probably not ever. But especially not right now, not when her brothers were being hounded by Heaven and Hell, not while Lucifer seemed to have his sights set on her. Not now.

He found himself remembering the first time he'd seen Alex. October, 2007. She was sitting on the ground, boots off, shaking bits of dead grass out of the insides of them—hair a mess, something or someone else's blood on her—shirt a little ripped, some scratches on her arms. Sam and Dean were nearby, packing weapons back into the Impala. They looked rough, too, but Castiel didn't remember the details of their appearance. He had been attentive to her, not them. Alex looked at her brothers with those large, watchful eyes, and Castiel saw her sadness as clearly as he could see her slouching shoulders, the arch of her long neck, the shiny silver whistle strung around that neck. Dean had called to her, and silently, she had gone to stand with her brothers, who fuss ed over her scratches. She looked small next to them, young and fragile. Castiel hadn't understood why he was ordered to protect her, but hadn't needed to. He saw her, and knew he was meant to be her guardian. It had felt right.

A handful of weeks later, after watching her pain and her silence, knowing he had the power to change it and wanting to, deeply—he simply had. There had been no other choice in his mind. But that time, it had been the right choice, not without consequences or hardship, but the *right choice*. He didn't question it, not then and not now. That had been before his vessel. The vessel, this human body, was the place where the questions began.
His vessel and the constant call of emotions that came with it complicated everything, made him unsure of himself and seemingly incapable of reasoning with any semblance of clarity. Everything was muddled and distorted, skewed by the curse of emotion. The longer he was here, walking the earth in the body of a man, the more intensely he felt. He wasn't sure that he wanted to feel it. Any of it. And yet he did. He seemed to have no choice in the matter; there seemed no other path for him than the one he was on.

Drawing a deep breath, Cas looked around the snowy world that surrounded him, reflecting on the past two days which he had spent trying to uncover how Lucifer had summoned Alex with a mere snap of his fingers. The Enochian warding symbols on Alex's ribs—placed by Castiel himself—should have prevented Lucifer from knowing her location. But so far, Cas had learned nothing. He didn't know why. And the thought that the devil could, at any moment, lay hands on Alex while Cas remained blind to her location—disturbed him on the deepest levels imaginable.

His search for God; fruitless. His search for answers about Lucifer; thus far unsuccessful. He was discouraged and alone; feeling the absence of Alex in every way; in need of answers and possessing none; wishing for an escape from the constant noise in his mind, but finding quiet nowhere. Not even here, in a frozen wasteland, away from everyone and everything.

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**Two Weeks Later**

Ketchum, Oklahoma

*Legend says a pure soul can destroy evil from the inside.* Alex sat back from where she'd been hunched over Sam's laptop and she rubbed an eye with the heel of her palm. She'd been on the internet for way too long. A bunch of the more "mainstream" religions and mythologies had similar statements about a pure soul being able to destroy evil from within—that was the one recurring theme Alex was finding as she tried, kind of failing miserably, to find something, anything, to dispel or confirm what Crowley had told her. Whenever Sam and Dean were distracted or gone, she'd pull out the laptop and read everything she could on Lucifer—but she had yet to find a website that actually talked about literally killing him and/or how. She needed to get to some of Bobby's books, because the vague stuff she was finding on the web wasn't cutting it.

*Word on the grapevine is that you're the one who'll kill Lucy.*

Crowley's ominous words filled Alex's every waking moment. She didn't trust Crowley, or any demon for that matter, but what the hell was she supposed to make of the claim? She went back and forth between believing Crowley was just screwing around with her to wondering if he were being truthful. Where would such a rumor have even come from? And what kind of truth was there to it? It made no sense to Alex, who so far, had been ignored by demons and angels alike. Everyone was after Dean and Sam, and Alex had always been an afterthought (or forgotten completely). But maybe that was the whole point. Maybe they were distractions. But from what? Alex was driving herself crazy with questions and theories. She hadn't mentioned it to a soul, and didn't plan on it, in case Crowley was trying to get to her or mess with her family. She'd figure it out on her own and go from there. And besides—she had a feeling she hadn't seen the last of Crowley. Next time, she'd be ready for him.

Staring unseeingly at the laptop screen, which was currently switching to screen saver, Alex listened to the ringing silence of the motel room. She kind of wished, for a minute, that she hadn't wimped out about going along on the current hunt. If she'd gone along, she wouldn't be so restless and, well, bored. Sam and Dean had both been fine with her staying behind—*too* fine. But she also *really* hadn't wanted to go along, not this time. Checking into a mental ward—and even if it were to go undercover—*nope*. Not happening. Ever. She had a huge aversion to looney bins. Even driving
by them skeeved her out.

So, she remained behind, alone.

It had been two weeks already since Carthage. Dean hadn't quite been himself since. Well, had any of them? They had really thought the Colt would work. They were all the way back at square one with no clue how to kill the devil—or if it were even possible. Cas had seemed to think it wasn't possible from the beginning. Maybe he had been right.

A twinge of dysphoria ran through her veins at the thought of him. Cas hadn't shown up since Carthage—after he disappeared abruptly, upset and riled. She remembered the mangled silver handcuffs he'd ripped off of her wrists, glinting up at her from the ground. It was strange, but that had disturbed her the most of everything that had happened that night. How clearly shaken and freaked out he'd been, as well as the reminder of how physically powerful he was. Sometimes, she forgot he was that strong and capable. And yet, as commanding as he was, his alarmed behavior followed by his disappearance and subsequent silence worried her. Where had he gone? Was he okay?

Alex knew he'd called Dean a couple times on the phone to check in, but that was it, nothing else, and it almost felt like he was avoiding her. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong there, but she wasn't sure what. His absence was noticeable. Sometimes she looked up, expecting he'd be there. But he wasn't. Alex leaned her elbows onto the table, put her head in her hands, and scrubbed her palms across her face. She was so very tired, as usual. But more in her mind than her body. There was too much to carry. Ellen and Jo, dead, sacrificing their lives for a whole lot of nothing. Dean, withdrawing and holding Alex at arm's length, treating her like she was a child. Sam, hesitant and guilty and avoiding her. Cas, gone and silent and upset with her, she was pretty sure. Crowley's cryptic message, the idea that she might somehow play a role in this whole apocalypse thing. It was all so much. And she shouldered it alone. She took her face out of her hands, absently twisted Dad's wedding band around her index finger where it always was.

There was a soft sound in front of her, and she looked up, accidentally knocking a book off the edge of the table when she saw Cas standing there, a grim expression on his face. "I can't find out why Lucifer was able to summon you like that," he announced without any dalliance whatsoever. Surprised to see him, it took her a couple seconds to respond. "Uh, nice to see you too, Cas," she said as she shut the laptop discreetly, stood up, feeling a little flustered. Her heart rate had increased. Then, frowning, she wondered aloud, "wait—how'd you know where I was?"

He glanced at her, sidelong, seeming troubled, his face hard with a stern frown. "I called Sam and he told me," Cas replied, distracted, on edge. "That's beside the point. Lucifer should not have been able to do what he did—the warding sigil I put in place—I haven't been able to learn why… or how he was able to do that."

"It's okay, Cas," Alex said, looking at him, a little worried. "Just, uh, calm down," she told him, and she got another one of those hooded glances. He seemed shaken up, definitely not himself. His weird behavior was disconcerting.

He looked around the room intently. "Why are you here alone?" he asked.

Alex shrugged, a little ashamed of her self-perceived cowardice. "The job my brothers are doing isn't exactly my... cup of tea."

Cas looked at her, expression twisting up in confusion. "What do beverages have to do with it?"
A smile popped onto Alex's face at his question and she tried to hide it. He really had no clue how funny he was, which made it even funnier. She cleared her throat, trying to concentrate on answering his question. "They're, uh, hunting some kind of monster at a mental hospital here in town. Old hunting friend of Dad's is in there, Dean figured he owed the guy. But I, uh, don't do crazy houses." Cas's eyes narrowed just slightly as he looked at her half way. "A visit, I mean, yeah, okay. But being committed—not happening."

Cas, still distracted, made no response. He went to the motel room window and looked out, scowling. "You shouldn't be left alone right now," he said grimly. His bright blue eyes flickered over to hers briefly. "It's too dangerous."

Maybe he meant well, but the comment snapped something inside her. "Cas—I know you're my guardian angel or whatever, but I don't appreciate your implication." She stared at him hard. "I'm not helpless. I can defend myself and take care of myself."

He looked at her, eyebrows knit together, turned a little toward her. "Like you took care of yourself when Lucifer summoned you?"

Alex felt her eyebrows raise in surprise at his comment, and before she could stop herself, she was slinging an insult back. "Yeah and you were a big help stuck in your little fire circle, weren't you Castiel?" He was visibly hurt by her retort, and Alex regretted her word choice and tone immediately. Her gaze faltered away from him, and she felt herself fumbling for words, for some kind of apology. "Sorry. I'm... just frustrated right now."

And that was the truth. She was so, so frustrated. No matter what she did, she felt weaker every day than the last. She used to fight hard, fear nothing. But these days, she ran from everything, lived in fear of the future, in fear that everything she did was in vain. Dean was treating her like she was a fragile china doll, Cas insisted that everything was too dangerous for her, she chickened out of the latest hunt. She felt smothered and ineffective. She wanted to matter. But maybe Gabriel had been right, that she had no role, that she was only a victim. She looked at Cas silently.

Cas took a deep breath, came away from the window but stayed back, further than usual, looking at Alex hesitantly. "I know that you are not, as you say, helpless," he said somberly. His eyes fell away from hers. "But there are bigger enemies after you than before."

Alex looked at him bleakly, nodding ever so slightly, feeling defeated, sighing heavily. "I get it Cas," she said. "You're just looking out for me."

Again his eyes darted to hers. "Yes." His jaw clenched tightly. "It's not like before, when I knew where you were at all times. You're hidden from angels. From me." His eyes focused on some distant point to his right. Alex could almost see how agonized he was at this point. "But not from Lucifer..." he trailed off. Cas looked at her now, strangely.

Alex looked at him closely, worried again. She knew the whole Lucifer thing was bothering him, but there was something else. She could sense it. "What is it, Cas? Something else is wrong with you."

"I'm functioning fine," he replied darkly, not looking at her again.

"You sure?" Alex asked, stepping a little closer, trying to read him, see through him. The second she did that, his eyes snapped to her, his expression seemed to chill over. Alex froze—he looked like he wanted her to get away from him, and she didn't understand. "Did I... do something?" she asked softly, fearing the answer.
But Castiel, eyes now going back and forth over the floor in front of her feet, shook his head just once, his voice deep and disturbed. "No, of course not," he replied, almost mumbling. "I—I have to go."

And he vanished without warning, leaving Alex stung, mouth hanging slightly open as she stared at where he'd been. What the hell? Why was he acting like this? He'd been behaving strangely toward her ever since she'd tried to put a move on him the night before Carthage.

It had only been the touch of a hand and the intention of a kiss—but apparently that was enough to completely repulse him. That was the only explanation she could think of. Well, he had been acting a little oddly toward her before that, too, hadn't he? Alex felt such a deep sense of embarrassment and humiliation, thinking of herself and how idealistic and shortsighted she'd been. She had believed, for a while, like a damn lovesick highschooler, that Cas was interested in her. That the way he looked at her was because—she stopped the thought right there. This was ridiculous. She was ridiculous.

She sat down on one of the beds, feeling hollow and dumb. The motel room seemed emptier than it had before. She hated herself for the emotions she was feeling, and in a fit of rage she grabbed the lamp off the bedside table, ripping it clean out of the wall, cord and everything. She threw it at the opposite wall where it shattered. She buried her face in her palms, breathing hard to keep herself from crying.

Invisible to her, Castiel remained, watching Alex, his face a mask of torment.

A Week Later

"Wake up. Alex!" Dean's voice was really loud and right in her ear as she became aware that she was being shaken roughly. She tried shoving him away, but he just yanked her up by the shoulder—if that wasn't a rude awakening, she wasn't sure what was. Awake but barely, she glared at Dean, saw that Sam was awake, too, and looking equally unenthused.

"Dammit, Dean," Alex moaned. "This is the first time I've gotten to sleep in two days and you wake me up in the middle of the fucking night?"

Dean was ignoring her and jerking his jacket on. "Anna just came to me in a dream and said we got to meet her ASAP."

Alex stopped mid eye-rub, suddenly awake and suspicious. "Wait—whoa—Anna?"

"We shouldn't just drop everything and go, Dean," Sam put in tiredly, running a hand through his messy bed head hair. "Could be some kind of trap."

Dean seemed to think that suggestion was ridiculous. "A trap? Come on, Sam. This is Anna."

"Who we haven't seen or heard from in months, remember?" Alex reminded him and stood up, wishing she were still asleep. She was too tired to talk sense into her brother, but left with no other option. "Dean these are crazy times. I mean two days ago Sam swapped bodies with a teenager who was gonna hand him over to Lucifer—and we find out demons have a bounty out on your head… I'm just saying maybe we should be careful. We didn't even really know Anna."

Dean looked at his sister unhappily. "Speak for yourself," he said cryptically, getting a confused look in return.

"Alex is right, we need a second opinion on this," Sam said, pulling out his phone, the blue glow
lighting his tired face as he began scrolling through his contacts. "I'm calling Cas."

Dean snatched the phone from Sam. "No, you're not," he said, ignoring Sam's bitchface and wagging the phone at him. "I don't need him raining on my parade."

Sam grabbed for his phone. "Give me—" he growled, "the phone!" Alex watched her apparently five-year-old brothers fighting over the phone. She didn't have time for this stupidity.

She sighed, resigning, bracing herself then looked at the ceiling. "Hey Cas, can you get your ass over here?" Alex asked out loud, drawing strange looks from Sam and Dean.

"Hello," Cas said, suddenly in the middle of the room. Even though she'd called him, Alex was a little surprised he'd come, honestly, a little taken aback at how fast he responded. She looked at him briefly, then when his eyes met hers, she looked away immediately.

"You can do that?" Sam asked Alex, kind of awed, then in quick succession, began to frown. "Why didn't I know this? And give me that." He swiped the phone back from his brother.

"Need to know basis," Dean grumbled, then turned on Cas. "Sorry, wrong number," he said sarcastically. "You can go."

"No—" Sam said a little forcefully, giving Dean a surprisingly assertive stare. "Dean—tell Cas what you told us."

Castiel waited, listening, his expression somber and focused.

There was a very agitated huff. "Fine," Dean said, and looked at Cas, went over to him. "Anna came to for a visit in la la land. Said she needs our help right away. That she's been in prison this whole time. Oh. And that you're the one who got her put in there."

Alex and Sam, who stood back a little further, looked at Cas in unison. The angel's eyes had narrowed just slightly as he looked at Dean. "That's true, yes..."

"You wanna explain why?" Dean demanded gruffly.

Castiel paused a moment, and he was hard to read. He seemed mildly abashed. "I thought it was the right thing to do, at the time. Now I realize that it was a mistake." He was frowning, thinking. "This news is troubling." He looked at Dean, the frown deepening. "No one escapes Heaven. No one. You will not go and meet her."

Eyebrows raising, Dean crossed his arms. "Oh, and you're gonna stop me?" he asked, looking like he was ready to fight.

Castiel responded by stepping closer. "If I must." Dean's expression showed surprise as Cas leveled him with an unflinching stare. "Dean, if she's here, if she's escaped Heaven, it's because she was sent." Cas paused. "She is not to be trusted."

"This is Anna we're talking about," Dean protested.

"Who we knew for a few days when she was human," Alex reminded him. "She's been upstairs an awful long time, Dean." Both Cas and Dean looked at her in unison, and she had to force herself to not look at Cas like she wanted to.

Dean didn't look like he liked the implication, but cut his gaze to Sam as if for a second opinion. Alex finally looked at Cas then, unable to stop herself. His guarded, intent gaze was directed at her.
She looked away. She’d felt fine until he appeared... now her insides were a jumble again.

"I think Cas is right," Sam was saying to Dean, and Castiel turned his attention back to Dean.

"Give me the address she gave you," Cas said. "I'll discover her intentions."

Dean looked at him, clearly pissed, wanting to trust Anna but standing alone in the minority. He huffed, outnumbered. "Yeah. Fine."

A woman entered a large, dark, and empty warehouse. Wind swept through the interior, and with it came the sound of whispering voices. "Hello?" the woman called, her brilliant red hair whipping around her face in the wind. "Who's there?" Over her head, light bulbs burst, showering the entire warehouse in sparks. She stopped walking.

"Hello, Anna," Castiel said, appearing behind her. His voice echoed in the large, dark space.

She turned around slowly, her dark eyes looking at him guardedly. "Well," she said. "If I didn't know any better... I'd say the Winchesters don't trust me."

"I don't trust you," Cas corrected her, looking at his sister angel carefully. "I wouldn't let them come." He began to circle her, giving her a wide berth, looking at her intently.

She kept turning to face him. "And why is that?" she asked.

"If you're out of prison, it's because they let you out," Cas said, glancing around the warehouse, watchful, expectant of some kind of trick or trap. "And they sent you here to do their dirty work."

"What makes you so sure of that?" Anna asked.

"Because I've experienced..." he trailed off, remembering. "Heaven's persuasion."

"You mean when you gave me to them," she said, and there was clear bitterness there.

Cas looked at her somberly, regretting what he had done. "That was a mistake." He said, and paused. "Anna, whatever they sent you here to do—"

"They didn't send me," Anna insisted almost angrily. "I escaped."

"No one escapes," Castiel replied testily—she was lying, she had to be—but Anna almost seemed amused at his comment.

"All these centuries, and you're underestimating me now?" She asked. "I escaped. I'm working on my own." She paused, mouth thinning a little. "Essentially."

"All right," Cas said, going along with her momentarily. "If you're not one of them, then what do you want?"

"I want to help." She sounded emphatic, but Castiel almost had to smile at the way she underestimated him.

"Then what are doing with that knife?" He asked, looking at her in superiority.

Her expression faded. She was caught. She grudgingly pulled out a knife—not an angel blade. "I'm not allowed to defend myself?" She asked. Another flimsy attempt on her part.
"Against whom?" Castiel asked. "That blade doesn't work against angels. It's not like this one." His angel blade was in his palm now, where she could see it and be aware of how prepared he was to fight her, if need be. Her eyes flickered from the blade to him, her eyebrows moved closer together. "Maybe you're not working for Heaven," Castiel said. "But there's something you're not telling me."

Anna's chin raised and she looked at him long, hard, and silent. Then finally, she spoke. "Sam Winchester has to die."

Castiel's eyes narrowed. He had suspected her of as much.

"I'm sorry, but we have no choice. Heaven is divided, Castiel," Anna said. "Some want the apocalypse. Others want to avoid it at all costs."

"And you want to avoid the apocalypse by killing Sam," Castiel surmised darkly.

"Yes," Anna said simply. "He's Lucifer's vessel."

"He's not the only one."

"What, that guy Nick?" Anna shook her head, as if that were a ridiculous thing to suggest. "He's burning away as we speak. No. There may be other vessels, but Sam is the only vessel that matters. You know what that means: If Lucifer can't take Sam, his whole plan short-circuits. No fight with Michael, no Croatoan virus." She looked at him unflinchingly. "I assume you've heard about the grim future ahead for everyone, Cas? For you?"

He looked at her sharply. "Bit and pieces."

Anna was frowning. "Maybe someone should show you the big picture. Because I've seen it all." She looked pensive, eyes falling away from his. "And it's not pretty." She looked at him again. "We kill Sam Winchester and none of it has to happen."

Cas raised his chin slightly. "Even if you could kill Sam, Satan would just bring him back to life."

"Not after I scatter his cells across the universe," Anna said grimly. Cas turned away, disturbed as Anna continued. "They'll never find him. Not all of him."

Castiel clenched his jaw in deep thought. She did have a point. And maybe half a year ago, he would have gone along with her plan without a second thought. But things had changed, and he couldn't even allow himself to consider killing Sam. He turned back to her. "We'll find another way," he said, attempting to forge a common ground with her.

"Oh, will we?" Anna asked, sounding darkly amused. "Last time I checked we weren't really even on the same side anymore, Castiel. You've changed."

He turned slowly to look at her again, seeing no reason to dodge her accusation. He knew she was right. "Yes, I have." It was strange though, because she'd encouraged him to change. Now she seemed filled with disappointment at the fact. But she seemed different, too.

Anna stepped a little closer, beseeching him. "What I'm suggesting is simple—clean—reasonable. Why are you so adamant about protecting Sam Winchester? It's in vain. It ends this way, or it ends with the apocalypse and Lucifer walking the earth and subsequently destroying it." Castiel stared at the ground to her left. Anna continued. "How's the Colt working out? Or the search for God? Don't you see? Nothing else is working. If you want to stop the devil, this is how."
He looked at her at that point. He hadn't given up on God, and he wasn't ready to concede that there were no options left. He wanted to believe there was a way, somehow. "I disagree."

She looked frustrated and angry. "Cas, I didn't want to do this. But you need to see exactly how bad it gets for the people you care about. I may have been in prison this whole time, but I've seen, Cas." She raised her eyebrows for just a second. "Everything you've been doing." Her eyes looked at him meaningfully. "Everything you will do. To Alex." At the mention of her, Castiel felt his defenses immediately rise. Anna seemed to see it, too. She almost looked like she pitied him. "You care about her very much, don't you?" Anna paused, not seeming to entirely understand. "Well, maybe seeing what happens to her if you refuse to kill Sam… maybe that will change your mind."

Cas frowned, not understanding what she was talking about—was she referring to what Dean had told him, how apparently, in the future, he somehow got Alex killed? Anna was stepping a little closer, raising her hand toward him, two fingers extended. "This might be a little intense," she said, and Castiel stepped back, tried to avoid the touch, but her fingers brushed his temple and it was too late.

In just a flash, he saw vibrant detailed scenes that flashed in front of him without any time for him to even react.

In the span of perhaps two seconds, these are the things that Castiel saw...

Cas saw himself and Alex, sitting with their backs against a wrecked car that was turned on its side. He wore the trench coat. She had a shotgun. Bullets whistled by, and Cas was staring at his hands, almost in horror. "No, I'm telling you, it's gone!" he shouted, and he sounded panicked. Alex, gripping her shotgun close, looked at him in disbelief.

"How can it just be gone?" she asked, and he shook his hand, unable to respond. Alex craned her neck the other way, attempting to get a view of their assailants. A bullet barely missed her head, and she sat back, fast.

"Well, I wish I brought another shotgun," she commented wryly, even as more gunfire popcorned through the air. Cas looked like he was about to be physically ill. "Hey," Alex said, demanding his attention, grabbing one of his shoulders. "Keep your head. Right? We're gonna get out of here."

He said nothing, but his alarm, panic, and dread was visible. Alex attempted to get him to look her in the eyes by saying his name. "Cas." When that didn't work, she put a hand on his neck, her thumb resting on his jawline, said his name again. He finally looked at her in the eye. Despite the war zone, the softest little helpless smile sprung onto Alex's face. "Looks like it's my turn to protect you."

The scene faded into a new one, where Cas, still in his trench coat, was pacing a motel room. "You're far too reckless," he was saying, angrily. "I lose my, I don't know, angel mojo today, and you risk your life like that? What would happen if you got injured?"

"Then I would be injured," Alex said, not hostile, but not pleasant either. "This is my life Cas—I'm not gonna sit back and sip margaritas while Satan is trying, and sort of succeeding, to destroy the world. I'm sorry you lost your healing power stuff, but I risked my life before you, and I'll risk my life now."

Cas looked at her almost sullenly. "Well I don't like it."

"You never have," Alex pointed out. She sounded a little annoyed, but after she said it, there was a grudging little smile pulling at her lips.
Quiet, standing in front of her, Cas was looking down at the ground, then at her. "I just don't think I could live if you died," he said softly, and her smile fell. She looked stunned and suddenly vulnerable. There was a long silence, and then he took her hand gently, looking down as his thumb stroked across the knuckles.

"...I'm not going anywhere," Alex said softly, trying to sound confident, and he gave her a look like he wanted to believe, but was too afraid to be able. He pulled her close into a tight hug, and her arms circled around him, inside the trench coat. His eyes were shut tightly. One of his hands gripped the back of her head. The scene faded away into darkness.

A new scene. Dean was pacing in front of a very beat-up truck, scanning the distance, agitated. Behind him there was a campsite, cabins and cars. It was dusk. Dean took a long swig from a bottle of Jack Daniel, then unhappy that he'd drained the last of the contents, threw it down to the ground where it shattered.

An old Toyota Landcruiser SUV pulled in just then, and Dean, murderous, zeroed in on it. Alex and Cas got out. Cas looked different—rugged and worn out. He was wearing different clothes: hunting boots, faded jeans, a wrinkled button up with a well-worn army-green cargo jacket. His hair was a little longer, raked forwards messily, and he had the beginnings of a beard. Alex looked tanner than before, a little older and more mature. She was healthier physically, not as thin as she'd been in the past. Her hair was messy and her shirt was lopsided. She was straightening it and glancing at Dean, who was bearing down on the two of them with a glare. Cas saw, and was already taking a defensive stance, standing in front of Alex purposefully.

"Why the hell are you two forty minutes later than everyone else?" he demanded.

"Got lost," Cas said casually, glancing at Dean with mild irritation, then grimaced, wrinkling his nose. "Dean—how much did you drink? You reek."

Dean shot Cas a death glare, his voice already bordering on a shout. "Listen, this is the damn end of the world and I don't have time for you two to be screwing around!"

"Relax Dean," Alex said, but it sounded more like a command than an attempt to soothe her brother.

Dean was outraged. "Oh, relax? Yeah, great! Lucifer released the freakin' Croatoan virus, he's out there trying to kill us, and this little group of a hundred people is depending on me to tell them what to do and how to survive. Yeah, it's a real relaxing environment!"

"Look Dean, we're all living in the same hell, okay?" Alex fired back angrily. "Why do you have to act like you're the only one having a hard time?"

"Oh cry me a river, yeah, you two are having such a damn hard time, aren't you?" Dean asked, looking between the two of them pointedly. Alex rolled her eyes at her brother, annoyed and pissed. He seemed to know something about them and was unhappy about it. Maybe it had something to do with their flushed skin and askew clothes.

Cas just looked at Dean, stepping a little closer, narrowing his eyes meaningfully. His voice was low when he spoke. "Back off, Dean."

Dean's head turned smoothly, his expression nasty. "You got some nerve, man," he slurred. "This is none of your damn business."

"Actually, it is his business," Alex said immediately, not even giving Cas a chance to speak. Dean
looked back at her, glaring and Alex returned the glare. "Cas and I are together, Dean, okay? We have been for awhile now."

There was a silence. Dean looked at Cas, then at Alex, his jaw tight, nostrils flared. "And when were you planning to tell me this?"

"What, to get your permission?" Alex asked sarcastically, and Dean exploded.

"You don't think I deserve to know what's going on in my little sister's life?" He moved toward her suddenly, bearing down on her angrily, almost violently, and Cas blocked his way, stepping pointedly, holding out a hand and looking ready to deck Dean if need be.

"Dean—get back," he said. Dean stopped, a piercing glare aimed at the other man. "Maybe you would know what was going on in her life if you ever made an effort to be part of it, Dean," Cas said acidly, defensively. Dean's expression chilled further. "You haven't even talked to her any time in the last year except to yell at her or tell her where she messed up a mission! And besides that, last time I checked," Cas continued, voice brimming with hostility and cynicism, "she's the one in charge of making her own decisions, not you."

Dean suddenly got an odd smile on his face, then looked down, chuckling.

"What's so funny?" Cas asked suspiciously.

Dean looked back at him, his expression superior and hateful. "You," Dean said coolly. "You were a pretty sorry excuse for an angel, but you're an even more pitiful excuse for a man."

"Hey," Alex barked, coming forward and shooting daggers at Dean with her eyes. "Don't talk to him like that!" She looked at Dean in disgust. "You're a real asshole these days, you know that?"

"Maybe I am!" Dean shouted, once again wrathful. "But you two don't get to mess around like friggin' idiots when you're out on a mission again, you hear me? You come back when I say, no earlier, no later. There's a reason I'm in charge around here, and if you two want to try and go against me, I got no problem kicking you out!"

There was a short silence. "Listen to yourself, Dean," Alex said, her anger fading into disillusioned sadness. "Who are you? What happened to my brother?"

"What happened to your brother?" he repeated, face twisted in anger. He was unresponsive to her softer tone, his voice still bordering on a shout. "A whole lot of shit, that's what!" He looked at her resentfully. "And it doesn't help that you're being a lying bitch about everything."

At that comment, Cas glaring dangerously, once again stepping into Dean's line of sight, his patience growing thin, his anger becoming more visible. He shoved Dean away, hard. "Watch the way you speak to her."

Dean steadied himself, seeming to find the shove amusing. There was a deep chuckle in Dean's throat. "That's sweet Cas," he said darkly, "trying to stand up for your little whore."

The words were barely all the way out of his mouth before Cas sprung forward and punched him in the face, sent him stumbling backwards with a split lip. "Don't call her that!" Cas shouted, then in confused anger shook his head, staring at Dean, aghast. "Alex is your sister!" Cas shouted almost sounding like he was pleading. "What is wrong with you, Dean?"

Dean spat blood down onto the ground. "I call 'em like I see 'em, angel wings," he said cynically then wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, gave them a dirty look, as if he were considering
Then he shook his head, a dead-in-the-eyes smile on his face. "You're not even worth it, man." He turned and walked off into the night.

Cas turned to Alex, who looked deeply hurt and troubled, close to tears and shaken up by what had happened. She stared after her brother for a moment, arms hugged around herself. She looked at Cas, who had turned around to her, gently touched her arm, was now looking at her in concern. "I don't recognize him at all anymore, Cas," Alex said softly, wounded. She looked down, and Cas stroked the hair against the side of her head tenderly, then kissed her forehead lingeringly, comforting her. He then looked back at where Dean had gone, expression troubled.

"Come on," he said, putting his arm around her shoulder and focusing completely on her. "Let's go home."

The scene faded away into the interior of a cabin. It was bright inside, daytime. From the flowery trees visible through the window, it was clearly spring time. The cabin was decorated simply. Some yellow wildflowers sat in a vase on a small table. The table had two chairs. A painting of a sunset hung on one of the walls. There was a large, unmade bed, a little kitchenette, and a small couch. That's where Cas was sitting—one foot propped up and in a splint.

"I hate this," Cas said, forlorn.

Across from him, pulling a box out of the closet, Alex turned to look at him sympathetically. "I know." She wore a small shirt with tiny straps, and it bared some of her midriff. She came to sit beside him, the box on her lap.

"I'm useless," Cas continued. At that, Alex looked at him pointedly, wordlessly. He looked back at her, and she gave him a little look, a little 'don't go there' smile. He didn't seem to be able to stay unhappy, his face softening into a smile. He turned his attention to shifting himself, gingerly repositioning his foot. He hissed in pain.

Alex looked at him, wincing sympathetically. "I'm sorry. Broken bones suck." She shifted the box on her knees, tried to make light of the situation. "Even angels bleed sometimes, huh?"

Cas got quieter, a little somber. "I haven't been an angel for awhile now."

Alex looked at him sidelong, smiling crookedly, shrugging a little. "Well, you'll always be one to me." Cas sent her a sidelong look, and Alex looked down, suddenly flustered. "That, uh... sounded better in my head," she said, and looked at him again, grinning, laughing at herself. He wasn't laughing at her, and her embarrassment faded into a meaningful gaze. His eyes mirrored hers.

"So." Alex cleared her throat. "Uh, wanna help me look through this junk?" She asked, and put the box between them, brushing the sappy moment aside. "I haven't looked in here since I packed it all up a couple years ago." She pulled out a photo. It was her, Sam, and Dean, smiling, arms around each other. Her face immediately saddened. "Now I remember why." She looked at the picture somberly for a long, quiet moment, then looked at Cas, troubled, exhaling. "I don't think I can keep this."

Cas held out his hand, motioned for her to give it to him. "I'll keep it for you," Cas said. "If you get rid of it, you'll always regret it."

She looked at the photograph intently for a minute. "I should've gone after Sam while I still could have," she said softly to herself. Then she handed over the photograph to Cas, her expression a little blank. She went back to looking through the box, visibly pushing her thoughts aside, and Cas looked at her sidelong for a moment. He then helped her sort through the box.
He fished out a shiny silver object. "Well, hello!" he commented, turning it over in his hand.

Alex looked surprised. "My whistle?" she asked. "I forgot I even kept that."

He held it out to her, and she took it, looked at it in a mixture of fond reminiscence and sadness. She then looked at him openly, and there was such a depth, such a mutual understanding in the shared gaze. "You should have this," she said suddenly.

Cas looked surprised. "Me? No. Why?"

Alex moved the box onto the floor, scooted closer to Cas, pulled out the silver chain that was hidden beneath his shirt, undoing the clasp. "This whistle was pretty much a part of me for twenty-five years." Her eyes darted up to his. "You changed my whole life." She held his gaze, looked at him significantly. "Not just by giving me my voice."

He looked touched, but still protested even as she was putting the whistle onto the chain—from which a silver ring already hung. "I can't—" Cas started.

Alex stopped a minute, looked at him, eyebrows raised, a little playful, a little challenging. "Say no to me one more time, Castiel."

He seemed to give up on saying no, his eyes softening as a fond, crooked smile spread over his face. "Wouldn't dare."

"That's what I thought," she said teasingly, and fastened the clasp back, then paused, looking at the whistle with an odd expression, a soft almost-smile. "You know, it's kind of insane, but... I'm glad I was mute." She looked at Cas again, whose expression was a little perplexed. Alex's lopsided smile was paired with surprisingly shy eyes. "It meant I got to meet you." She tucked it all back under his shirt, and Cas caught her hand in his, held it a minute, and wordlessly, they looked into each other's eyes.

Cas's eyes seemed to darken, fill with intention. "Come here," he told her huskily, and Alex complied immediately. She climbed onto his lap, her legs on either side of him as her arms circled his neck, one of her hands against the back of his head, fingers in his hair. His hands came to rest on either side of her waist and he looked at her openly, adoringly—there was no other way to describe it. "You... are the most perfect woman alive," he said.

Visibly embarrassed, smiling, Alex pressed a kiss to his lips. A slow, simple kiss. He smiled against the kiss, eyes closed. She drew back a little, put a finger on his lips as his eyes opened again. She seemed to be trying to stop him from saying anything else. He appeared to be amused by that and spoke against her finger, playful. "Well, I would know," he said, shrugging in jest.

"Please just shut up," she said, grinning before she kissed him again, at first just to silence him. And then, after a couple seconds, the kiss deepened, became more passionate. His hands rested lightly on her waist, skimmed down to her hips, then gripped a little firmer, pulled her a little closer as her arms more fully circled him, her hands cupping the back of his head and a shoulder, too. They pulled apart, just slightly, and Alex rested her forehead against his. Eyes now closed, Cas smiled softly. Content. Alex's eyes went up and down, skimming the length of his face, then leaned in to kiss him again, made a soft sound that could only be described as sensual as Cas's hand began to move upward from her hip to her rib cage, moving upwards steadily.

It all faded away.

Cas was chopping firewood outside the cabin, around the back. Orange leaves dotted the trees
surrounding the area—autumn. There was a solid thunk as Cas split a log and he stood back for a moment, wiped sweat away with the back of his sleeve. Alex appeared suddenly in the doorway of the cabin, her face anxious and body language tense. Cas saw her arrive and was about to smile at her, then took in her appearance and facial expression. "Cas—come inside," she said. "Fast." She disappeared back into the cabin, even as Cas was wordlessly dropping the axe and doing just as she said. He climbed the few steps two at a time and entered the cabin to find Alex standing in the middle of the cabin, arms folded, expression intensely wrong.

"What is it?" Cas asked, going to her, concerned. He grasped her arms gently, trying to get her to look at him. "Alex?"

She finally looked at him, expression close to horror. "Do you, uh, remember that last run the group did into the city? When you got mad at me for sneaking off to go to the drug store?"

"Yes, of course I remember—" Cas said, not understanding, sounding more than a little worried. "That was yesterday."

"Right, well—" Alex said, shaking her head, struggling. "I was getting a test." She seemed out of breath. "I thought I was just late." She looked at him in trepidation. "But… I'm, I'm not."

Cas looked lost, and even more worried. Alex swallowed, her voice lowering to a frightened whisper. She looked close to tears. "I uh, I." Her jaw worked oddly. "I'm pregnant, Cas." He blinked twice. Alex waited for him to say something, then seemed to think he didn't understand. "With a baby," she clarified.

He let go of her, took a step back, as if he'd had the breath knocked out of him. "I know what pregnant means," he said. He was staring at the floor, expression unreadable.

"What are we gonna do?" Alex asked, close to tears, her eyes downcast, blinking rapidly. Her voice was strained and frightened. "This is no place for a baby, for a child."

Cas looked at her, took in her distress again, and then caught her hands up in his, returning his full attention to her, trying to catch her gaze. "Our child," he said gently, chin bent down, eyes seeking hers. He sounded surprised and in awe and a little worried all at the same time. Alex's face softened as she met his gaze. "Our child," Cas said again, looking at her with eyes full of many different things—apprehension, uncertainty, but most of all, love and a growing intense emotion. "We made something, together… a new life." He sounded like the thought itself stirred him down to the soul.

Alex looked at him, a certain kind of stunned hopefulness softening her features. "I just… I thought maybe you wouldn't want this," she confessed.

Cas looked at her in soft bewilderment. "I want everything with you."

Alex looked at him intently, breathing hard suddenly, emotional. "You're sure?"

"Yes I'm sure," he said immediately, touching the side of her face sweetly.

Alex looked somewhat relieved, but only for a moment. She looked frightened again, and her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper. "Cas, I'm just so friggin' scared. I don't know how to do this."

Cas pulled her close, into his arms, soothing her. "We're in this together," he told her quietly. Alex had her head laid on his shoulder, eyes closed tight. Her arms were locked around him, seeking reassurance. One of his hands came there against the back of her scalp, cradling her head firmly and comfortably. He pressed a single kiss there on the top of her head and there was a smile on his
lips and great, watery emotion in his eyes. He shut his eyes, seemed to breathe her in. For a minute they were still like that, then Alex pulled back a little, enough to look at him. She looked like she were thinking a million things, and Cas seemed to know it, too. "I'm gonna take care of us," he told her, and those simple words visibly relieved her. A brave smile was coming over her face despite her worry and he pulled her into another solid embrace. He was smiling and his eyes were filled with light and tears of joy. "We'll find a way. We always do."

The scene ended.

Alex was pacing back and forth on a cabin porch, her expression tense and worried. "Chuck it's been two days and we haven't heard from them," she said.

Chuck was watching her from the corner of his eye. "You know how those old CB radios are, Alex. Probably quit working. They'll be back. They always are."

Alex stopped pacing and leaned against the railing of the porch of her and Cas's cabin, one hand on her head as if she were tired or had a headache. Her other hand rested on her lower back. Chuck looked at her sidelong. "Are you sick or something?"

"No, why?" Alex asked slowly, mistrustfully.

"I just, I guess I can't believe you stayed behind on this mission. Seemed like a pretty big one." Alex said nothing, staring straight ahead of herself.

Chuck tried again. "It just seems kinda out of character for you to not go… you always go."

"Not this time, Chuck," Alex said cryptically. Chuck seemed perplexed and even suspicious, but let it go. At that moment, one of the younger guards ran past, shouting over his shoulder, "They're back!"

Alex craned her neck, trying to see down the twisting road. Dean's Jeep had just become visible, heading up the caravan. "Thank God," Alex breathed, so relieved. Chuck glanced at her. She was already taking off down the porch and toward the front of the camp where the cars would circle up. The other campers who had stayed behind were gathering, forming a small crowd as the cars pulled in. Dean swung out of his Jeep, and Cas jumped down off the back of the Jeep, slinging his gun back on its strap, scanning the crowd.

Alex pushed her way through everyone, making a beeline for him. She didn't even see Dean, passed right by him. Catching sight of her, Cas grinned, relieved, maybe as much as she was. He had a cut on his face, grime and dirt. Alex ran the last couple steps to him, threw her arms around his neck even as he wrapped his arms around her, lifting her up into a tight embrace. "I am never letting you go anywhere alone, ever again!" Alex told him, clinging to him tightly, legs wrapped around his strong waist. He pulled back to look up at her, his eyes wrinkled from his wide grin.

"What, miss me?" he wisecracked, and kissed her through his smile. Dean watched the reunion grimly, then stalked off in the opposite direction.

The scene faded.

Alex and Cas were standing, binoculars in hand, on a plateau that overlooked a small town. Cas's Landcruiser was parked next to them. "But this is the last time," Cas was saying. "This recon stuff, you know, pretty safe, but still." He lowered his binoculars. "Not safe enough. Forget the raids and Dean's crazy missions."

Alex was quiet a minute, and the breeze whipped her hair around her face for a couple seconds. "I
agree."

Cas looked at her like he must have misheard. "You what?" He looked at her strangely. "You're not going to argue with me?"

Alex lowered her binoculars too and looked at him sheepishly then shook her head. "No."

Cas turned and faced her straight on, put a hand to her forehead. "Are you feeling all right?"

"A little sick, actually," she admitted. He lowered his hand, concerned, and she batted him away good-naturedly. "I'm fine, I'm fine." She sighed. "I just know, for now, my out-in-the-field-days are gonna have to come to a close. To stay safe. To keep... the baby safe." She said 'the baby' as if it were still a foreign concept to her. A daunting but exciting concept.

"I can stay behind with you," Cas offered, drawing a surprised look from Alex. "I don't have to go out on the missions, if it would make you feel better. You wouldn't have to worry about me."

"You'd do that for me?" Alex asked, touched.

"Of course," Cas replied, as if he didn't understand how she could think otherwise. "You're the most important thing to me. Out of everything."

Alex cocked her head to the side, a fond little smile on her lips. "You sure do know how to make a girl feel special," she said teasingly, grabbing him by the collar of his jacket, and he grinned at her, kissed her as she pulled him close. It was a deep, familiar kiss, and he held her as though he knew everything about her and cherished every single thing.

She curled into him after the kiss, and he wrapped his arms around her protectively, his chin resting on top of her head. "We're gonna do this, Alex," he said softly, reflective. "Have a life. A regular life in a crazy world. Our family." He said the word family in such a gentle, awed way.

Alex frowned over his shoulder, squinting into the distance, straightening. Something had caught her eye. "What was that?"

Cas looked back where she was looking. "What was what?"

"I thought I saw some movement up at the farmhouse," Alex said, setting her binoculars down on the hood of the SUV.

"An animal, maybe? There's never Croats out this far from the city," Cas said, but was pulling his pistol out anyway, checking the chamber. "I'll go check."

"Not alone," Alex said firmly, and he looked at her, clearly not wanting to have this argument. She was already drawing her pistol and checking it for ammo.

Cas looked like he was thinking about protesting, then let it go, told her, "just stay close."

Together, they approached the run-down farmhouse, sweeping the area with weapons ready. "There," Alex said, motioning her aimed pistol toward the window to the right of the main doorway.

There was a flash of movement, and Cas tensed, held out an arm. "Stay back," he muttered. Alex complied, but stayed on alert, her gun covering him, her eyes darting around, making sure they weren't being approached from behind or the side.
Cas slowly climbed the stairs up onto the large porch, his pistol held high. "I don't see—" he whispered... then froze. He muttered a curse word even as the front door burst open. Croatoans, at least seven of them, burst out, hungry for blood. "Get back, get back!" Cas was yelling as he emptied his ammo into them, stumbling backwards down the stairs. It happened in less than three seconds—one of the Croats jumped off the porch railing and straight onto Alex, knocking her to the ground, catching her completely off guard.

Cas didn't even see it happen, but he heard her scream and whirled to look at her, almost getting himself killed in the process. The last Croat grabbed onto him, tried to bite him—savagely, Cas pistol-whipped his attacker across the face and shot him point-blank, then immediately charged the couple of feet over to where Alex was. He grabbed the Croat off of her, throwing a sloppy punch and then shot the guy two times in the chest, barely able to hold the gun. The Croat fell over, dead, forgotten.

Alex was laying flat on the ground, blinking, stunned as Cas dropped to her level, seeing the bloody wound on her shoulder and visibly losing something mentally, Cas let out a soft, shocked sound. He shakily gathered her into his arms, supporting her, and she looked at him with glazed over eyes, confused. She was breathing heavily. It was a deep, vicious bite wound on her shoulder, and blood spilled out, down her arm, staining his clothes too as he pulled her close. Cas fumbled, pulling her up as he stood and carried her away, stumbling back toward their vehicle. Alex's head lolled back and she grimaced, groaned, sounding dazed.

"You're, you're okay, you're gonna be fine," Cas told her frantically, setting her down in a sitting position against the tire of the car, looking at her wound, confounded and alarmed and at a terrified loss. "Fine, just fine, let me see," he was continuing. Alex was looking at him in shock. Their eyes met, both pairs filled with dread. She shut her mouth, swallowed, closed her eyes tight.

"Cas—" she managed, then opened her eyes. They were wide and fearful. Knelt in front of her, Cas had a useless, shaking hand pressed hard down on her wound. "Cas, I'm gonna turn," she said in the softest voice.

He shook his head in vehement denial. "No, no you're not." He sounded desperate, angry almost. Alex gave him an unexpectedly brassy look, but it was tainted by uncoordinated wooziness. "Do you see this bite?"

He did, but his expression showed nothing but stubborn, fearful defiance. He almost didn't seem to hear what she'd said. "You're going to be fine," he insisted again in a rising, choked voice, not really looking at her, his words beginning to run together. "I'm going to get you out of here, and, and you're gonna be fine Alex, I'm gonna get you home, and you'll be—"

"Cas, stop!" Alex suddenly said, and grabbed his face, made him look at her. She seemed suddenly and absolutely terrified. She breathed hard a few times out of her nose, then her eyes fell downwards to her bleeding shoulder. She sounded hollow. "We both know I am not gonna be fine."

"No," Cas protested weakly, his voice breaking hopelessly. "Don't say that," he pleaded. Alex looked at him, filled with a sudden, quiet, dread-filled resolve. Cas saw it, and went still, looked down in cold dread. Alex held out her loaded pistol to him. He looked from it to her in disbelief, face gone slack. Her eyebrows moved closer together as her eyes pleaded silently with him.

He was shaking his head weakly, silently. Alex's voice hitched. "Please Cas, you have to..." she whispered, eyes filling with tears. She pushed the gun at him, into the palm of his hand, using her other hand to close his hand around it. They stayed like that a minute, Cas looking at her in lost,
terrified dismay. He didn't move.

Alex groaned suddenly, screwing her eyes shut and gritting her teeth in pain, to which Cas looked even more terrified, grabbed her harder—and his eyes were shining with unshed, panicking tears. "Cas, please," Alex said, growing more urgent. He took the gun, wrapped his hand around it, but looked at her unmovingly, shaking his head again, adamant. A horrible sobbing sound escape out of his mouth. "If you don't, then I have to, and I can't," Alex said brokenly, barely able to speak in an even tone.

"I'm supposed to keep you safe," Cas said, looking at her in abject horror. "Not kill you!"

"There's no other choice," Alex said. "If I turn and then hurt you—" she stopped herself, eyes tearing up. "It's too late for me, Cas!" she said, crying now. Cas just stared at her, dismayed. "Please. Just do it!" Alex insisted, panicked, voice rising in fear and urgency.

Cas's face broke. "I can't, I can't!"

Alex grabbed the gun by the barrel with shaking hands, practically stabbing it into her stomach. "Cas, shoot me!" she screamed. "Shoot me!"

Their eyes locked and Cas sobbed out loud, his face the picture of misery and grief. "I'm so sorry," he whispered in a tight whisper. The gun cocked with a loud click and they clung to each other tenderly, weeping for what was about to happen. He touched his forehead to hers and whispered through choked tears I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry over and over again and she shut her eyes, waiting, trusting him in this final moment, whispering that she loved him.

And then the sound of the gunshot cracked through the thin autumn air like thunder.

Alex and Cas stared at each other in complete shock and horror—like neither could believe he had actually pulled the trigger. And then Alex whimpered in intense pain, face crumpling, and Cas threw the gun aside, trembling, beside himself, pulling her into his lap, cradling her with great affection as blood pooled across her abdomen.

"I'm… I'm so sorry," Cas said, barely able to speak through tears. His face was twisted in defeat and horror and gleamed with tear tracks.

Alex blinked strangely, staring up at the sky. "It's... okay," she said softly, sounding far away. Her face then scrunched up in pain and she made a horrible sound. Cas gripped her tighter as she breathed hard through gritted teeth, stared at the sky again. "Cas… do you... d-do you think there's still a Heaven up there?" she asked, then looked at him with teary eyes. She suddenly looked so much younger and scared, unguarded and vulnerable. "Where we can be together again?"

"Yes, of course there's still a Heaven," Cas told her immediately through his tears. She looked disillusioned, like she didn't believe him. She groaned again, sobbed, thrashed in pain, curling into his arms pathetically.

Her breathing was becoming shallow and labored, but she looked up at him and suddenly there was a brave little smile through the pain. At the sight of it, Cas touched the side of her face in broken tenderness, hand tightening as his expression struggled not to break. She looked at him a moment, eyes thoroughly traveling his face. "I love you. So much," Alex whispered, eyes locked onto his, expression soft, anxious. She grew intense, "Promise me, Cas." She swallowed, winced a minute, pained. "Promise you won't blame yourself for this, okay? I—" she grimaced again. "I know how you are," she said through gritted teeth, but fought to maintain eye contact.
"Alex—" he managed waveringly, looking at the woman in his arms with such guilt and pain. He pressed a long, aching kiss to her forehead. Her eyes fluttered a little, and she looked up at him, her hand weakly coming to touch his face, and then going to the back of his neck, pulling him toward her for one last kiss, which he readily gave. It was gut-wrenchingly gentle, slow, fervent, and they both made soft sounds of grief at the action. She grabbed one of his hands when they pulled apart, looking afraid and in pain. He gently grasped her hand in return, running his thumb over the top of her hand gently, tracing familiar lines. His face was a battlefield of pain, denial, and grief, each fighting for dominance. As if sleepy, Alex blinked and her eyes got hazy. And then her eyes went dark and her body lost its life and went completely limp in his arms.

Cas looked like he'd stopped breathing, as if he were frozen. He stared at Alex motionlessly, stunned. He asked her name softly, and when no reply came, when it was clear to him that she had died, he lost it, face crumbling as he clutched her body to himself. He wept loudly, a completely lost man.

The scene faded.

"Yeah, Chuck, it's just—" Dean looked over his shoulder, pausing mid sentence, frowning at the sound of a car coming.

"Ah good, they're back," Chuck said, sounding relieved.

"Geez, and it's about damn time, too," Dean grumbled at the sight of Cas's Land Cruiser pulling up. Then, he frowned deeper, pausing. Only Cas was in the car. And then, as he stopped the car and got out, both Dean and Chuck went still. Cas, who looked horrible and pale, had blood all over him and the look on his face seemed to cue them in to the horrible bad news. He looked at them with a broken expression, shut his door, opened the back door, pulled something out. Dean seemed to stop breathing when he saw what Cas had pulled out of the back seat. Cas was carrying Alex, who was covered in blood and limp. Dean walked forward as if in a dream, for a moment in total shock.

"No," Dean said softly. His sister's skin color was unnaturally pale, bloodless, her lips pale and soft blue. She was clearly dead. Dean, who had stopped in his tracks, was suddenly heaving heavy, racing breaths, horrified and again he said, "no," more adamant that time, stepping back away from Cas in horrified denial.

"She—it was a Croatoan—" Cas said blankly, looking in Dean's general direction unseeingy. His fingers clenched into Alex's body like vices.

"You—you weren't supposed to let her get hurt," Dean said, shellshocked.

"I know," Cas said woodenly, looking down, glazed over.

"You were supposed to protect her," Dean said again, hollow. Then, suddenly, enraged. "You were supposed to protect her!" Cas looked at Dean completely devoid of emotion. He just stood there, holding Alex.

Dean went forward, reached out for his sister, barely holding himself together. "Give her to me," he said, grief breaking his voice pathetically.

Cas's eyes snapped to Dean's. "No." Cas looked down at Alex for the first time, and his expression distorted, his voice wavered. "I can't."

"Like hell you can't," Dean said, trembling.

Cas responded by falling to his knees and breaking down, clutching Alex to himself pitifully. "You
can't take her from me!" he sobbed out brokenly, clinging to Alex's dead body, refusing to let go as he wept bitterly.

The scene faded.

Dean sat across from Alex's still body, which was laid in Chuck's cabin. She'd been changed into another shirt, a long sleeved one that hid her shoulder wound. She looked like she could have been sleeping, even though she was so pale. Dean gazed at her silently. "Do you remember that time you glued my shoes to the floor, kiddo?" He shook his head, a soft, sad little smile on his face. "I was so damn mad." He looked at her face carefully, memorizing every detail. "Couldn't stay mad too long though. My little sidekick." His smile faded, his voice hitched. Memories seemed to pass in front of his eyes and he broke down. "I miss you so damn much."

He put his face in his hand, tortured. "Why'd it all have to fall apart?" he asked, forlorn, frustrated, beyond sorrow. "Why'd you leave me? Why'd you fall for Cas? And why couldn't I just let it go?"

He shook his head in self-loathing, tears running down his face. "I pushed Sam away, was too proud to admit I did the same to you… I guess I thought because you were a few doors down we were still close." Dean bowed his head miserably, a broken man. "I'm so, so sorry Al."

There was a soft noise behind him, and Dean stood up, expression darkening, tears forgotten. "Cas."

Cas stood there in the doorway, looking even worse than he had before—disheveled, mentally deficient, grief-torn. Dean looked at him threateningly. "Get outta here, man."

"I loved her Dean," Cas said, his voice low and unsteady. "Well that doesn't matter now, does it?" Dean retorted bitterly. "She's dead. No thanks to you."

"Like hell you did!" Dean snapped, and advanced on Cas, visibly shaking. "Alex was the only damn thing left in this world that I cared about or loved, I didn't want to but I trusted you to keep her safe and this is what happens?!" Dean was irate, messed up, riled. "You let her get bitten then you shoot her in the stomach?!!" He shook his head, a muscle jumped in his cheek. His fists were clenched at his sides. "You're lucky I don't fucking kill you where you stand, Cas."

Cas just looked at him, then his eyes went downward. "Maybe you should."

Dean took that as an open invitation, slugging Cas across the face. Cas stumbled back, his face turned from the force of Dean's fist. But he made no move to retaliate, he just sadly looked back at Dean, who again punched him for all he was worth, not just once—he began to beat Cas into the ground, blow after blow, blind and enraged and ruthless. Cas did nothing—just took it.

Suddenly, two other men entered the cabin and broke them apart. "Whoa, stop, stop!" Chuck shouted as one of the camp guards held Dean back.

"What the hell!" Chuck demanded, beside himself. Cas was sitting slumped against the wall, his face bloody and bruising already. Chuck looked at Dean, completely aghast. "Dean, you're beating the man your sister loved… with her body still in the room? What is wrong with you?"

Dean jerked out of the guard's grip, looking at Chuck and then Cas guiltily, conflicted. Cas looked up, a little dazed. Chuck shook his head. "Listen. I know you both loved Alex very much. I know
you're both hurting. But this has got to stop! I've watched you two fight over this woman for years now, and it has got to end!" He paused, embittered. "What would she say if she could see this?" He shook his head blankly. "You were friends once. Best friends."

Dean and Cas glanced at each other, then looked away. Chuck appealed one last time, looking at both of them pointedly, upset. "This is no one's fault."

Cas's head was bowed now. Dean looked at his sister's dead body, then at Chuck. "Yeah, maybe someday I'll believe that," he said tersely. "But not today." He stormed out.

The scene faded.

It was night now, in Cas's cabin, and no lights were on. There was a loud crash. Cas threw one of the table chairs at the wall, where the painting of a sunset hung. The chair broke as the painting fell off the wall. In a rage, Cas took another swig of green liquid out of the bottle in his hand, let out some kind of animalistic bellow and kicked over the kitchen table, then threw a plate that had been sitting on the counter, took another long drink from the bottle then threw it at the wall violently. He grabbed the painting and threw it out his cabin door, then he turned and knocked everything off the top of the dresser where it sat in the corner. He ripped the mirror off the wall and sent it crashing to the floor. A picture of him and Alex sat in a frame beside the bed, and he took it and threw it hard with another strange pained shouting sound, panting and crazed.

He yanked open the closet, where some shirts that were clearly Alex's hung. He went still. Stared at them, a long moment, his rage ebbing. Then he shut the closet door again, jaw tightening. He grabbed his handgun from where it was tucked into his belt, and with a dark expression, he marched out the back door, stumbling a little in the dark, catching in thickets of thorns but not even seeming to notice.

The moon was high and washed the landscape in pale silver, and he stopped there, at the tree line, held the pistol to the side of his head, put his finger on the trigger—and then nothing. There was a long moment where he stood there, obviously trying to make himself pull the trigger. But he seemed unable. He muttered a dark curse word and then a horrible sound of grief tore out of his mouth.

He let the gun fall to his side. Breathing heavily, jaw clenched, he flew into another fit of blind rage, and ran full force into the large tree trunk in front of him, bashing himself into it pathetically. He fell backwards, landing hard, making sounds like sobs, but not from physical pain. He stood up drunkenly, looked around for the gun, topsy-turvy.

"Cas?" came a voice behind him, and Cas turned, grabbed at the owner of the voice, slammed them violently up against the same tree he'd just slammed himself into. "It's me Cas, it's Chuck!"

Chuck said, hands raised in surrender, expression worried.

Cas let go, blinking weirdly, looking disconcerted and crazy. "You, uh, you okay?" Chuck asked, to which Cas exploded, grabbing Chuck with renewed vigor and misdirected rage.

"There's no Heaven, Chuck!" He shouted cynically, bitter, hateful emphasis on the word heaven. "She's gone forever. FOREVER! Nowhere! She's nowhere and there's nothing and it's my fault!" Cas threw Chuck down onto the ground and began pacing manically. "I shot the woman I love," Cas said, sounding defeated, then suddenly enraged again. "I murdered her!"

He stopped, putting a hand on his face, which was twisted up in pain. Chuck watched silently, keeping his mouth shut and not getting up from where he'd been thrown. Cas shook his head and crumpled to his knees, both hands on his face now, miserable sobs shaking his entire body. "Leave
me alone," he choked out. "Just leave—me—alone. Let me die. I'm dead without her. I'm nothing. I lost the only thing worth living for."

The scene faded away into a new one.

Crouched, Cas laid a bundle of yellow wildflowers at the base of a wooden cross etched with the initials A.E.W. He looked somber and stoic, his eyes slightly hooded. "She's been gone six months now, Chuck," Cas said, addressing the man who stood behind him, watching silently with hands in his pockets. Cas seemed a little out of sorts. His hair was longer and shaggy, unkempt, there were dark circles under his eyes. His color was sallow. He stood up, looked toward Chuck. "Six months." His mouth was in a thin line. "I don't think I can take much more." Cas stated it almost emotionlessly.

Chuck looked at him carefully. "I thought we went over this the night of the funeral," he said. "When you tried to kill yourself."

There was a cynical attempt at a smile on Cas's face. "Yeah, well, I still think about doing it every day," he said nonchalantly. "I've tried a few more times." His expression faded into loathing. "But like the moron that I am... I can't seem to make myself do it. I can't do it right."

"Cas," Chuck said, and put a hand on Cas's shoulder.

Looking at Chuck's hand weirdly, Cas shrugged away from him and walked off a couple steps, then stopped. He sounded authentic again, briefly. "Living without her is the most painful—" he took a deep breath, eyes filled with heavy sadness. "She was the way I understood the world, Chuck." He paused, melancholic. "She taught me how to be human." He was completely still, and sounded earnest, lost, desperate. "I don't know how to love anyone but her. I don't even think I can. I don't want to." For a minute, he looked like himself. "I just wish I could go back in time. Change everything." He suddenly chuckled darkly, cynically, as if he were hearing himself. "Wow. Sometimes I hear the things I think and I'm like, how could someone be such an idiot? Why do I even bother? I'm not even alive anymore. I'm just stalling. Putting off the inevitable. For no damn reason."

"Don't talk like that, Cas," Chuck said. He'd walked after Cas and was standing in front of him now. "You're important."

Cas rolled his eyes at Chuck. "I'm important? To who? Who the hell would care if I disappeared tomorrow? Dean? He tolerates me. The women I BS all day long? Yeah, right. You? Don't make me laugh." Cas laughed derisively. "I'm not important. I only live to get wasted." He sobered a little, melancholic again. "I'm pathetic." His jaw clenched tight, his eyes went down, his voice cracked. "She would hate me if..." Cas swallowed, trailed off. He clenched the forgotten bottle in his hand, lifted it and took a swig. His eyes glittered with tears.

"Stay alive, Cas," Chuck said emphatically, watching his friend in concern. "You're still alive for a reason, I know you are. You matter."

Cas looked at him as if insulted. "You sound like a damn religious handout," he said darkly, and walked off angrily, leaving Chuck by himself.

The author sighed, then shrugged sadly. "You tried, Chuck," he muttered to himself, then looked back at Alex's grave for a long moment. "He really loved you, didn't he, kiddo?" He paused. "Maybe too much."

The scene faded.
There were a few cars gathered up, people loading weapons and getting ready for some kind of assault. Alex—Alex from 2009—was there with Cas, off to the side, behind a truck. Cas was looking at her strangely. "Kiss me," he whispered, and her expression dropped.

"W—what?" she asked, face blank.

"Please," he said, his voice just a broken whisper. "I just... I can go in there and face the devil, face death, the whole nine. If you kiss me." He licked his lips nervously. "One last time," he paused, thinking of something, and frowned, then smiled in the softest, saddest way. "Or... first, I guess. For you."

Alex's mouth hung open slightly. "I... uh..." she had quickly become flustered.

He hesitantly caught her hands in his. "A dying man's wish," he said softly.

"But... you don't know you're dying," she protested weakly.

A muscle in his cheek jerked, and his gaze faltered. "I have been for awhile now."

Alex looking up at him hesitantly, for a very long couple seconds, then nodded, expression a cross between fearful and nervous.

He seemed to have been holding himself back—he kissed her as soon as the go-ahead left her mouth. Gently at first, soft and glancing, then suddenly Alex seemed to take over, pulling him in desperately, and the kiss became something else entirely. Cas pressed into her, she bumped up against the side of the truck they were beside, she let out a soft little moan—he roughly grabbed her hips, lifting her up, her legs wrapped around his waist, the kiss deepened even more, their hands tangled in each other's hair and—then it ended completely when the sound of arriving cars cut them short. They broke apart, panting, staring at each other.

Without anything further, the scene faded.

An abandoned building, wrecked inside, run down: Cas laid in a pool of his own blood, several gunshot wounds in his chest and abdomen. He was gasping for air, dying, looking at a photograph in his hand, struggling. He seemed to lose his strength, and then the life went out of him, he breathed his last, went still.

The sound of dress shoes clicked, echoing, as a tall man entered the room. It looked like Sam. But it was Lucifer, dressed in a white tuxedo. He seemed almost sympathetic as he looked down at the dead body at his feet. "Ah, brother..." he commented softly. "How the mighty have fallen." His head tilted to the side just barely as his eyes traveled Cas's dead body and face. "A shame things had to end this way for you."

Lucifer crossed the room, over to a window, looking out. "You should have joined me while you had the chance, Castiel," he sighed, looking back at Cas's body briefly. He was cold, superior. "But no. You had to do it your way."

Lucifer returned his gaze to the window. "Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven," he said to no one. He gazed out of the window, triumphant, his eyes chilling and never blinking. He took in a deep, pleased breath. "Hell on earth. Heaven just a memory." The smile deepened. "I win." With his finger, he drew a pitchfork in a splatter of blood on the glass of the window.

And it all faded out.

Everything Castiel had just seen had rushed his mind in the span of a couple seconds—he was still
in the middle of taking a step backward when everything came back—the warehouse, Anna, reality. Completely stunned he stared at her, breathing heavily, reeling. His mind could barely process everything he'd just taken in and seen.

Anna looked at him intently. "You saw." She said. He could only look at her, wordless, horrified. She seemed satisfied, especially at his speechlessness, seeming to know he'd seen what she meant to show him. "So, now you see," she said, urgently. "Sam Winchester has to die, or all of that happens. The pain, the broken relationships. The world, practically destroyed. You, a miserable shell. Everyone you cared about dead and gone." She looked at him significantly. "Lucifer walking the earth, no one left to stop him." She raised her chin slightly. "We can stop all of that. Today."

When he said nothing, she lost some of her certainty, frowning at him. Castiel shook his head, regaining some composure, hiding his inner terror just barely. "The answer's still no, Anna."

Anna's face contorted in utter disbelief. She didn't seem to understand, then became almost angry. "You're actually willing to let all of that happen? To Dean? To Sam?" Anna stepped a little closer. "To her?" At that, Cas looked at Anna, who was shaking her head almost in disgust.

"What you showed me—it's not real," Cas said vehemently, in denial. "I don't believe it," Cas said, faltering. And he didn't. He couldn't.

"Why would I lie to you?" Anna asked angrily.

"You've already lied to me today, and you just want… to trick me into helping you." Cas accused, then turned a little, allowing the shadows to obscure his face from her. He was struggling, and badly. "None of what you showed me…" he said tremulously, "it's not possible." Was it?

"At this point in time, it's definite," Anna said intensely, defiant. "The only one lying here is you. To yourself. That future happens. Everything you saw happens, no matter what you do after today. This? What I'm proposing? This is the only way to change that. Don't you want to?" She went quiet, giving him a chance to speak, but he said nothing. She tried again, forceful. "Destiny doesn't have to be set in stone, Cas. We can change it. All we have to do is kill Sam. He dies so that they can live." Still, Cas said nothing, and Anna grew more ardent. "The Croatoan virus never has to even exist—you can save millions, Cas. Use your head! This is the right thing to do!" Anna stopped. Got quieter, her eyes full of meaning. "Do this one thing and the woman you love can live." Cas turned on her finally, dangerously, murderous almost. Anna looked at him, mystified. "Don't you want that?"

Cas looked at her unblinkingly, his voice low and dangerous. "Anna, you and I have been through much together." He stepped a little closer, his angel blade still in his hand, raising just slightly. "But you come near any of the Winchesters, I will kill you without hesitation."

Anna looked at the blade, then at him, disappointed, disenchanted, not understanding. She backed up one step, looking at him ruefully. "I don't think you'll ever regret anything as much as what you decided here today, Castiel." It sounded like a threat. She disappeared.

The second Anna vanished, Cas stumbled sideways, catching himself barely against a wall, holding himself up with a flat palm. He could barely breathe. It was as though the things Anna showed him had physically rendered him momentarily incapable of standing. His mind spun with the images he'd seen, the words he'd heard. It felt as though something had been ripped out of him, and he couldn't make sense of it, couldn't understand—was that real? Had all of that really happened? Was that really the future? His future, no, their future? All he could hear was the sound of an echoing gunshot, the strangled cries of Alex as she laid dying in his arms. Alex.
He looked up suddenly, a horrible thought crossing his mind—if Anna were gone, Sam was in danger, and possibly Alex and Dean, too. Without a second thought, Castiel left immediately, back to the motel room where the Winchesters waited.
Cas had disappeared to 'discover Anna's intentions' about ten minutes ago.

Sam sat stock still on one of the motel beds with elbows leaned onto his knees and hands clasped. He glanced at his twin, who had been sitting in the same spot since Cas vanished. She had a hand on her knee, the index finger tapping constantly. She stared at the floor, deeply pensive. He could tell she was chewing the inside of her cheek like she did when something was bothering her. He also knew she was exhausted—sleep deprived from the constant nightmares she'd been having lately. She hadn't said anything about it, but Sam had heard her waking up breathless and scared for the past few weeks. Since Carthage, he was pretty sure. He hadn't said anything because he knew how she was about this stuff. She'd tell them when she was ready—ask before then and get an arm ripped off.

Sam glanced at his brother, who was pacing in agitation, true to normal form. "Come on, how long does he need, anyway?" Dean demanded in a mutter, gesturing angrily with one of his hands.

As if on cue, Cas reappeared in the middle of the motel room, startling them all. Sam immediately noticed that he looked different than he had a few minutes prior—almost like he'd had the wind knocked out of him. The angel looked from Sam to Dean, grim, deadly almost. "I found Anna," he said lowly.

"And?" Dean asked impatient and urgent.

"And she wants to kill Sam," Cas replied harshly.

Sam shot to his feet. "What? Why?"

Cas looked at him dead in the eye, his expression foul. "She believes it will forestall the Apocalypse." He turned around and marched over to the motel table without any further explanation.

Alex stood up with an incredulous expression on her face. "By killing Sam?" She sounded like she hadn't heard right.

At the table, they could only see Cas's profile—he was pulling something out of his pocket—chalk? But when Alex asked that, he went still, his expression pinched slightly, a muscle jumping in his cheek. His eyes slid in her direction, but he didn't look right at her. "Yes," He refocused on what he'd been doing and began drawing something vigorously on the table. He sounded impatient, like he were explaining something obvious. "No Sam—no Lucifer. Destroy the vessel, destroy the devil. That's her mentality."

Dean, who had taken a minute to digest, was shaking his head his head. "Really? Anna?" He looked and sounded a little let down. "I don't believe it."

"It's true, Dean," Cas replied, sending a glancing dart of a scowl at Dean. He sounded on edge and Sam looked at him intently, thinking hard and realizing that Cas was deeply upset—maybe because Anna had a point. Maybe because Cas thought Anna was right. Sam swallowed, his heart beating fast.
"So she's gone all Glenn Close, huh? That's awesome." Dean said flippantly.

Cas looked at Dean with narrowed eyes, expression filled with malevolence. "And who, the hell, is Glenn Close?"

There was a shocked pause in the entire room at Cas's rude, angry question. Dean looked at Cas oddly. "Uh… she's no one, just this psycho bitch who likes to boil rabbits."

Unamused and perturbed, Cas gave Dean a dirty look and returned to drawing. His chalk strokes were sharp and jabbing—Sam looked closely and saw that Cas's hand was shaking. Damn, Anna must have meant business. Sam had never seen Cas so clearly shaken up. Afraid almost. Which kind of messed with Sam, made him afraid, made him wonder. He approached Cas cautiously, using a soft, appealing tone. He had to know. "The plan to kill me—would it actually stop him?"

"Whoa Sam, what?" Alex turned to look at Sam. He glanced at her, but ignored her shocked question and wide eyes, just looked at Cas again.

The angel had gone still again, listening hard as Sam asked again, rephrasing the question. "Cas, what do you think? Does Anna have a point?"

There was a heavy silence and Cas looked at Sam darkly, then glanced at Dean, who still hung back and was watching at the angel with grim apprehension. Cas looked away, seeming to be thinking. "No," he finally said, distracted, somber. "She's—Glenn Close." He resumed writing with the chalk. Sam wasn't actually convinced—but let it go for the moment. He could feel Alex looking at him, deeply disturbed. He glanced at her then at Dean who looked similarly troubled. Sam was stumped.

Sam cleared his throat, going over towards Cas. "What are you doing, anyway?" he asked, looking at the strange symbols Cas was marking onto the surface of the table.

"A ritual," Cas said blandly. "It will show me where Anna is so that we can go after her."

Dean frowned. "What, look for the super angel-powered chick that wants to gank Sam? Why poke the bear?"

Cas looked at Dean with an impatient, narrow-eyed glare, once again seeming to be off-kilter and short-tempered. "What bear?"

"He means why tempt fate," Alex explained.

Again, Cas seemed to tense up when she spoke to him. He didn't look at any of them. "We... poke the bear because Anna will keep trying. She won't give up until Sam is dead." He grabbed a bowl that had been sitting on the counter and slammed it down with more force than necessary onto the table. "Therefore, we kill her first," he said with dark resolve. He vanished without warning.

"What the—" Dean started, only to stop when Cas reappeared, a jar in hand.

Ignoring the Winchesters, the angel poured the contents of the jar, some kind of oil, into the bowl on the table. He began to recite something in Enochian. "Zod ah ma ra la—ee est la gi ro sa."

Red flame shot out of the bowl, and in unison Cas stumbled back as if in pain, bracing himself against the back of one of the chairs—he had screwed his eyes shut, was breathing heavily, wincing. Sam and Dean exchanged surprised looks, and Alex had taken a couple steps forward, clearly worried, then hesitating. "Cas, are you—"
"Fine," he said tersely, straightening, avoiding looking at anyone but Dean. "I've found her."

"Okay," Dean said. "So where is she?"

"Not where," Cas said, frowning deeply. "When. It's nineteen seventy-eight."

"She went back in time?" Alex asked.

Sam, beside her, was equally confused. "Why nineteen seventy-eight? I wasn't even born yet."

Cas looked at Sam grimly. "And you won't be if she kills your parents."

The twins stilled, understanding and then looking at each other apprehensively.

"Anna can't get to now you because of me," Cas said darkly. "So she's going after them."

"Take us back right now," Dean said.

Cas looked at him with little patience, cynicism almost. "And deliver you right to Anna?"

Dean didn't back down. "They're our parents, Cas, we're going."

Cas shut his eyes a second, seeming to be frustrated. "It's not that easy." He walked a few steps away.

"Why not?" Sam asked.

Cas turned, gave him a peevish glance. "Time travel was difficult even with the powers of heaven at my disposal."

"So, what, you're like a Delorean without enough plutonium?" Dean asked.

Cas looked at Dean unhappily. "I don't understand that reference."

Beside Sam, Alex made a soft little sound, like a muffled, covered up laugh. Sam glanced at her—she was pressing her mouth closed against a little amused smile, her eyes were on Cas. Sam turned his attention back to Cas, who was talking to Dean flatly. "But I'm telling you, taking this trip, with passengers no less—" the angel shook his head, looked somber. "It'll weaken me."

"I can stay here," Alex volunteered, to which Cas's eyes snapped up to her. She was pretty used to being left behind to be point person or the getaway car or lookout from the distance, so it wasn't outlandish in her mind at all to suggest.

"No," the three men said in unison.

Alex made a surprised, weirded out face and held her hands out looking at all of them in rapid succession, ending with Dean, whose 'no' had been the loudest. "Okay then." She now looked mildly embarrassed. "Geez, just trying to lighten the load."

Sam looked from her to Cas, was looking at his sister intensely, his expression unreadable—Cas seemed to feel Sam's gaze and glanced at him, then looked away, jaw working. "There might be more angels who are in on this plan of Anna's," Cas muttered, eyes darting back and forth over the floor in thought. "I don't want any of the three of you out of my sight."

"See, even more reason for us to go with you," Dean reasoned, then approached the angel insistently. "Cas, they're our mom and dad. If we can save them, and not just from Anna... I mean
if we can set things right, we have to try."

"Set things right?" Alex repeated, eyes narrowed, looking at her brother suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

Dean sent her a pointed look, turned to look at her tersely. "Warn Mom about the nursery fire, Azazel—all of it. Stop the whole shit storm before it even starts." Dean said it like she should have already known what he meant and been on board, but Alex looked as surprised and unsure about that as Sam felt. In fact she almost looked upset as she stared at Cas.

Cas didn't notice her looking at him, he was staring at Dean intensely. He walked forward a little, expression stern. "You truly believe you can change the past, Dean?" he questioned cynically. His voice lowered, his chin pivoted downwards—he looked wary and intensely foreboding. "Even after last time?"

"Well it's at least worth a shot, man!" Dean said, growing exasperated.

Cas seemed equally frustrated in response, looked from Dean to Sam, glancing just barely at Alex, then looking down to his left. He shook his head grimly. "This is not a good idea," he said.

"Yeah well, good ideas aren't exactly our strong point," Dean said sarcastically. But he had the air of triumph to him in the slight smile and the way his chin was raised. Like he already knew Cas would do what he'd demanded.

Cas looked at him long and hard then gave in with a long, deep huff. "Fine," he muttered. "I'll be back with the required essentials." He vanished again.

"The required essentials," Dean mocked in a goofy, cartoony voice. His voice returned to normal. "Nerd."

Cas reappeared just as quickly as he'd disappeared—two large, ancient looking ceramic jars in hand. "We'll need some kind of bag," he said.

"Here," Sam grabbed his duffel and shook the contents out onto his bed, then handed it to Cas. Dean was grabbing his jacket, tossing Sam his. Alex grabbed hers from where it had been thrown over the side of a chair—looked like they weren't going to waste any time. Sam swallowed. This was all his fault.

"Holy oil," Cas explained as he put the two jars into the bag. He then pulled out an angel blade from inside his trench coat. He gave Sam a significant look as he shrugged on his jacket, pausing. "Do not lose this." He put it into the bag and zipped it shut. "Ready?" Cas asked Sam, handing him the bag.

Sam took the bag and swung it up onto his shoulder, attempting a smile, but it didn't quite work. "Not really."

Dean, Alex, and Sam gathered facing Cas, Alex between her two brothers, and Cas raised his hands, about to touch them and send them back—but Alex's voice suddenly stopped him short. "Wait, Cas—how bad exactly is this gonna set you back?" she asked, peering at him with her eyebrows knit together.

Cas didn't look at her when he spoke. "I'll be a little out of sorts when we arrive," he answered curtly. Sam glanced down at his twin, who appeared frustrated by Cas's shortness. Sam glanced back at Cas, who still refused to look at Alex. Sam frowned a little, his instincts telling him something, maybe some kind of fight or something, was going on between these two.
He didn't have time to wonder. Cas's fingers were coming toward his head—and then suddenly, the motel room was gone.

Sam almost fell over as the ground beneath his feet changed and then everything else, too—beside him Alex grabbed on and they steadied each other as Sam looked around, disoriented. They were standing in the middle of a busy street and a loud horn blared behind them alarmingly close—the three Winchesters whirled as a car screeched to a halt, almost hitting them. "Get out of the street!" the driver of the car shouted.

"Watch where you're going!" Alex shouted back, making a rude gesture in his general direction even as Sam pulled her toward the sidewalk.

"Guys!" Dean barked, and Sam stopped short as a second car almost ran them over, jerking to a stop, almost knocking Sam over when the bumper hit his leg. The driver looked at them like they were crazy, and Sam awkwardly shrugged, mouthed 'sorry!' and stumbled forward when Alex pushed him along, trying to get them out of the street.

The three of them made it to the sidewalk, disoriented. "Ah, shit," Alex panted, scanning the area with a hand to the side of her head. She looked worried and confused, and then she asked what Sam was wondering: "Where's Cas?"

"I don't know," he said breathlessly, seeing no sign of the guy. "Did we make it?"

"Unless they're bringing Pintos back into production," Dean said, pointing at one of the cars, "I, uh, I'd say yes."

"Oh my god!" Alex suddenly exclaimed, gone still staring in shock or maybe fear—her brothers both followed her gaze to see Castiel, collapsed against the side of a car a few feet away. He looked barely conscious at first glance.

"Cas!" Sam exclaimed, already hurrying over—he dropped into a crouch, grabbing onto Cas, who looked like he might fall over any second. "Hey, hey, hey!"

Dean and Alex were already on either side of Sam—Dean kind of bent over, and Alex had fallen to her knees and was grabbing Cas's arm, saying his name in a voice awash in worry. The angel, usually so aloof and composed, appeared woozy, in pain, disoriented. He was gazing at Sam's twin in a daze. Blood ran down out of his nose. "Take it easy, take it easy," Dean commanded gruffly, looked at him intently. "You all right?"

Looking anything but, Cas frowned in pain at nowhere in particular. "I'm fine," he said. "I'm—much better than I expected." Sam was surprised to hear that—this seemed pretty bad to be 'much better than expected.' He made to start helping Cas up, but without warning, Cas coughed violently, gagging up blood, and then went slack, his eyes rolling back in his head. He pitched sideways and would have fallen over completely if Sam and Alex hadn't mutually caught him by the shoulder.

"Cas… Cas!" Alex stared at him, eyes wide, but got no response. She looked at Sam, wide-eyed. "Did he—did he just pass out?" She looked at Dean, aghast. "Is that even possible?" She looked at Cas again, who had brilliant red blood dripping out of the side of his mouth. "Angels don't pass out! Do they?!

Sam put a hand in front of Cas's mouth, checking for breathing. It was there. "Well, he's breathing. Sort of."
Alex held the pads of her pointer and middle finger against Cas's neck for a couple seconds. "Pulse seems normal," she said, but she didn't sound too relieved. "A little out of sorts my ass." She muttered. She almost sounded pissed underneath all the worry.

Sam sat back slightly, unsure, looked at Dean, who had straightened up and was looking around in a disconcerted way. "What do we do?" Sam asked him.

"Hell if I know!" was the immediate response. Dean pinched the bridge of his nose. "I don't have time for this, man." He let go of his nose and huffed a frustrated breath, then turned and walked off a few steps. Annoyed, Sam muttered an 'I'll be back' to his sister and got up, following Dean. Cas remained unmoving where he'd lost consciousness with Alex holding him up and peering at him anxiously.

"Okay Dean, we need to figure this out, now," Sam said.

"I know, I know," Dean said, overwhelmed and unable to stop pacing. He grabbed his own chin, looking totally clueless, his eyes scanning the area kind of desperately. And then, his eyes stopped. Sam looked where Dean was looking—The Prairie Court Motel. Sam looked at Dean, not understanding. Dean however clapped his hands together once decisively. "Okay, here's what we do. We put Back to the Future over there up in a motel, safe and sound where he can sleep off this—whatever—while we go gank Anna."

"...Leave him alone?" Sam asked, a little surprised at Dean's idea.

"Well the other choice is just a little inconvenient, Sammy," Dean said a low, tense voice, starting to sound defensive and backed into a corner. "I don't got time to drag around a big unconscious dude, do you?"

Sam made a face. "No but... you're saying we leave our ticket out of here... behind?" Dean made a face of his own at Sam's question. "Cas likes to disappear on us when he's, you know, lucid. What if he wakes up and forgets we're here or—" Sam stopped. He could speculate forever and there just wasn't time. He refocused to his main point. "We can't leave him, Dean. It's a bad idea."

"And we can't take him with, either," Dean argued, getting more impatient by the second. "So what choice does that leave us?"

Sam gave a frustrated huff, glancing toward where Cas and Alex were—then paused, the perfect idea striking him. "Alex can stay with him!" He said a little animated, not sure why he hadn't thought of it already. "Make sure he doesn't wander off when he wakes up!" He paused, looking back at the angel, suddenly a little bleak as he considered. "If he wakes up."

"You have got to be kidding me," Dean said darkly, and Sam felt himself raise an eyebrow slightly. Was Dean seriously still on this whole keeping Cas and Alex apart thing?

"Dean," Sam said, deadpan. "Get over yourself." He got an evil eye from his brother, but just rolled his eyes. "You're making a big deal out of nothing—even if you thought Cas might try something—and that is a huge if—does he look like he's up to doing something like that anytime soon?"

Dean looked at Sam unhappily, then in Cas and Alex's direction. "I mean, just look at them, Sam!" Dean hissed, jabbing his hand out demonstratively. Sam looked—all he saw was Alex supporting a passed-out Cas while looking concerned.

"What?" he asked, looking back at Dean oddly. "All I see is Alex and her friend Cas who she's worried about. Who is also super unconscious at the moment." Dean responded by clamping his
lips into a thin line. Sam just looked at him calmly. "I'm right about this Dean. And you're being a little bitch."

"Am not," Dean muttered, then cut his eyes sharply to Sam, narrowing them slightly. He seemed to have thought of something, folded his arms, suddenly giving off an air of superiority. "Anna's after you Sam—maybe I should leave you here with Cas, huh?"

Sam's expression fell in exasperation. Dean couldn't just let it go. Of course not. Sam huffed. "No, Anna's after Mom and Dad now, she doesn't even know I'm here. And, I mean, think about it. Alex will be safer here, right?" That last part got Dean's attention, just like Sam knew it would—they looked at each other significantly. If there was anything they would always agree on, it was that they wanted their little sister to be safe. Speaking of, she had noticed them exchanging words and had left Cas propped against the car, was walking over, looking at them with a terse expression.

"What are you two arguing about now?" she asked.

Dean spoke up before Sam could. "Sam here wants you to stay behind and babysit Cas while we go do all the fun stuff."

"We need to make sure he doesn't disappear on us while we go take care of Anna," Sam explained, quickly following up Dean's statement.

Alex's eyes flickered between the two of them for a long beat, her expression unreadable. "So... I'm automatically the one who stays behind while you guys run off and save Mom and Dad, face down a rogue angel who's after Sam, risk your asses and possibly get killed in the process?"

Dean looked at Sam, his expression suggesting Sam was done for. Sam pressed his mouth downward in a kind of shrug, briefly as he tried to appear nonchalant. "Uh, basically."

Alex glanced back at Cas, pausing, then looked back at them. She appeared to be upset. "You guys need me on this one."

"Yeah, we do—to make sure our time machine doesn't go AWHOL," Sam said, trying to appeal to her sensibility.

She folded her arms and looked at him challengingly. "Okay, well, why can't you stay? You're the one Anna's after, right?"

Sam pressed his lips into a thin line—this was his favorite thing, when it turned into a sibling rivalry contest. Dean looked at Sam, as if to say 'see? I was right.' Sam took in a long breath to keep his patience. "I can't stay because I am going," Sam insisted, looking at Dean pointedly, then Alex. She was incredibly annoyed with him. Sam huffed, tried again. "Okay, here's another idea: Dean stays with Cas."

"Youngest by one minute and forty-seven seconds, Sam!" Alex protested. "That doesn't even count!"

Sam muttered under his breath, "it does though."
Dean had his hand on the side of his head and chopped it down through the air, looking like he was approaching his wit's end. "Look you two morons, at this point, I don't care which of the two of you stays!" he thundered. "Time's wasting—Anna could've killed both Mom and Dad by now and have time left over to go catch tonight's episode of The Bob Newhart Show." He glanced from Alex to Sam, irked. "You two are getting on my last damn nerve."

"Feeling's mutual," Alex told him and got a glare from Dean in response. He looked over at Sam, who was currently very unhappy about the standoff.

"Okay, look," Dean muttered, "you two settle this the old fashioned way and we're done and moving on, end of story." He waited about one second then jerked both hands up at them. "Today, guys!"

Alex and Sam contemplated each other reluctantly. Sam raised his eyebrows at her challengingly, and she just made a 'not impressed' face back at him. Sam raised his fist, cradled in his palm, and she mirrored him, looking at him tersely.

They didn't need a countdown or go signal—in unison, they started. One, two, three times they hit their own palms, and then on the fourth count, Sam held his hand flat—paper—and Alex kept her hand in a fist—rock. Sam's face broke into a triumphant grin and he covered her fist in his hand.

"Paper beats rock!"

Alex made a frustrated sound. "Yeah, okay," she said, nodding grudgingly. "I can accept defeat." She let out a gusty sigh. "You a-holes really owe me one for this." Sam noticed that she didn't sound that mad though, just kind of apprehensive. Dean, however, seemed to be over the entire thing, antsy and ready to get going.

"Yeah, whatever, let's get you two checked in so we can get this show on the road," he said, already striding back toward Cas. Sam watched Alex, who was looking at Cas with a weird expression. He thought it was worry, which made sense. He knew she really cared about the guy—it was her guardian angel after all, why wouldn't she? Alex seemed to sense her twin's eyes on her, and looked back at him petulantly, which only entertained Sam.

"Hey, don't act like you hate it so much," he teased in a low tone, grinning as he nudged her. He got an 'I hate you' face from her in return.

The Prairie Court Motel

Alex ran the washcloth under hot tap water, not sure she believed what was happening right now. Sam and Dean were already gone—they had checked her in a couple minutes ago, thrown Cas down on the bed and then left in a huge hurry—but not before Dean had told her they would call by ten o'clock to check in or be back that night—and if not, to come looking. So here Alex was, in 1978, holed up in a quiet motel room with an injured angel... but that wasn't even the best part. As odds would have it, the only room available at the motel was the honeymoon suite.... and when they said honeymoon suite, they meant it.

The room was covered in cheesy red heart motifs and there were several crappy paintings of red roses displayed across the wood panel walls. There was a cheap bottle of complimentary champagne set on the dresser, no ice or anything though—beside it sat two slender toasting glasses with gold hearts etched on them. There was a heart shaped tub in the bathroom, a little sculpture of cupid aiming a bow and arrow on the bedside table, and a plaque hanging above the bed that said 'Love Conquers All.' In short, the room was ugly as shit. Finished wetting the cloth, Alex rung it out and exited the bathroom. She'd had seen some corny motel rooms in her day, but this one took...
the cake.

However, she wasn't really so much focused on the room decor as she was the guy on the bed. Laid flat and unmoving, Cas looked just the same as when Dean and Sam had left—unresponsive. She paused a second, the sight of him like that halting her completely, scaring her all over again. Seeing him so messed up was really chilling. And somehow, the blanket he laid on (which, of course, was a tacky heart print) seemed put there to insult her or taunt her. He looked so handsome and like he could have been sleeping. Well, except for the horrifying streaks of blood across his lower face.

Alex shook herself and then gingerly sat on the edge of the bed, one leg folded under her as she leaned over him carefully, steadying herself with the light touch of her palm to his chest. Blood was drying underneath his nose at the edge of his mouth... and she felt almost sick. He hadn't been telling the truth about how bad off the time travel would leave him, the idiot. And now she was left not knowing if he'd recover—when he'd wake up—or if he'd be okay at all. Was this some kind of angel coma? Or the equivalent of hitting his head hard? How long would this last for? Would he be permanently damaged? And then, a more disturbing thought... was this him losing his 'angel mojo' like he'd talked about in 2014?

There was no way to tell, not yet, so she didn't need to get herself completely bent out of shape over it. She felt powerless to do anything except clean him up a little, but since that was the only option, that's what she did. With her palm still pressed against his chest, her free hand began to carefully dab the washcloth at the blood that ran down from his nose. Alex reflected momentarily about how she just wasn't sure about this. Part of her was really screaming in frustration at being 'left behind' as her brothers went and hopefully stopped Anna from killing Mom and Dad... but... on the other hand, she really couldn't feel too upset, because honestly, being here when Cas woke up, making sure he was okay—that felt important to her, too.

Still, Alex's mind went back to the other perspective—she could be out there, helping her brothers stop a crazy angel from murdering her parents, one of which she'd never even known at all. As soon as Dean had demanded Cas take them back to 1978, Alex had been struck by the frightening and intriguing thought of meeting her mom. But the weird thing was, she didn't know if she even wanted to—she had spent her whole life not knowing the woman, having no memories of her at all, only a couple of crappy photographs, some stories, and nice sounding hand-me-down memories from Dean, who did remember her. So the idea of actually meeting Mom and putting a real, living, breathing face to the name was gray area for Alex. In the deepest parts of her heart, Alex felt that it was easier to write Mom off as a woman in a grainy photo than see her as a real human being—not knowing Mom made it almost painless to exist without her. Just thinking that made Alex feel really crappy about herself. Mary Winchester would be ashamed to know her daughter was that shallow and heartless and afraid.

And then there was the thought of seeing Dad again. She wasn't sure if she could handle seeing him again, in any context. She remembered when he died. He'd told Dean and Sam goodbye, privately, separately. But hadn't said anything to her at all. Maybe he'd been waiting for the right opportunity that never came, maybe he just had died before he got the chance, or maybe he had been too afraid to talk to her. He had never talked to her much. He had never liked having one-sided conversations, which you tended to have with a mute person—and he'd never 'gotten' her like Sam and Dean had. He'd always looked at her with this kind of veiled, stand-offish look in his eyes. She remembered trying so hard to make him proud. She'd learned to shoot straighter, draw faster, load quicker than her brothers. She'd memorized sigils and wards and spells, more than Sam and Dean had. But he'd never done what she'd wanted him to do: just look at her with nothing but pride and joy. He'd acted proud of her some days, he'd sometimes laughed at the purposefully funny things she'd done or said (well, written). He'd patted her shoulder a few times in approval. But it had always felt like he were holding back. Secretly looking at her with intense disapproval and
disappointment. And then, there were the nights he'd drink too much, get angry. And those nights were the ones that dominated her memories.

She didn't want to see Dad again, she realized. And she didn't know how to feel about that.

She thought about what Dean said about setting things right—he wanted to warn their parents about Azazel, stop the nursery fire, Mom dying, everything. What if he did, and what if it worked? It would change literally everything. Alex pictured herself living a life where she possessed a voice, had two parents who worked normal jobs. She pictured herself living in one house, going to one school. Having Christmases at home and always knowing where she'd be falling asleep come night time. Making cookies for bake sales and having a mom who would braid her hair and teach her how to talk to boys. Alex would be scared of guns and knives like most other girls, be squeamish at the sight of blood. She'd go to prom and get excited about turning sixteen and subscribe to shallow magazines about fashion and celebrities—she'd spend time complaining about minimum wage and how her MP3 player was a piece of crap—she'd have a dad who was proud of her, smiled at her with his eyes, talked with her. They would never even have a clue about the horrible, wrecked life they could have had instead. She imagined all of this and even though parts of it sounded completely amazing and perfect, it was so far removed from the life she now lived—it just set her at unease, felt wrong. Especially when she drew back a little and looked at Cas. If Dean changed the nursery, it would change this, too. It would mean she never met Castiel, right?

She'd finished wiping the blood away from under his nose and then moved onto the blood streaked at the edge of his mouth, slowly tracing the washcloth into the corner crease of his lips. She had to hold his face steady at this point with her other hand. Underneath her palm, his jawline felt rough from stubble. She realized the only sound in the quiet room was of his deep, steady breathing, and her eyes darted to his chest, which rose and fell rhythmically underneath her hand. She refocused. She'd cleaned Dean and Sam up a million times but this was totally different, and oddly enough, left her feeling insanely vulnerable. Maybe it was just being in such close physical proximity to him. Alex realized how she was looking at him now, really looking at him. His piercing gazes had always sent her eyes running away, but now, with him at a complete lack of consciousness… she could look as long as she wanted. Her eyes flickered around his face, first resting on his long, dark eyelashes, then the soft crease where his lips met each other, then the hollow of his cheekbone. She had ceased moving now. The scruff of his five o'clock shadow. The cleft of his chin, the graceful line of his jaw. The little dark curls of shaggy hair behind his ears. The weirdly beautiful vertical lines across his lips—lips that looked so kissable and tempting. The little, barely noticeable wrinkles along the ridge of his nose. The uneven line where his dark, messy hair met his forehead… the crazy rebel tuft of hair sticking up on the top of his head. She smoothed that down gently, haltingly, looking at his face again—then brushed his hair back from his forehead without thinking. An unnecessary action. But she had done it anyway. She looked at his lips again. She could hear another sound in the room now—herself, breathing a little harder than what was normal, because she was unintentionally remembering the kiss from 2014—she was filled with guilt and remorse—and yet, longing for more of the same.

Exasperated with herself, Alex made a couple last gentle swipes of the washcloth, trying not to look at him. His face was clean now, free of blood, and Alex sat back a minute, quiet, eyeing him from the corner of her eye. Now what? I'm a little rusty on angel first aid. She checked his pulse again, fingers to his neck—it was normal, and his skin was warm, smooth. She hesitated, pulling her hand away into her lap, watching him carefully for any change. But he didn't move at all, didn't make a sound. She had to make herself stand up.

Alex got up and tossed the bloody washcloth into the trash, then turned around, folded her arms, looked at Cas apprehensively, not sure what to do. She found herself staring at the plain black
dress shoes on his feet. They weren't scuffed or dull at all, they looked brand new. *How did he do that?* She remembered the first time she'd seen him that she, Dean, and Bobby had shot him up pretty good, but the next time she'd seen him, he was in the exact same outfit—mysteriously sans bullet holes. Since then, she'd gathered that he seemed to be able to regenerate his clothes. That, or he had a magical heavenly closet somewhere with an endless supply of the same outfit. Hmm. And that… didn't seem likely. *Regeneration it is.* But if he had the power to alter his appearance like that, it struck her as a little odd that he chose to remain in the same, ordinary things. Something he'd told her, long ago, popped into her mind. *I like this coat,* he'd said. She smiled softly in response— he'd shown up in her dreams trying to be helpful and had only succeeded in pissing her off—so, of course, she'd picked a fight with him, trying to keep him at arms length. She'd been so unsure about him. She'd *hated* him in some moments, for goodness sake. She continued to watch Cas, sobering. Things had changed so much since then.

She sat down on the edge of the bed again, fixing where one of the lapels of his coat had turned inwards. She thought of how the trench coat—the cheap suit—the crappy ten dollar tie—the things he wore were so ordinary, so everyday, so unlike everything Castiel was: powerful, surprising, a lightning storm contained in a glass bottle. But, she reminded herself with a sudden note of somberness—that the clothing, the messy hair, the now-familiar face—that was Jimmy Novak, or at least it *had* been, once—the things she had come to identify as Cas were not really Cas at all, were they? She was struck with a pang of guilt, thinking of Jimmy, wondering what had happened to him, if he were still in there somewhere. Until a couple years ago, this guy had been an average Joe. And now he was like some kind of angelic iPhone case, *if* he was still in there at all…

*Was* Jimmy still in there, conscious and suffering, overwhelmed by the weight of a crushing angelic being that inhabited his every atom? It was difficult to look at Cas... Jimmy... whoever he was... and not have a lot of conflicted, confused thoughts about this very subject. And it was getting harder and harder to really even separate the two in her mind. She'd only seen Jimmy for like a day, and Cas for so much longer… but still, she was wondering something about herself: Was she attracted to the being Castiel was, or the physical appearance of Jimmy? It wasn't that simple, but... well, it didn't really matter, Alex reminded herself, as there was clearly nothing coming from it... it just would have been nice to have one less crazy unanswered question floating around in the insane asylum she called her brain.

She rubbed her forehead with the palm of her hand, pacing a little now. This whole situation was so screwed up. She had messed up so friggin' bad hadn't she? God, maybe it would be better if Cas just stayed knocked out this whole time, however long it took Dean and Sam to return. Because if he woke up and started treating her weird again, she wasn't sure if she could take it. It sucked to have Cas skirting her like she was the plague. Grimly, she thought of this one girl Courtney that Sam had been good friends with in seventh grade—best friends, really... until Courtney told him that she liked him and wanted to be his girlfriend. Sam, definitely *not* on the same wavelength, had been totally skeeved out and had started avoiding her at all costs because it was so awkward for him and he didn't want what she wanted *at all.* The friendship had fallen apart into nothing. In middle school, who cares, no big deal. But... wow. Alex was the Courtney in this situation, wasn't she? She felt embarrassed about the revelation. She would take back the hand touch thing in a heartbeat if she'd known it was going to ruin whatever they were before. She stopped pacing, looking sidelong at Cas's still form. *Friends.* They had been friends. And that should have been enough for her.

Miserable, Alex tried not to notice how Cas's clothes were too big. His white dress shirt, especially, kind of stuck out, bunched up. His trousers, however, laid flat against him, and she could see, vaguely, the taper and angle of his hips underneath. She swallowed, uncomfortable, needing to look anywhere but at Cas—still, her eyes wandered to his hands, which laid still beside him. Rough, large, warm, strong. Those hands had healed her, held her, wiped tears off of her face—
those hands had snapped handcuffs onto her one day... then ripped handcuffs off of her the next. She thought of the irony of that. How when she first met Cas, he'd had zero problem leaving her cuffed in the basement at Bobby's. And then, roughly a year later, how he'd savagely torn another pair off, the most upset she'd ever seen him.

She shivered a little at the thought of Lucifer, remembering when he'd shoved her to get a rise out of Castiel. She was troubled, and it wasn't so much the assault as it was the way Cas had reacted. He'd looked positively murderous when the devil slammed her against the wall—Cas had drawn himself to his full height looking ready to destroy everything in his path, practically seething. And Lucifer had said, softly, far too close to Alex... "Look. How protective he is of you." As if he were pleased with the display, like it was something that fascinated him. He'd almost sounded triumphant—but why? Cas was her guardian angel, right? Wasn't he supposed to be protective? She actually had begun to think about this very idea a lot the past couple of weeks—that maybe that was the exact reason why she'd gotten so confused about Cas and his feelings toward her. She'd thought that the way he looked at her, his attentiveness and care were because of romantic feelings or emotions. She got it now—she'd made the mistake of looking at it from a human perspective, He had some kind of profound, deeply rooted bond to her because he was her guardian angel. She'd made the mistake of assuming things—that, paired with what had happened in 2014—she'd just been dumb. It was obvious that whatever she and future Castiel had in 2014 was because he was human.

Really, Alex... thinking an angel could fall in love with you.

She'd laugh at herself if it wasn't so frigging pathetic. She had seriously been reading too many romance novels. They were starting to melt her brain.

Alex stopped pacing and tried to get her head straight. She needed to stop mooning around like an angsty teenager and get to work preparing. If Anna showed up here, Alex wanted to be ready. It seemed highly unlikely, but it never hurt to be ready for a worst case scenario in her experience. She shrugged her jacket off and tossed it toward the heart-shaped coat knobs dotting the wall beside the door—the jacket totally missed but she didn't care. She had caught sight of herself in the mirror above the dresser. She looked so plain, so tired, so haggard to herself. She combed her fingers halfheartedly through the hair on the left side of her head, then realized it was a lost cause and looked away and back at Cas, pensive. Then, she drew her hunting knife out of the sheath on her belt and shoved the sleeve of her flannel shirt up a little bit. Holding her arm out in front of herself, she took a deep, reluctant breath—this was always the worst—then sliced into the skin there, suppressing a pained sound as blood flowed out of the cut. Satisfied with the blood flow, Alex re-sheathed her knife and went over to the bed again.

On the wall above the bedside table, Alex began to fingerpaint her blood, the strokes forming the angel warding sigil. She'd added this symbol into her mental catalogue of wards a long time ago, basically the first time she'd seen it. Funny how drawings and shapes combined just so could save your life, trap a demon, send a spirit into the void.

After a moment she finished with the sigil. Alex washed her hands and grabbed a dry washcloth from the bathroom and held it against her bleeding arm, then leaned against the bathroom doorway for a minute, waiting for the blood flow to stop, looking at Cas. He looked so peaceful. She wondered if he would dream, and if he did, what it would be. She smiled softly at the sudden thought that she was watching over her guardian angel. And then she promptly stopped herself. These were more of her ridiculous romance-novel influenced thoughts.

The sound of silence was ringing in her ears all over again and Alex let out a soft, frustrated breath of air. Mind turning to worry about Sam and Dean all over again. If they screwed this up, got
themselves hurt or killed, she would murder them. Getting exasperated with herself and the silent room, the noisy barrage of thoughts, Alex looked around restlessly. She definitely couldn't just sit here and stare at Cas all day, and she couldn't stew in silence about Sam, Dean, Mom, Dad, life... she needed a distraction, stat. She tossed the washcloth away then went and switched the television on—it was ancient, the kind with wood panels on either side of the screen, and it had an antennae the size of a fish tank on top of it. Only one channel came in, and on it, some movie she'd never seen before. The picture quality was pretty horrible.

"I tell you this as an artist, I think you'll understand," a young Christopher Walken was saying to an even younger Diane Keaton—who was dressed really oddly, kind of butchy or hipster maybe. "Sometimes when I'm driving... on the road at night..." he said, "I see two headlights coming toward me. Fast. I have this sudden impulse to turn the wheel quickly, head-on into the oncoming car. I can anticipate the explosion. The sound of shattering glass. The... flames rising out of the flowing gasoline."

Oh geez. Well that was optimistic. Alex was not amused with her luck. This looked like a great movie to watch while she was already kind of depressed. But, at the very least, it was some background noise to distract her from everything else. She sat cross-legged on the far edge of the bed at a respectable distance from Cas. Close enough to keep an eye on him, make sure he was still breathing. She glanced at the cut on her arm, where the blood was beginning to clot, then absently rubbed an eye, thinking an IV drip of coffee would be nice right now because she was so frigging tired. She looked back at the TV screen unseeingly, staring. She didn't want to fall asleep—because every time she did, the nightmare, the one she'd had for weeks now, consumed her.

"Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?"

Castiel heard a soft masculine voice speaking somewhere nearby. It was dark—his eyes were closed—what was happening? And then he remembered bringing the Winchesters back to 1978, then collapsing...

"Oh, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do," the voice continued, as Cas, eyes still closed, realized how weak his vessel was. Hazily, he was recalling performing the locating spell to find Anna, then he remembered his conversation with her in the warehouse. His eyes snapped open, his pulse suddenly rocketing. He remembered everything. His eyes darted back and forth, staring widely at the dark, unfamiliar ceiling above. The things Anna had shown him about the future clambered loudly for attention, sent his entire vessel into a panicked and confused state. He heard the same male voice speaking still nearby, but didn't catch the words, his ears buzzing loudly.

Unsure where he was or what had happened—he seemed to be inside some kind of room now and on a bed—he looked to his left—and promptly froze. Within arms reach, Alex laid on her side, facing him, eyes closed, her form still. Her head was resting on her arm, her knees were drawn up toward her chest. If he hadn't seen her shoulder slowly moving down and then back up as she breathed, he had been a fraction of a second from believing she was dead—the memory of seeing her lifeless body covered in blood was still so fresh and pervasive in his mind that seeing her still there beside him had somehow convinced him, just for a moment, of the worst.

But she was alive—and asleep—beside him. Cas let out a breath he hadn't realized had been held, then was suddenly struck by the realization that they seemed to be alone—where were Sam and Dean? He looked around the room briefly, wincing against the pain and difficulty of raising his neck even four inches. He was immediately confused by the overwhelming barrage of strange, red decorations that covered the dim room. He could see that the television was on. It was kind of dim in the room—they were in a motel suite of some kind. He couldn't hold his head up any longer and
gave up, letting it thunk back onto the pillow.

He looked back at Alex, the strangest and most overwhelming combination of emotions overcoming him. In the most literal sense, he felt he couldn't take these sensations and thoughts. They violently ricocheted around in his head, spilling over each other and multiplying and they were too much to bear or carry—Cas wanted to grab his head in his hands and silence it all, just make it stop. But his arms were too weak to move, and even if he could move them, there was a terrible suspicion inside that no physical action on his part could ever quell this chaos inside of him—the noise in his mind wouldn't stop or end. He seemed to have no choice but to lay there lost in despairing, horrified thoughts.

He could barely understand what Anna had shown him. He had seen it—taken it in—but couldn't comprehend it all. He'd seen a future where a fallen, human version of himself and this woman beside him had been together and very obviously in love—he understood little of the intricacies of being human, but he had known they were in love with certainty. He was once again feeling his breath shortening as he wondered how. Castiel had watched humans since the dawn of time but hadn't ever imagined himself being capable of taking part in being one. He hadn't ever thought he would be anything but a servant of God and Heaven. But in this supposedly certain future, he had fallen from grace and together with this human girl beside him forged a new life... shared a home... created a child... Castiel blinked rapidly, eyebrows knitted together. His heartbeat was fast and he could feel it in his throat. He heard the television still but the voices and music were muffled because he was so unfocused. He had created a child, with her. That thought was even more confusing and bewildering than the rest, and he couldn't confront it, not yet. It was much too much.

He watched Alex closely as she continued to sleep. He felt such fierce protectiveness and desperation rise in him at the same time, quickly followed by shame and fear about the future. He heard the sound of an echoing gunshot, saw her dying moments flash across his mind. Could that really be where the future would take them? He didn't want to believe it. He thought of everything else briefly—Dean's cold and heartless demeanor, Lucifer walking the earth in the flesh, the Croatoan virus all but destroying the world. But none of it seemed as awful as the knowledge that he could be responsible for Alex's death. Not only her death. But the death of the small, new life within her—again, the thought of the child overwhelmed him, and he sent the thought away. It wasn't difficult, because he was lost in so many other nightmarish thoughts. The thought that he could hurt Alex in any small way inspired endless horror and intense fear like he'd never felt before. He could never, never let that version of the future happen. All roads lead to the same destination. He'd said this to Dean once. Now Castiel didn't want to believe that, because if it were true... what Anna how shown him was inevitable. In that moment, Castiel swore to himself that he would find a way to make sure what he saw never happened. Even if he had to kill himself.

"Sin from thy lips? Oh trespass sweetly urged! Give me my sin again." The man on the television said, sounding deeply emotional and affected.

Cas glanced down with his eyes, just beside his right foot, where he could just see a couple on the screen kissing passionately. The sight of it made him think of the kiss he had witnessed between the Alex beside him now and the Castiel of the future. Quickly after the shock of witnessing such a passionate and sexual kiss, a dark, foreign feeling shimmered through him. He wasn't entirely sure what it was. Perhaps it was jealousy. Why had she done that? And moreover, why hadn't she told him about it? He felt lied to, as her strange behavior toward him when she'd gotten back from 2014 now made sense. He wanted to be angry that she hadn't told him about the kiss—but then, in quiet realization, he thought perhaps he had no right to think she owed him an explanation. Still, he couldn't brush aside the feelings of betrayal. And confusion. And, he realized in surprise—hurt.

Offhandedly he thought maybe that was why she had kissed him so readily in the panic room…
because she had done it before. He felt a sudden surge of loathing and hatred toward that angel-turned-man who had fallen apart, gotten Alex killed, then had the audacity to involve 2009 Alex and touch her like that. Castiel didn't recognize that man as himself. He was left feeling empty and bitter. But then his mind turned to the knowledge of how he had taken the memory of the panic room from her. Stilling, ashamed, he thought cynically that perhaps this is what the humans meant by 'irony.' She had hidden something from him—and he had taken something else from her. They were 'even,' weren't they? So why did it feel so awful?

He remembered seeing her and Dean right after he'd whisked them out of Zachariah's clutches. He'd immediately, instinctively picked up on the fact that something was wrong with Alex, but hadn't known what. He'd asked her about it. She had sidestepped. He'd asked again. She'd insisted she was fine, but the way she'd looked at him... he hadn't believed her. He remembered standing there beside a busy street, later that night alone, hands in his pockets. Wondering about what she'd seen in this dark future that had rattled her so thoroughly. Dean had promised to explain it and had, a few days later when Cas went to see Dean in the privacy of a dream. Dean hadn't told him how he had discovered Cas was the reason Alex died in the future. So many lies and half-truths. So now Cas was wondering what exactly had shaken Alex so deeply: The kiss? Did the future Castiel tell her about her death? Was she shaken up because of how hopeless and desolate the future of the world was? The sight of her brother Sam, possessed by Lucifer?

His anger faded into a deep sadness and frustration as he realized that if Alex had told him about the kiss, he wouldn't have known how to react, what to say or do. He wouldn't have understood, not then. She had probably known that. He pondered. Perhaps the kiss in 2014 was bothering her in the same way that he was bothered by what he had done in the panic room. He couldn't know—she carried so much sadness with her, and sometimes, he thought perhaps she was cracking under the weight of it all.

He looked at her thoroughly now, turning his head slightly toward her. She often looked so weary and burdened, but right now, her face was relaxed and peaceful, soft, free of worries if only temporarily. He had studied her face countless times before, but never tired of the discourse. During his existence he'd observed innumerable humans, but none of their faces drew him like hers did. He didn't even know why. How many other women possessed similar features? And yet, there was no one in existence now or ever who was as oddly captivating as Alex was to Castiel.

She was a fleeting being, fragile and transient. When he thought of her in comparison to his world of Heaven and eternity, she seemed so small and powerless. She should have been meaningless, but she wasn't. Not to him. He thought of it for a moment, he, a thousands of years old celestial being. Her, a fleeting, mortal blip on the timeline of eternity. But she seemed realer and grander to him than the Sistine Chapel or the Garden of Eden or Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.

He loved the barely-noticeable freckles scattered across the bridge of her nose and the slightly mismatched shape of her eyebrows and the uneven arc of her hairline, the flyaway hairs that never seemed to be tamed... the sight of her eyelashes dark and fanning out against fair skin... he'd counted their number before. He was smiling softly now, unaware. His eyes ran from the point of her chin up the swoop of her angular jaw, then flicked over to the soft pink lips that were parted just slightly—and then he felt guilt crash over him like a wave breaks over a rock, and his smile faded. He remembered what it had been like to kiss those lips. And he longed to feel it again, the other-worldly quality of his mouth and hers, together.

Castiel couldn't look away from her. And when he realized he couldn't look away, he felt the sensation of panicked worry eating at him from inside. He needed to be distant from her, far away, because being close to her made him weak and vulnerable in the strangest of ways and in turn endangered her. He knew if he could stay far away, if he could let their relationship be resigned to
a few interactions per year... he would keep her safe from that future where they were in love, broken, and doomed. But despite his convictions and his recent attempts to keep them apart, fate seemed to be determined to push them together. Like now. He literally couldn't move his vessel, it was so weakened. And she was right beside him, looking so small and sweet and he remembered how it had felt to hold her close against him, how she had rested her head against his shoulder there in Gabriel’s hell world. In quick succession, he remembered how he'd seen her lay her head on his shoulder in the future, right before they had approached that farmhouse... horror rippled through him again, as intense as before.

Alex shifted then in her sleep, moving her arm slightly—Cas froze at the sight of a streak of bright red blood there—and then he immediately reached out a weak, shaking hand and gently turned her wrist toward him, trying to see where the blood was coming from. He could see a cut, clearly self-inflicted there on her forearm, partially covered by her halfway rolled up flannel shirt sleeve. It looked like it wasn't bleeding anymore, but that didn't matter much to Cas—why had she cut herself to begin with? He looked around—then saw it. She'd drawn an angel-warding sigil there, beside the bed on the wall. He relaxed, just a little, but felt largely unhappy. She should have taken his blood to do that, not hers.

She stirred suddenly, frowned a little in her sleep, then made a soft sound, like in pain. Castiel went still, unsure what was happening. Again, she whimpered, and becoming concerned, Cas touched her arm, said her name. Her eyes shot open, wide and darting around, momentarily confused. Then she saw him and stopped moving. "Cas?" she seemed disoriented.

They looked at each other for three very long seconds, then Alex was sitting up, perturbed, looking around like she was dazed. "Did I fall asleep?" It seemed to be a rhetorical question, because she squinted at her watch, then went wide-eyed. "For... crap, three hours?!"

She grimaced and rubbed her forehead, looking distressed. Cas watched her from where he laid. "Were you dreaming just now?" he asked.

She turned her attention to him then frowned a little, eyes darting away. "Uh, yeah, I think." Cas waited for further explanation, his forehead wrinkling. But she shook her head, acting like it didn't matter. "It's nothing." She then looked at him pointedly, turned back toward him, tilted her head the side just slightly, eyebrows close together in concern. "Are you good?" she looked him up and down, assessing him. "What happened to you?"

It was shameful to be stuck laying flat on the bed, unable to move much, her so high above him. He felt foolish. "My vessel isn't as strong without Heaven's power behind it." He explained, not able to keep his face from showing his discomfort about that fact. He paused. "I... don't think I can even sit up at this point."

"Damn," Alex commented. She looked worried. "You'll be all right though?"

He wondered if she were worried about getting back to her year, or about him. "Eventually," he answered. She looked kind of unsure about his answer. "Where are Sam and Dean?" Cas asked, and she swung her legs around toward him, sitting cross legged.

She looked unhappy at his question, cracking her knuckles in distraction. "Gone after Anna."

"They left you here with me?" Cas asked, frowning slightly, not sure if he understood how Dean would allow that.

"Someone needed to keep an eye on you," she said shrugging lightly, giving him a very small smile.
Cas let out a heavy breath, grim, regretful. "I shouldn't have listened to Dean. I should have come alone," he muttered. "Traveling with passengers... it's weakened me. I'm all but useless." It was highly dangerous that they were here in 1978 and he couldn't protect them against Anna.

Alex gave him a look when he said that he was useless, like she was unhappy he would say such a thing. She didn't say anything about it though. Instead she asked him, "Do you want to sit up?"

He frowned deeply. "I can manage it myself." He lifted his neck, shifted his arms... and promptly realized he couldn't. It felt like the entire world were sitting on his chest. Also, everything hurt.

Seeming almost amused or maybe that was fondness in her expression, Alex rolled her eyes at him as she got up and rounded the bed then came to his side while giving him a soft little 'told you so' smile. "Okay, up we go," she said, hooking her arms under his. She used her body weight to drag him upwards along the bed while lifting him toward her—he was surprised at her strength. Grunting a little, she propped him there against the headboard—and there was a fraction of a second when she drew back but without completely retracting her arms from him where they looked each other in the eye and inexplicably remained still. Her hazel eyes caught the lamp light in the room and appearing to be almost amber in color at that moment—he was fascinated, intrigued... and then she pulled away completely, uncomfortable but trying to act as if she were at ease, trying to smile, looking more like she were grimacing. Cas realized that Sam made the same face sometimes. "There's no shame in, uh, asking for a little help now and then, Cas," she told him, attempting a light chuckle. He looked away. No shame? Then why did he feel nothing but?

He glanced at her sidelong. "You must be upset to be left behind."

She seemed surprised by his comment, thought about it for a beat then shrugged in good nature. "Nah, it's okay. I mean, hey. It was my turn to watch over you I guess." She smiled at him, but it was a hesitant, cautious smile. He understood that she was trying to be light and optimistic, but he was so wretched, unable to even sit up by himself—that her attempt only increased his misery. Alex seemed to react poorly to that, and sobered, looking away.

"My only love sprung from my only hate! Too early seen unknown, and known too late!" A young woman was lamenting on the television screen.

Alex huffed and got up abruptly, switching off the TV set, then turned back around with folded arms. Pensive, she cleared her throat, seeming to be unsettled. Finally, she looked at him squarely. "Cas... did I do something wrong?"

Her suddenly emotional tone confused him. "What do you mean?" he asked.

There was a pause. She shifted where she stood restlessly, her eyes dropping away from him. "I just—you've been acting kind of, I dunno, weird toward me since Carthage," she said. The blood in the veins of Castiel's vessel suddenly felt cold—did she somehow know what he had done? "And I just think," she continued, sounding lost, "did I do something to like upset you, or...?" she stopped there and looked at him fearfully, face and body tense as she waited for his reply.

Castiel just looked away and kept his voice and face neutral despite the internal racket of fear and guilt. "No, of course not." It wasn't a lie, but Castiel knew he was lying by avoiding the truth. "When humans want something really, really bad, we lie," Dean had told Cas not long ago. Cas didn't even desire to lie or hide things, especially from her... but he had trapped himself here where it was the only option that remained. He couldn't tell her the reason why he'd been more distant and avoidant was because of what happened in the panic room. She couldn't know about his mistake, his momentary lapse in control. Especially now, considering what he had seen in the future. And yet he could see that it left her thinking she'd done something to push him away—Castiel marveled
sorrowfully at the mess he had created. He didn't even know how to fix it, or if that were even possible. He watched her as feelings of misery and loathing went pinging around inside of him.

Alex was chewing on the inside of her mouth—Castiel could tell from the way her cheek hollowed out on the side. "I was really drunk the night before Carthage, okay?" She said, and Cas was perplexed. That wasn't true—she hadn't been drunk, had she? Perhaps just slightly inebriated. "I, uh, don't really even remember most of what happened," she said, and Cas swallowed, felt his teeth grit together, felt his eyes drop down and away from her. "And whatever I might have said..." she continued awkwardly, looking at him as if waiting for him to understand. And suddenly he did. She thought when she had touched his hand… he closed his eyes briefly, and reopened them. Whatever I might have done..." she continued, highly uncomfortable.

He cut her off before she could continue, but he couldn't look at her. "There are no ill feelings, Alex. You did nothing wrong."

She looked at him closely. Did she believe him? Her face was scrunched oddly. "Are you sure?" she asked. "Because you just haven't been... you the past few times I've seen you and I just thought —"

"Of course I'm sure," he all but snapped, hating being stuck sitting on a bed. And he was afraid of what she was asking, of what she might discover if she kept pressing him for answers, he was despising himself for what he had done and the wound he'd inflicted on her without even realizing. She was startled at his tone and sharp look. Cas was startled too and his eyes went down, his voice softened. He tried to find an excuse, another lie. Anything to sweep away the chance of her finding out what he had done, what he had hidden away. "It's… Lucifer… and also my search for God… I can't find answers on either anywhere, and—I'm highly vexed." It wasn't a complete lie, but it still felt like one. Alex seemed to be thinking his answer over and grew sympathetic. Cas felt a wash of shamed, guilty relief.

"So, no luck with the whole God thing," she said and came to sit at the foot of the bed near his feet. The whole God thing. Cas shook his head and pressed his lips together, avoiding her eyes. "He's nowhere to be found."

"But you haven't given up." Neither a question nor a statement. She sounded intrigued.

"I can't give up," he said. There was too much at stake, there was too much at risk. And besides that, there was nothing else left to believe in. Everything else had failed Castiel. Heaven, his brothers and sisters, his own decisions and choices. "He's out there somewhere. I don't know why he's… hiding." His word choice of 'hiding' made him quiet for a moment. Why would his father hide when he was needed so desperately? It would make sense when he finally found God, he told himself. Perhaps it was a part of the design, a test of faith.

Alex looked down at the bedspread with a quietly disturbed expression. "Don't know how you can have so much faith in someone who is refusing to be found."

"Didn't you believe in your father?" Cas questioned. "Even when he went missing?"

Alex looked at him with a caught off guard expression. "Uh... no." She glanced off to the side. "I thought he'd finally just split, honestly." Her chin moved forward a little in an odd expression like reluctance, then her eyes came to look at him uncertainly. She thought a minute longer, not looking at him when she spoke. "My dad and I… he failed me in so, so many ways. How would I have faith in him? When he treated us, me so..." she stopped, swallowed, glanced his way. "I mean... you saw what he tried to do, right? Give me up?" Her words paused him completely.
He realized his mistake, realized that he had temporarily forgotten that pivotal moment that Gabriel had shown Alex: John Winchester talking to Bobby Singer about giving his daughter up into state care—disowning her. He remembered seeing the memory from where he'd been fighting to reach Alex, and at first, not understanding what the two men were arguing about. And when he had understood, he'dfelt a strange hollow horror. A father should protect his child, this was his solemn duty. And Alex had been more vulnerable than most children. Therefore her father should have absolutely protected her, never even considered letting her leave his sight, not even for a moment—Castiel felt something inside him darken as he thought of John Winchester trying to abandon the one who had been entrusted to him.

He looked at Alex now and spoke slowly, frowning, his voice affected by everything he was thinking about. "He never should have even considered... 'giving you up.'"

She looked at him from the edge of her eyes. "Why not?"

Those two words shocked him. "How can you ask that?" he asked in wounded disbelief.

"Because I get it," Alex said darkly. "I was just... a problem and in the way. He didn't want me."

Her voice wavered almost imperceptibly, leaving Cas feeling helpless, wondering why should would assume that or believe that.

"I don't understand," Cas said, looking at her intently—he could feel how wrinkled his forehead was.

Alex looked at him fleetingly, and her jaw working back and forth as she clenched it. She didn't say anything for a long moment. "He drank a lot. He said a lot. The kind of stuff you don't just forget." Her hand gripped bedspread tightly beside her leg, and he thought perhaps she didn't even know she was doing that. "That stuff you saw that Gabriel put me through?" she asked softly. "That wasn't half of it. Not even close." Her voice steadied and she raised her chin then drew a deep breath. "So no. I didn't believe in him when he disappeared... even though we'd kind of been getting closer at the time... I just thought he finally got tired of it all. Of Dean and me and our shit." She looked very small and sad sitting there at the end of the bed. Her shoulders sloped forward a little as she looked at her feet. "I lived my whole life never knowing when he'd be back. If he'd be back." Guilt and pain flashed across her features, and Cas didn't understand why. Alex shook her head, distressed, absenty rubbing the side of her forehead with her fingertips. "He was a good man. I know he was." There was a lot of deeply conflicted emotion in those words. "But I don't think I believed in him. Ever." She paused. "He never believed in me."

Cas was quiet and thinking, regretting what he'd asked her—it had clearly caused her emotional pain. He reflected morosely that he was her guardian and was supposed to keep her safe from harm. But no matter the path he took, it seemed he was cursed, only able to cause her torment and pain. And in the end, in the future... death? For a moment, he couldn't look at her. When he did, she was now peering at him in intent curiosity. "Have you ever even met God, Cas? Dean told me one time that Anna said only a couple angels have ever met him."

"That's true," Cas admitted, understanding the unspoken question, looking down at his hand to the right, waiting for her judgement. "I'm not one of them."

She looked at him in vague surprise. There was a short silence. "No offense but... how can you believe in a guy you've never even met?"

He glanced up at her from the corners of his eyes, reluctant. Her heartfelt question seemed far worse than a flippant insult—which was what he had expected. He let the silence hang for a moment. "It's getting more and more difficult," he admitted grudgingly.
She turned a little, shifting and facing him more now, a hand on her knee, all traces of her former distress replaced by inquisitive curiosity. "So, if you find God, do you think he would actually be up for stopping the whole Michael Lucifer slapping contest? I mean, isn't them facing off part of his grand plan?"

She phrased things strangely, he thought. Similarly to Dean. He felt himself frown as he thought over the question. He then answered truthfully. "I'm not sure. What I believe about that anymore."

He watched her reaction to his words—she blinked a couple times, looked down, her eyes going back and forth slowly. She was thinking, deeply. And so was he now. Trying to quiet the creeping doubt within that God would never be found. He'd searched the world for months now. He was running out of places to look. But God had to be there somewhere, he had to be. He watched Alex now and her eyes snapped back to his—they were an impossible color; every shade of a forest filtered by late afternoon sunlight. As always, they drew him in. "Cas, I need to ask you something and I need you to be honest with me," she said, and her concerned expression alerted him to the fact that what she was asking worried her. "Does Anna have a point?"

He took a moment to understand what she was referring to. "About killing Sam?" Cas paused heavily. "Perhaps."

She frowned, looking at him intently. "That's not what you said when Sam asked you that."

"I didn't want to acknowledge it as an option," Cas said, avoiding her questioning gaze. It was an uncomfortable subject. "I still don't."

She sat back a little, looked at him, her face softening. "When I first met you—you would have killed him without hesitation if you thought it would stop Lucifer."

He glanced at her and thought about how much had changed since then. "That's true," he acknowledged, not sure why it left him conflicted. Commands and orders had been his entire existence, he hadn't questioned the will of Heaven. And now, he did nothing but question it. He let out a long breath through his nose. He felt troubled down to the deepest part of his being. But when he looked up at her again, he forgot the pain for a moment.

A soft smile pulled at Alex's lips and the action softened her entire face. She looked at him in a way he didn't know how to describe and he noticed that the air in the room had grown still, that he could hear his vessel's heart beating in his ears. Cas wanted to know what she was thinking, what made her look at him like that. He didn't have to wonder long, because she spoke as she lowered her chin a little, her eyes falteringingly staying on him. "You've just—you've changed so much," she said, and unlike the way Anna had said it to him earlier—as an insult—Castiel recognized it as a deeply pleased admission, and somehow it caused him to feel pleased, too. Alex was still looking at him with those soft, open eyes, the look on her face giving him the impression that she had something important to say. When she spoke, she said something no one had ever said to him before. "You know what? I'm proud of you, Cas."

He felt a rush of something in his vessel, a visceral spike of instant and pleasant surprise—she was proud of him? He felt lighter somehow, but it quickly faded into confusion, because he was unsure of how she could feel that for him. "Why?"

"Because you've decided to be your own person, make your own choices." She sounded approving and pleased. Which only made him feel rotten inside, vile. If she only knew what choices he'd made—the things exercising free will had caused—she would more than likely not be speaking to him. She would be regarding him with a disdain he fully deserved.
Distracted by thoughts of the panic room, her begging him not to take her memory, he grew sullen and dark. "It was simpler just obeying orders," he said.

She seemed to empathize with him, unaware of his inner struggle. "It always *is* easier to just do what you're told—but it's not always better."

Castiel looked at her long and hard, wondering about the future Anna had shown him. Wondering if Alex would say this at all if she knew what he had done to her already—how they had kissed each other and admitted feelings they had to each other, how he had taken those memories from her completely. He thought about what the future could lead them to if he didn't stop it now. "How do you know?" he asked slowly, needing to know. "If you're making the right choices?"

She shrugged, not realizing the weight of his question or why he asked it. "A lot of times you don't," she said, then reconsidered. "Most times you don't." She looked at him intensely now. "But this one? Trying to save Sam... find another way to shut down Lucifer... it's the right choice."

"But how do you know it's the right choice?" he asked, thinking of Lucifer alive and well in 2014, of Alex dying in his arms, of Dean unrecognizable and merciless. His eyes flicked onto hers, and he was desperate to know how he could learn whether he were on the right path or not.

"I just do," she said, and the way she said it... he believed that she was certain. And it assured him in a very, very small way, but he was still left hollow and unsure how he could know for himself when a choice was right or not. He felt foolish, a thousands of years old angel of the Lord seeking advice from a twenty-six year old human being. Perhaps she thought him foolish, too, for not knowing how to do things like know right from wrong without someone telling him. But she didn't look like she thought that. Unlike her brother Dean, she never looked at him with deep-seated annoyance or displeasure—not anymore. She used to. He felt a ripple of fear inside as his stomach clenched. Perhaps a future where they were close and intimate wasn't as far off or as impossible as he had assumed. After all, it wasn't long ago at all that she had told him she hated him. But clearly, that had changed.

Disturbed, he stared at his right knee. "How can I know about other choices I have to make? How do I know if they're right?"

She let out a heavy breath, thinking, maybe trying to find a way to explain. Or maybe she didn't know the answer to his question at all. She then spoke, carefully. "You take the days as they come. Do your best to do the right thing," she paused. "And learn to be okay with not always knowing."

She had grown introspective, and was looking at a vague place in front of herself. "Because trust me." Her eyes flicked back to his. "A lot of times... you won't know."

*A lot of times, you won't know.* How true that was. "It sounds simple when you say it like that," he said, downcast.

"That's the funny thing about life though," she said, but she didn't sound amused or like she found it humorous. "Nothing's ever as simple as it sounds." Cas attempted to shift himself, and grimaced. Concerned, Alex watched him. "Are you in pain?"

"It's tolerable," he said. "If I don't move."

"I'm sorry. If I had known you'd be messed up this bad..." Alex trailed off, paused. "I would have insisted you guys leave me behind."

"I wouldn't have let you stay," Cas said, to which she looked at him, faintly challengingly. But she said nothing and glanced at her watch tensely. Cas looked at his feet sprawled in front of him
unmoving on the bed. He was still unable to move and his vessel was exhausted of energy. He
should have come alone, taken on Anna himself, not have listened to Dean about bringing them.
Another bad choice, he realized unhappily. He refocused on Alex, who had stood up and was over
at the window, peering out. She seemed restless and concerned. "You're worried," Cas said.
"Yeah, what else is new?" Her arms were crossed now and she sighed, sounding resigned. "I've
spent my whole life worrying about those two stupid jerks." She said 'stupid jerks' with an odd
amount of affection and a sad little smile. Cas frowned, watching her with a confused expression.
"I... don't understand. You used an insulting term—but with a tone that indicates fondness."

Her crooked little smile got a little bigger as she looked at him from the corner of her eye. "Family,
friends... they get to do that." She paused, then unexpectedly added, "You ass."

Castiel opened his mouth to ask why she had referred to him as a posterior, then stopped. She was
looking at him with a playful expression, trying to press her lips into a straight line, but her smile
was evident. Cas felt himself smiling a little, too. Family, friends got to do that. He was smiling
more now, and she chuckled, eyes crinkled. He understood. She was implying he was her friend, or
perhaps even family, that he was among a special group of people to her. And then, the thought of
her dead body in his arms four years into the future flashed in front of his mind's eye, and his smile
faltered completely.

There was a sudden knock on the door, and they both looked in unison as a voice called
"Housekeeping!" and the door swung open. Panicking at the unexpected intrusion and unable to
move, Cas watched helpless as Alex, already half way to the door, was drawing her knife behind
her back, hiding it there, ready to attack—the knife still had her blood on it.

"Room's not empty," Alex said, stopping the door halfway with her foot, mostly blocking the
newcomer's view into the room.

"Oh, sorry honey!" said the woman. Cas could just see the top of her head and part of her face from
in the gap between the door and Alex's arm. "I thought this room was empty," the woman
explained, and craning her neck, eyed Cas curiously, then grinned widely, looked at Alex and
winked. "Damn, looks like you wore him out good!"

"Uh—yeah, thanks," Alex said, and turned, shut the door in the woman's face and locked it then re-
sheathed the knife, looking a lot less amused than she had a minute ago.

Cas tried to decipher the woman's meaning, looked at Alex intently. "That woman. What did she
mean you... 'wore me out good'?

Alex looked at him and from her expression, he was surprised she didn't ask 'are you serious?'
Instead, she pursed her lips and looked to her left. "Umm, well, this is the honeymoon suite," she
said, eyes darting around, expression strange. Cas's frown deepened. He didn't understand what that
meant, and Alex gave him a testy look, expelled a huff, tried to explain again. "She, uh, thought we
were... that we had... I guess, you know." Cas waited. No—he didn't know. "Had sex, Cas," Alex
said, exasperated, her ears and cheeks a little redder than they had been a moment before. He was
silent and she folded her arms again, became sarcastic as her cheeks grew even redder. "You know
what sex is, right?"

Cas gave her a hooded glance. He had existed for thousands and thousands of years—of course he
knew what it was. And immediately after thinking that, he remembered the image he'd seen of
Alex and himself in the future, her on his lap, her legs on either side of his legs, their arms wrapped
around each other, hands on each other, no space between their bodies, his hand skimming upwards
along the front of her body... it struck him as being intensely sexual, and gazing at her now, he felt a strange sense of embarrassment. His skin began to feel hot all over. Unintentionally, he wondered what might have happened next in that cut-short moment Anna had shown him... would they have kissed more and then... would they have...? He swallowed, intensely uncomfortable without any warning and unable to look even in Alex's direction because he was oddly humiliated as his mind went to a place he hadn't wanted it to. He tried not to think of it, not to imagine it, not to wonder about it. Sex. With her.

Sex was an activity which most human beings participated in—it was a means of reproduction and a source of physical pleasure, or so he'd gathered—but more than that he understood it to be an expression of emotional and physical love. He hadn't thought about it much before; he had never quite understood the more intimate details of the act, nor had he cared to. Not before. Now, he felt a growing curiosity about it, and discomfort at the realization that he felt that way.

In Heaven it was said that sex was something God had created for humans to express love, but Castiel had observed that idea wasn't always true. Many humans had sex with complete strangers—he almost had, thanks to Dean's insistence. Cas remembered that woman—Charity? That prostitute woman at the strip club. He had watched this loose woman, completely detached, as she had said strange things to him about what she planned to do to his body. She had pushed his coat off his shoulder, licked him on his neck. He remembered frowning, wondering why she was tasting him and if the act was supposed to be pleasurable or evocative. His vessel hadn't reacted at all to her, not positively. Not how it reacted to the woman standing across him in this room right now, he realized, and finally looked at Alex again, hoping she would never know the extent of his sinful thoughts. She seemed to feel his eyes and met his gaze guardedly. Just her eyes meeting his made his vessel react. He wanted so much to not be affected this way, to be so under the influence of her presence.

"Yeah, uh, awkward, right?" she commented dryly on his continued silence, then rubbed the back of her neck self-consciously, trying to smile but grimacing instead. "Hey, so, let's not mention that to Dean. Ever."

He heard her, but he was distracted by thoughts of the future, fears of what it would bring. Did he possess the ability to change it? He felt able to when he was away from her, but in moments like this where she was close and in his atmosphere, he wasn't so sure he could resist forever. He'd already proved to himself that he was weak enough to stumble—the panic room. And he'd seen a future where he'd obviously given in and paid the ultimate price. The loss of Alex, the girl he was sworn to protect. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, seeking an answer he wasn't sure she could give him. "If you knew the future were certain... unchangeable... would you still try to stop it?" he asked. Her immediate response was to make an almost cynically amused face.

"Uh, yeah. I mean, look at my friggin' life right now. Lucifer, Michael...? Everyone says it's gonna happen, that it's fate, that it's already a done deal." She stopped, stared at the wall in front of her blankly. "Everyone except Dean and Sam."

Cas frowned. She'd neglected to mention herself. "What about you?" he asked.

She glanced at him again, grim. "I'll do whatever it takes to keep it from happening. You know that." Her jaw was tight, her voice was hollow. "I can't lose them." She looked afraid. He could see it in her tense shoulders, the rigid lines between where her eyebrows pushed together, her fingers nervously pressed flat against her legs as she stood still. He remembered seeing this same fear in her as long as he could remember. The fear that she would lose her brothers and have nothing. He considered telling her that even if they left, he would remain. But he felt it was a reassurance he
couldn't offer her. There was a long silence, and Alex sank to the bed again as she breathed out heavily. She sat rigidly near his feet and stared into middle distance.

Cas watched her unchanging profile. He was helpless and weak and realizing that this was the reason he refused to give Sam over to Lucifer. Because it would offset a chain of events that would realize Alex's worst fears. And also, Sam was his friend—Dean was his friend. The three Winchesters were the first and only friends he'd had. He didn't want to see them used or manipulated. He didn't want to see his brothers Michael and Lucifer destroy each other and the world along with it. It gave him enough sorrow that his brothers were being made to kill each other, but the fact that it had to be her brothers in the balance… made it even worse for Cas.

He looked around the room now, frustrated, searching for an answer. All he saw were hearts and roses all over everything in the room. The sight of them irked him greatly and he felt a scowl on his face. "These heart shapes are inaccurate," he muttered, and surprisingly, Alex looked at him, a strangely amused expression on her face, the pensive look fading away. She seemed to think of something, stuck her pointer finger up then swung it down.

"That reminds me." She stood up and went to the dresser, grabbing a small square thing off of it. She pulled little cards out of the little box and sat down, this time not on the edge of the bed, but in the middle of it, only arm's length away from him. She sat cross-legged. "The greatest pastime ever invented: a deck of playing cards," she said, shuffling the cards expertly. They made pleasing little papery sounds. She glanced at him doubtfully, pausing. "Do you know how to play poker?"

Cas looked from the cards to her in all seriousness. "Gambling is sinful."

She stopped completely, looked at him oddly. "Well, so is murder and we do that all the time." He looked at her blankly. She gave him a look as she looked down at the cards. "I've seen you get smitey a time or two." She glanced back at him from underneath her eyelashes. "So cards can't be that bad, right?"

Cas was silent, unsure. Alex began dealing cards, gave him a little smile, and his unease faded. "We'll play Go Fish instead," she told him.

"So weird how this was in the honeymoon suite though," Alex said, and moved her game piece to a purple square, then cringed. "Stuck in the molasses swamp, as usual," she muttered and sighed.

Cas drew another card from the deck and looked to see what color he got. He looked so at ease and unlike the Cas she was used to—he was relaxed, eyes not squinted up, eyebrows not furrowed. He really seemed to be into the board game. They'd played Go Fish for a few rounds and Cas had complained (well, stated, but she called it complaining) about the lack of fish imagery in the game, said it with such serious concern. She'd laughed at the comment, then poked around the room and found, of all things, Candy Land in one of the drawers of the dresser—and the remains of some weed, too. Welcome to the seventies, she'd thought to herself.

Cas was now propped onto his side, his head resting in the palm of his hand—he seemed a little stronger than before, but not much—he moved his piece to a red square, just a few squares away from the 'home sweet home' square. "I'm winning," he said, and looked at her with an almost sly smile on his face.

Alex gave him an overly-dramatic challenging look from where she sat across from him. "Don't be too confident, buddy." She turned over her newest card and then smirked. It was a blue card, freeing her from the swamp and taking her forward, one square ahead of his. She smirked triumphantly at him and he drew another card, then looked at her, raised his eyebrows… and
showed her the yellow card, moving his piece to the 'home sweet home' square.

And then he surprised her completely by making a face like she had a minute ago. "You shouldn't be so confident… buddy," he parroted her, and it sounded hilarious and kinda stilted coming out of his mouth. Alex dissolved into giggles (which didn't happen—ever). She could barely see because her eyes squinted up so much as the giggles turned to full on laughter—he looked so funny—propped there like that, his face in his hand like a little damn kid, looking so pleased that he'd won the dumb game. Her guardian angel, the *Candy Land* champ. It was in, one word: cute. She shook her head, still laughing.

She wiggled her eyebrows at him. "Care to go double or nothing?" she asked, then he looked slightly confused and she laughed again. "I mean, want to play again?"

Understanding flashed across his features, then *enthusiasm*. "Yes, again," he said, and moved their pieces back to the beginning as Alex grabbed up the color cards and shuffled them quickly. This was bizarre, to say the least—playing a kid's board game with her wounded angel, but it also felt so good because he wasn't holding her at arm's length, looking at her like the spawn of Satan. Maybe it was just for today or now, but they were *okay* again, and it made her feel good, safe, better about everything. Encouraged that they could be friends again.

Alex finished shuffling the cards and noticed that Cas was staring at her arm—at the cut on her arm where the blood was congealed. It wasn't super visible, just the end of it from beneath where her shirt sleeve was rolled up, but his smile had faded, and his eyes flicked up to hers. "You shouldn't have used your blood for the sigil," he said, suddenly perturbed.

Alex wasn't sure what he was getting at. "Why not?"

"You could have used mine," he said, and Alex made a face like she didn't understand how he could suggest that. Did he forget he had been bleeding and unconscious and had frightened the living daylights out of her because he'd been bleeding? And he thought she'd just merrily slice into him for some more blood? It was almost funny, except not really. "Uh, Cas, I wasn't gonna cut you open—no way."

He looked unruffled, in fact, a little pissed. "So you cut yourself instead."

Alex frowned, then got a little defensive. "It's just a little cut, Cas." It hurt like a bitch but she wasn't going to admit that. Instead she just raised her eyebrows, trying to sound confident and like she didn't really care. "Do you know how many times I've had to bleed doing what I do?"

His eyes met hers. "Too many." And her air of confidence faded just like that. Cas's protectiveness of her had sometimes made her feel angry, like he thought she was weak or stupid, but those two words carried so much empathy and sadness. Like he hated the fact that she hurt, not that he thought she were a delicate, wilted flower.

She looked away. When he said things like this to her… she couldn't help the way she felt. "Well, I did it to protect us," she said stiffly, and his somewhat stern expression faded.

Alex put the *Candy Land* cards down, staring at nothing blankly. "I think Lucifer is inside my head," she blurted suddenly. Castiel's expression went cold and Alex fumbled verbally. "Or, or *something*."

"What do you mean?" he asked intently, and he suddenly looked every bit the Cas that had stood at the edge of a circle of holy fire and stared the devil down.
Alex wasn't sure why she'd just blurted that out—she hadn't told anyone about it, had been too freaked out about it, hoped it would stop or go away... she folded up Candy Land, moved it and the cards to the side, anything to avoid looking at him—

"Tell me, Alex," he insisted, voice deeper than she remembered.

Alex finally looked at him. If she were going to tell anyone, it should be him. "I've been having this recurring dream," she said waveringly, trying not to sound as freaked out as it made her feel. "Since the night before we tried to kill him."

"What is the dream?" he asked, dangerous, intense, needing to know.

Alex wet her lips with her tongue, trying to figure out how to word it, because it was mostly feelings more than images. There really were no images actually, just the vague shadowy interior of the panic room. She frowned deeply. "It's... so strange. I'm in the panic room every time. At first I feel… weird. Like, out in the open? Like I've let a secret out or said something I wasn't supposed to. But then I feel good. Safe... really, really happy. But then it cuts short and there's this horrible fear and I want to run away, but something is like… pinning me down? That's the worst part. The feeling of being trapped." She stopped a minute, thinking about how awful the feeling was. "And then I wake up." She looked at Cas, whose expression seemed even colder, more fearful than before—like he feared the worst, and Alex's stomach turned in anxiety—if it scared him, how bad was it? But he said nothing. Alex waited, but he still said nothing. "That weird dream, plus the way he just, called me to him—could he be inside my mind?" No reply. "I mean, how could he be, right? But—maybe? Did he leave a mark, or...?"

Cas was shaking his head, his expression stony. "No, I don't—I don't think it's possible."

"But what if it is?" she asked, starting to sound as desperate and afraid as she felt. "I mean would you even know?"

He avoided looking at her, seeming to be thinking hard. His jaw was tense. "I'll find out. How Lucifer did what he did," he sounded grave and distracted. "But... I don't think that's him inside your mind."

"Well what else could it be?" Alex demanded, starting to fear the worst the more she talked about it out loud. "It started the night of Carthage," she reminded him. That, to her, was the biggest indicator. She looked at him: he was her last resort, her only way of really knowing. "Just, test me or something. For a mark or a devil tracking device, I don't know. Please Cas."

He seemed reluctant, but then after a couple seconds, raised his hand, placing it on her shoulder. He closed his eyes and his face twisted in deep concentration like thought, he remained like that for about ten seconds. Ten seconds in which Alex just stared at the knot of his tie, trying to regulate her breathing. Just stuck feeling his hand on her shoulder—large, warm, heavy. She had forgotten how his very touch was enough to undermine her. He finally opened his eyes, frowning, looked at her. "Nothing," he said. His hand moved just slightly down, to the curve of her shoulder instead of the top even as the frown softened, his expression becoming unreadable and intense. His eyes were bluer than any sky she'd ever seen. And then he took his hand away and said nothing. The loss of his touch was disappointing.

He looked like something was hurting him, maybe physically, and Alex moved her head to try and see him better. "You okay?" she asked, looking at him closely.

His eyes slid her direction, but remained downcast. "I'm fine," he replied wearily.
Alex, didn't think she believed him, but let it go, shook her head, at a loss, plagued by thoughts of
Lucifer. If it wasn't some kind of mark inside, how? Any of it? "I just need to know why it's
happening. If it means something," Alex said, plaintive. If Cas couldn't help her, could anyone?
She waited a couple seconds, then quietly sighed, deeply distressed. "I haven't even told Sam or
Dean about it." She wasn't sure why she'd said that out loud, but it got his attention.

He once again met her gaze, deeply surprised. "Why not?"

Alex took a second, thinking about it, not totally sure. Then she shrugged shallowly. "They have
enough problems of their own right now. If this isn't something… I don't wanna worry them."
There was a heavy pause. "But… if it is something…" she trailed off, not sure what she was going
to say. She had propped an elbow on her knee and had her forehead in her hand now, tired. Drained.

Cas was pushing himself up a little into a sitting position, grimacing. He leaned against the
headboard, arms at his sides, head turned to look at her. He looked serious. "I won't let Lucifer
have you. Or Sam." He paused, looked down, suddenly disconcerted. "I suppose that's not very
reassuring, looking at me right now."

Alex smiled to herself unexpectedly. Cas was so very ashamed of his current condition, and it
showed—and maybe she should have felt really bad for him, but seeing him vulnerable and
uncertain just drew her to him more. She almost felt protective of him in that moment. "No. It's… I
believe you, Cas." She paused, looking at him through veiled eyes, realizing how much she owed
him as she thought about everything. Not just Dean's life, but Sam's too. She felt a surge of
realization that this angel in front of her—all he did was give to her and her family. How could they
ever repay him, even a little? Maybe with a thank you. So, she did her best, even though she felt a
little awkward verbalizing it.

"Hey, so, it meant a lot that you weren't willing to help Lucifer find Sam that night, you know. I—I
didn't think you would continue to say no like you did." She hadn't. And when he had, with her life
on the line… she'd been so proud of him. Scared shitless too, but proud.

In response to her praise, he seemed to grow even more despondent and maybe a little angry, too.
"It was an impossible situation to be put into," he said starkly. "I only got you out of Carthage with
fifty-six seconds to spare."

Alex felt her eyebrows raise up a little. Had it really been that close to midnight, to when Lucifer
said she'd drop dead if she wasn't out of town? She hadn't realized. That was a close call. "Well, we
got out though, right?" she asked, attempting to be optimistic.

Cas didn't look at her. "Barely." He looked guilty and conflicted and Alex suddenly realized
something, tilted her head to the side. This was the exact same kind of crap Dean put himself
through constantly. She felt sad to see Cas doing the exact same thing.

"Don't blame yourself for things that didn't even happen," she told him gently.

His eyes snapped to hers. "Lucifer had you there." He looked almost angry again. "That
happened." He was angry now. "He could have killed you, Alex, and I wouldn't have been able to
do anything. I barely saved your life as it was." His jaw clenched, he looked away, his expression
foul. "And look at me now. Helpless again."

Alex stared at him speechlessly as he got quiet stared off at the floor unseeingy. He looked so
frustrated, and she knew the feeling, but still. Whenever he got angry like that, his eyes blazing
with a quiet fire that promised retribution, she always mentally took a step back, remembered how
powerful he was, how he could devastate his enemies with just a touch... all while he walked the
earth in the body of a man. She was pretty sure Sam and Dean didn't quite see him as she did, they seemed to underestimate him or maybe they were just too distracted with the craziness of reality to think much about it. Alex paused. *Sam and Dean.*

She checked her watch and her stomach clenched. It was almost eleven at night. *Crap.* This was not good. Dean said he'd call by ten. She glanced at the phone beside the bed, her instincts buzzing with foreboding. "Something's wrong," she muttered, and turned, got up, suddenly incredibly antsy. *If I don't call you by ten, if we don't come back, come looking.* Dean's words to her earlier that day.

She turned to Cas, who had started frowning at her the second she'd said that something was wrong. She looked at him apprehensively, knowing what she had to do. He wasn't going to like it, and she was pretty sure he would have to stay put, which he'd like even less. He was sprawled there on the heart-covered comforter like a sad rag doll. "Cas—I've gotta go find them. They've been gone too long—are you able to move?"

He looked at her, shocked, then frowning even deeper than before. "You can't go alone."

She was already snatching her jacket up off the floor where it had fallen earlier, shrugging it on, giving him a 'no, duh' look. "That's why I asked if you could move," she said. "Can you?"

He struggled a minute, pushing himself up further into a sitting position—then collapsing back against the headboard weakly. The worst part was the little weak groan he let out.

"So, no," Alex said, grim, glancing around the room. She didn't want to leave him just sitting there, unable to move or defend himself—but she literally had to go find Sam and Dean. Cas watched her finish adjusting her jacket. He looked incredibly unhappy. She'd feel the same if she couldn't move or walk or do anything. Hell, she'd been there a few times actually, stuck and wounded and left behind.

"I won't be long," she told him. "I'll be back as soon as I find them." She turned to leave, but the sound of his voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Wait."

She turned around. He looked at her pensively. She walked over to him, watching as he reached inside of his trench coat, wincing, and withdrew something—a gleaming silver angel blade. "Take this," he said, and held it out to her.

She stared in shock, then shook her head. "I—I can't leave you without a weapon—" she protested. Cas held it out further. "Take it."

"Wait—I thought you gave Sam your blade," she said. He shook his head slightly. "I gave Sam Uriel's blade. This one... is mine." He held it out even further to her, handle first, the sharp end pointed at himself. And Alex was struck by how important this moment must be. He was letting her have the only thing that could kill him, the only thing that could defend him against other angels.

She looked from him to the blade. "Are you sure?" she asked. It felt like too much to accept.

"Take it," he repeated, holding her gaze. Alex looked from his eyes to the handle of the blade in his hand. She gave in, reached out, her hand closing over the handle, fingers brushing against the ends of his as she took it. The blade was surprisingly light and cool to the touch, almost seemed to hum with an energy against her skin. Just holding it was incredibly intimidating.
Her eyes flickered to his, doubtful.

His eyes were already looking into hers. "Anna is very fast," he said in quiet grimness. "Alex, be careful."

At that remark, she couldn't help but smirk a little as she slipped the blade into the inside pocket of her jacket. "Always am."

"No," he said grumpily, "you're not."

Maybe that shouldn't have made her smile, but it did a little. The smile faded fast though when she took in his clear dismay and fear. She felt her stomach clench a little bit as she thought about the danger and uncertainty of their situation. It was dizzying and overwhelming, really: Dean and Sam, missing, Cas down for the count, a powerful angel named Anna somewhere out there bent on killing her parents and/or Sam. In all the time that had passed already, she thought of how much could have already happened, terrible possibilities and scenarios played out in her mind's eye. She made herself stop, because if she let her mind go there, she'd panic. Days like this she had to think how impressive it was that she wasn't in a crazy house somewhere. Alex zipped her jacket and pulled her hair out of the collar, to the side. She couldn't waste any more time. So she put on a brave face and nodded once at Cas. "I'll be back," she said, and turned, went to the door.

She paused there, looked back as her hand came to rest on the doorknob. Cas was looking at her in intense discomfort. He didn't want her to go. It was written all over his face. And she realized that she really, really wished she didn't have to leave him there all alone, but what choice did she have? Sam and Dean might need help, might be dead for all she knew. Or, Dean might just not have been able to find a phone. Leaving Cas defenseless seemed risky, but not going and finding her brothers was risky too. For a second, Alex wondered if this were the right thing to do. Cas had asked her earlier about how to know when you were making the right choices. And this was one of those times when you just didn't know.

Conflicted, Alex took in a deep breath, turned. And then walked out the door.
The instant the door closed behind Alex, Cas suddenly had a rush of fear and resistance and had struggled again to sit up further, driven by the need to be able to function again and now. He foolishly hoped he would suddenly, miraculously be able to move and subsequently be able to go with her to make sure she was safe. But it was the same as before—the vessel pinged in pain all over, refusing to move. He let out the softest growl of frustration, barely able to contain the defeat he was feeling. He felt miserable and pathetic, completely inept, and Alex was out there alone. Completely alone.

In all his centuries he had never experienced such a sensation of utter failure. Nothing was working as it was supposed to, and it wasn't just limited to his vessel. He couldn't hear the celestial whispers that Dean referred to as 'angel radio.' Castiel now regretted listening to Dean and bringing the Winchesters back with him. He might have stood a chance at taking Anna on by himself. But he had foolishly listened to Dean and given in to his demands, thus endangering them all. There was a dark thought lurking at the edge of his mind that Anna might have already killed Sam and Dean both, and Cas had just let Alex go after them, perhaps to walk straight into a trap. The thought made him horrified at himself. He had placed them all in mortal jeopardy with his choice to listen to Dean's wishes. What had he done? He cursed himself internally.

Cas had wanted to command Alex not to go after them, not yet, and not alone—the danger was too great. He might have done so in the past. But now he knew Alex well enough to recognize when she had made up her mind. So he'd done the only thing left to do: sent with her a small part of himself, his blade. It was only a small hope of defending herself against Anna, but it was better than nothing.

Castiel thought again of her face as she took his blade with so much hesitation, then almost reverence, like she'd almost understood in a small way the significance of the gesture. Alex didn't know this—how could she, humans knew nothing of the sacred nature of the angel blade—but angels didn't give away their blades. Ever. They didn't loan them out. Each angel received only one, and only forfeited it upon death. Each blade was connected to its angel, and the angel to the blade. To give a blade away was considered an abomination. Castiel was sure that if his brothers and sisters in Heaven could see him now they would be shocked about how many rules he had broken in favor of helping the Winchesters. In favor of protecting Alex.

Cas struggled again, painstakingly pulling his legs over the edge of the bed. He felt such an acute sense of urgency. The reality of the risk to her life was pressing on him greater than before, and he needed to be where he could see her and know she wasn't in immediate danger. Refusing to accept his weakened state, he groaned in pain, pushing himself up with all of his strength, attempting to stand. He fell forward onto all fours, shaking from exertion.

2010

Dean stumbled, almost falling sideways—jolted by suddenly being sent forward in time, back to the future. He saw that he was in the motel room they'd been in before when they'd left for 1978… his mind was left to reel from what had just happened, but mostly, he had to know Sam was okay—because a minute ago he'd been dead, Anna had killed him and—
"Dean," came a voice, and there was a big hand on his shoulder. Dean turned in dumbfounded shock to see Sam there, looking just as confused as Dean was. Overwhelmed with relief, Dean grabbed his brother and hugged him tight. Sam didn't really hug back, he seemed disoriented, and when Dean let go, Sam was looking around the motel room in a daze. "What happened?" Sam asked. "I was—we were in seventy-eight and—Anna—she stabbed me and... I remember..." His look of confusion transformed into realization. "Did I die?"

Dean looked away, disturbed. "Yeah, you did. Anna killed you."

"Explain." Sam demanded intensely, almost threateningly.

Dean thought it over—it was a jumble in his mind, too—the entire thing—and it was pissing him off. "Okay, so Anna stabs you... you fall over dead in front of me... then Michael shows up, ganks Anna, makes Uriel go poof—"

Sam looked like he'd misheard. "Michael?"

Dean glanced at Sam broodingly. "He was using Dad as his meatsuit. Great, right?"

Sam's look of sheer disbelief and shock summed up Dean's feelings on the whole deal. Smirking humorlessly, Dean began to pace back and forth in front of his brother. "Yeah, I know. He said all this BS about the bloodline, how Dad was a vessel and not the vessel, how free will is an illusion... I'm destined to say 'yes'... blah blah blah. Then he fixed you, sent us back." Dean paused, stopping mid-step, suddenly realizing something. His stomach dropped, his heart clenched. He suddenly couldn't breathe. "Shit. Crap!" He looked at Sam in horror, then around the empty motel room, whirling completely, frenzied in his search.

"What?" Sam asked.

Dean looked at his brother in breathless terror. "Alex isn't here, Sam! She's still in nineteen seventy-eight! With Cas!"

Cold realization flashed across Sam's face, then anger. "Dean!" Sam exclaimed. "How?! Michael zapped you back too fast for you to tell him, oh yeah, my sister's here too, could you give her a ride back?!"

Hackles raising at Sam's blaming tone, Dean grew confrontational. "Michael was in my head man, I blanked for a minute!"

"You mean you forgot about her!" Sam corrected accusingly, shaking his head in abject horror.

At that comment Dean went cold, feeling like he'd been caught. Instead of admitting that Sam was right, he considered punching Sam in the nose. "I told you we should've left Cas alone, taken Alex with us!" He raged.

Sam held up two hands defensively, raised his eyebrows at Dean. "So now this is my fault?"

Dean ignored his brother's question and turned around, trying to see straight. Had he made the biggest mistake of his life by leaving Alex with Cas? How the actual hell was he supposed to get her back here? She was thirty-two years into the past for God's sake! Behind him, Sam seemed to have calmed down a little bit. "Listen Dean," he reasoned tensely. "I'm sure when Cas wakes up, he'll bring her back."

Turning abruptly, hostile, Dean stared hard at his brother. "And what if he doesn't wake up, Sam, huh? What then?"
Sam lost bravado, clearly realizing Dean had a point.

"I knew I shouldn't have let her out of my sight, dammit—" Dean knocked a lamp off the dresser beside him, repeating, louder, "dammit!" and trying to think, just think what he could do now, if anything. He was literally at the end of his rope. In total desperation, not sure if it would go through or what, Dean stood there, glared at the ceiling. "Cas!" he shouted. "Cas! Can you hear me you bastard? You bring my sister back to me right now!" There was a long pause, and nothing happened. "Cas?" Dean repeated, but with less power, more fear. Nothing. Dean looked at Sam, who could barely meet his eyes. Quickly crumbling, fearing the worst, Dean sank to one of the beds. "Jesus Christ, Sam. What the hell are we supposed to do?"

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1978

Exhausted, Alex opened the motel room door and froze—Cas was standing (just barely) and gripping the dresser with both hands, looking like he was about to fall over. He looked up and saw her, his face washing over from pained exertion to relief. Alex was shutting the door behind her, already halfway over to him. "Cas! What are you doing?"

He wobbled a little, gripping the dresser tighter. "I was... preparing to come after you," he said, sounding disconcerted.

"On what legs?" Alex asked, dumbfounded—he looked like he was going to fall any second and her hands kind of hovered out in front of her near him, just waiting for him to topple over.

In response to her question, he looked down, then back at her questioningly. "Uh... these legs."

Alex, drained both emotionally and physically, shook her head, grabbing his arm and pulling it over her shoulder. "Cas—come on. You need to sit back down—" she said. He seemed unable to control himself very well, leaning on her weightily, his feet shuffling oddly as she took her other arm and wrapped it securely around his back and waist, basically supporting him completely as she walked him over to the bed. She grunted from the effort—he was heavy. She left for one hour and he was trying to kill himself by trying to come after her... when he was clearly not even able to stand unassisted! Unbelievable. She didn't need him risking his ass for her like that and it pissed her off that he would try it.

Cas, a little dazed, was looking at her—she could tell because his voice was right in her ear. "You're much stronger than you look," he said, and sounded slightly surprised.

She just looked at him sideways, tone bordering on annoyed. "That's what I've been trying to tell you," she said as they reached the bed. She helped him sit as he'd been before, leaning against the headboard, upright. His legs were still off the edge of the bed, dangling limply, but Alex had gone kind of catatonic, staring at nothing in particular.

"What did you discover?" Cas asked, looking at her intently.

Alex looked at him again and her expression was foul. "A whole lot of nothing. The house was empty and dark, no one was there. They either went somewhere or..." she trailed off. Agitated and fearful, she yanked her jacket off, threw it toward a knob on the wall. It missed. She reacted by bowing her forehead into the palm of her right hand, shutting her eyes, heaving a frustrated, overwhelmed breath. Her eyes flew back open when she felt his hand close gently around her left wrist. Cas was looking up at her with an intense, questioning expression—concern. The anger and helplessness faded a little, replaced by something else: fear.
Alex swallowed, feeling more vulnerable and afraid than she had in awhile. She looked at his hand there, closed around her slender wrist. Then back into his eyes, despairing. "Where are they Cas?" she asked, desperate for an answer. There was a long pause and she sounded scared and small to herself when she spoke again. "Was I too late? Are they...?" she couldn't verbalize her fear that they were dead.

She just wanted so desperately for Cas to tell her no, it wasn't too late, they were alive, not to worry. But Cas's hand dropped away, his gaze went into the middle distance in front of him, his jaw flexed tensely. "I don't know."

His answer seemed to make her chest tighter than before, and she felt a surge of hopelessness overcome her. She stared down at his legs as they hung awkwardly over the side of the bed. Almost angrily she bent and grabbed them, half-pushed half-hauled them up until they were in front of him on the bed, then she wordlessly walked away from the bed a couple steps, agitated, caged, at the end of her rope. She needed answers, she needed to know what was going on, she needed her friggin' brothers to be okay, safe and sound—but she had jack squat to show for her search, no clue if they were alive or dead or what. She'd done it in record time too, Dean would have been proud of how fast she'd found John Winchester in the phone book, hot-wired a car, driven the fifteen minutes across town. She'd been ready for a fight, to face down an enemy... but had found nothing. And the whole time she'd been out there, she'd been worrying about what if she found Sam and Dean in dead piles on the ground—what if she got back to the motel and found that Anna had come and killed Cas, who had been left defenseless without his blade. Crap, the blade. She'd forgotten.

She turned back around. Cas was watching her and she could see that he was worried, and maybe a little affronted, too. She'd slung his legs down kind of aggressively without explanation, like she was mad at him. She wanted to explain to him—as usual—because that pleased little look he got when he understood was one of the best things she could think of—but she felt like if she opened her mouth, all the pent up emotions she was holding inside: fear, anger, self-doubt would spill out into the open. So, wordlessly, she went back to the bedside and took the angel blade from where she'd had it in a belt loop behind her. In her hand, the cool metal seemed to buzz with an incorporeal energy and strength. She held it out to him, thought about saying a thank you, but that didn't seem like enough. He took it silently, then he laid it beside him on the bed, didn't even look at it. She followed the blade with her eyes, perplexed, then looked at him.

"We'll find them," he said, and his words surprised her, caused her to go totally still. She looked at him, feeling bare under his gaze, wanting to believe him, but not sure if she could allow herself to. Guilt and regret washed over her.

"I should've gone with them," she managed brokenly, so miserable and torn. Suddenly feeling like she just couldn't stand up anymore, she sank down, sitting on the edge of the bed, next to his waist, her feet remaining flat on the floor. She felt like she was going to suffocate or implode. "I'm so tired of feeling this way," she managed to say as she stared at her knees. "Like any friggin' choice I make doesn't matter in the end." She tried to laugh at herself, but lacked the energy. She could only let out a weak breath of air. "I made this big speech to Dean and Sam after the whole Gabriel thing and... about how I wasn't going to be a bystander, but look. I am. I always am." There was a heavy pause, where Alex had to fight away tears. "And they might be dead now. They might be dead."

"We'll find them, Alex." Cas repeated.

Alex looked at him challengingly. "How?"
His gaze faltered away. He thought hard and he seemed unsure at first. "In the morning. We'll go look together."

Alex resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "You can barely even sit up," she pointed out, a little harsher than she meant to.

Hurt flashed across his eyes and Alex immediately regretted it. "I know," he replied, and again looked away, unhappy. "I'm sorry. I've failed you."

Alex felt a surge of indignant anger at his words. "You've failed me?" she repeated. How could he think that? After all the stuff he'd done for her family, all the sacrifices and hell even dying for them? She felt insulted somehow that he would say he was a failure, and her temper was short as it was. "You haven't failed me, Cas," she told him angrily. "Everything you've done for me and my brothers is the opposite of that." It was all nice stuff to say, but she said it so aggressively, almost bitterly, that it lost any grateful tone it might have had. And before she could stop herself, she sealed the deal with one final bitchy comment. "You haven't failed me, so just cram the pity party, okay?"

Cas looked at her with a strange, wounded expression, didn't say anything for a couple of long seconds. "You sound like Dean."

Those four words somehow seemed to jab her in the gut, brought on a guilt-trip. She sounded like Dean? Dean who talked down to Cas? Dean who rolled his eyes at Cas? Dean who didn't treat Cas with respect or trust? Alex was appalled at herself and suddenly grasping for a way to explain herself. "I didn't mean—" she shook her head, out of words. "I'm sorry… I just..." she just what? She couldn't find the words and looked down, remorseful.

"You're upset," he stated grimly, and she looked at him again. He was looking at his feet. "I understand."

She realized in genuine surprise that he was right—and how mature, how intuitive that seemed of him—but he looked so miserable, so personally offended, that it momentarily made Alex want to jump off the planet. She was a jerk. She gritted her teeth together. This is why conversations were so hard and why sometimes she just wanted to give up on them completely—she got so caught up in her emotions sometimes that she didn't stop to think about what she was saying or what it would do to the involved party. She tried to think of a way to explain herself to him.

"Yeah, I'm upset… not upset with you though," Alex tried falteringly, wishing she could take back the thoughtless comments. She could almost see the wheels of his mind turning with self-loathing and she tried to catch his gaze. "How could I be mad at you?" she asked. "I mean… after everything? And today you gave me your damn angel blade, Cas..." she didn't have to pretend—she literally was still floored by the gesture. More hesitant now, she looked away. "I kind of can't get over that."

"I couldn't go with you." He just clenched his jaw. "You needed it."

She studied him from the corner of her eye a minute longer. "It left you totally defenseless," she said, and he met her sidelong gaze with a hooded glance of his own.

His eyes flickered down, but then met hers again. "I wanted you to have it."

Her heart clenched with an unfamiliar warmth, as she felt like she heard all the things he didn't say just then. She had gotten the feeling that he valued her safety over his own in the past, but today, he'd proved that all over again. She felt largely undeserving and caught off guard, like, how the hell...
did I end up with this guardian angel who would give his life for me? It was a huge, frightening thought and it made her feel a thousand things all at once. But the biggest one was a growing sense of trust and… she could barely keep his gaze now… love. Her heart twisted up, her pulse hammered. Her entire body seemed to go on high alert as she realized how much she felt for him, and not just fleeting little confused feelings or shallow attraction. No. Genuine, deep, unmoving things. That word she'd thought just a minute ago. Love. Her confusion levels skyrocketed. How long had she felt like this?

"What's wrong?" Castiel asked, frowning in unease, his head tilting to the side at her silence.

She realized her face had frozen in an odd expression as she'd gotten lost in thought. Covering, she quickly flashed a nervous grin. "I, uh… just… thinking how I have the best guardian angel ever," she told him sloppily—and it was a sentiment she did feel—but said in a light tone that didn't reveal exactly how deep that feeling went.

His eyes slid to hers again, sullen. "You're attempting to compliment me," he stated. "But I don't deserve it." Alex looked at him with perplexed concern. He heaved a heavy sigh, staring ahead of himself unseeingly, a deep frown etched across his handsome features. "I'm a poor example of an angel. Attempting to serve a God I can't find. Heaven has cast me down. I've made… bad choices. Bringing the three of you here being one of them." He still wouldn't look at her. "I'm not the best anything."

She didn't agree. Not at all. And without thinking she leaned forward, grabbed his forearm. His eyes snapped up to hers. "You're the best angel I've ever met," she insisted intensely, then lost a little confidence as his brilliant blue eyes bored into hers. She'd grabbed him without thinking—should she let go, if this was overstepping his boundaries? Would this upset him like when she'd touched his hand at Bobby's? He just looked at her silently, frowning vaguely. And she didn't move her hand. However, it was harder to breathe now. "I mean maybe I haven't met a lot of angels, but I mean… still." She paused, voice softening. "You're the best one." She looked at his hand on her arm. He was looking at her hand, too, and Alex realized how damn quiet the room was and how uncomfortable it had become. His gaze was so intense and soft all at once and she wanted to kiss him so badly. Instead she stood up, became overly animated and a little showy, trying to make it casual again, trying to act like nothing had happened. "I mean, there was Anna, nice at first, turns out she's insane. And Uriel, dick. Zachariah—God, what a douche. Raphael, he sucked big time. Gabriel, hate that guy. Lucifer… don't even get me started on what an asshole he is." She gave a short barking laugh, but it was forced.

Cas watched her silently, his normal confused-perplexed-squinty-eyed 'what are you talking about' face on. She smiled a little for real at that, shrugged her hands out in front of herself, the pressed her mouth into a shrug. "I'm just trying to say that you're doing something right, Cas, okay?" she asked, then held up a mock-threatening finger and told him: "Now, get down on yourself one more time and I swear to your dad..."

He blinked a couple times, the slightest hint of a smile on his lips, but his eyebrows were still knit together. Like he understood that she was making a joke, but he didn't quite get it, but it still amused him. It was probably the cutest expression Alex had ever seen. Her affable smile couldn't hold up as she took in his appearance, his face, everything about him, the memory of kissing him—well not him, but the future version of him. She felt a pang of loss for something she'd never had, and unable to handle it, she turned away and went to the other end of the room.

He's your guardian angel, your friend, and that's all. She repeated this in her head several times as she stood in front of the silent television, trying to believe herself. "What... are you doing?" Cas asked after a couple seconds, and Alex, not sure what she was doing, tried to act purposeful.
"I'm—" she looked down at the television, reached for the knob. "Uh, turning on the TV." The picture quality was horrible and she slammed the top of the TV with her fist… maybe a little harder than she needed to. The static cleared a little, and she saw Robin Williams on the screen. He was dressed in a ridiculous outfit—rainbow suspenders over a colorful shirt. Alex recognized it immediately. *Mork and Mindy*. She smiled a little bit as she remembered. "Huh. I used to watch this show as a kid."

She looked back at where Cas sat on the ridiculous bedspread, underneath the plaque that said 'Love Conquers All'. Her smile faded. This was the part where she grew up and stopped trying to make this whole Castiel thing into something it wasn't. Accepted that his devotion and care was otherworldly and learned to be okay with that, not always selfishly longing for more. She could do that. She *would* do that.

"Mindy! My whole emotional life is flashing before my eyes!" Mork exclaimed in animated distress on the television set, and Mindy comforted him with don't worry, it was just a bad dream. Alex went back to the bed, and Mork was telling Mindy how he didn't *have* bad dreams, as his alien race had cut off the ability for bad dreams when they had cut off their emotions. Cue the laugh track. Alex remembered this episode, actually.

Cas watched her as she sat beside him on the bed, leaning against the headboard, her shoulder just a foot away from his. She glanced at him. He looked away, watched the television for a moment. "Who is the man with the hair like Sam's?" Cas asked, referring to Mork.

Alex looked at him sidelong, resisting the urge to laugh out loud. "Hair like Sam's? Oh he'd *love* that. Uh, that's Mork. He's an alien from planet Ork. He came to earth in an egg-shaped space ship. That girl's his roommate Mindy. But everyone knew they were more than that."

Cas took it all in, listening intently then frowned. "There is no such planet, Ork."

Alex did a bad job of hiding her amused smile. "It's a *fictional* show, Cas," she said. "Ork is made up. Mork is an actor named Robin Williams." Cas almost looked suspicious and Alex tiredly chuckled, watching Cas out of the corner of her eye. Watching him was almost as entertaining as watching the show. He looked at the screen intently, as if he were staring at an impossible math equation.

"*But showing emotions is a good thing, Mork,*" Mindy was saying kindly.

Mork looked shocked. "*But Mindy—that's a no no, no no for a Nanu-Nanu!*" Laugh track. "Mindy, I've made a decision and I don't think you're going to like it very much."

"What is it?" Mindy asked.

"Well, I've gotta stop this before the emotions take me completely over, so... I've got this little door in the back of my mind... I'm going to round up all of my emotions put them behind that door, lock it, and hide the key... in my foot."

There was laughter from the audience, even though Mindy looked disturbed. "*Are you saying that you won't feel anything anymore?*"

"*Right on, strike up the bland,*" Mork said really fast and determined, and stood up, put his hands at the side of his head. "*Goodbye Mindy! I'm closing off my emotions forever.*"

Mindy jumped up after him. "*Wait a minute Mork, don't!*"

Alex yawned, not able to stop herself—she was really tired. This reminded her of the nights she and...
Sam had spent wondering where Dean and Dad were. They'd always had each other and whatever local television shows had been on. He'd always try to get her to watch that Beauty and the Beast show but it was so cheesy and stupid and Alex would beg to watch The A-Team or Miami Vice instead. She blinked sleepily, getting drowsy.

"Well you haven't convinced me that I need them," Mork was saying, "so on behalf of my emotions, I'd just like to say... goodbye, sayonara, ciao, ta-ta, catch you later Mama... and shalom! It's been nice feeling you."

"Wait a minute Mork, no, don't!"

Mork's face had become emotionless, his voice had become monotone. "It is too late. The door is locked. My emotions are shut off forever."

"Then so's the Mork who I like so well," Mindy lamented.

"Don't worry, we can go on having a non-emotional equivalent of fun," Mork droned. "There are certain advantages. Watch." He smashed himself in the hand with a little stone statue and Mindy cried out, asked if it hurt. "You bet," Mork said without any feeling. "Ow. It's killing me."

"So what's the advantage of that?!" Mindy asked.

"I can hurt myself all day without bothering other people," was the stoic reply.

Mindy looked confused, then hurt. "Mork, can that door in your head ever be re-opened?"

"Yes, but I can't do it, because what's behind there is far too dangerous."

Mindy became angry. "You know something, you are really DUMB."

"Nice try, but insults to a man with no emotions is like hay fever to a man with no nose."

Mindy got upset, said Mork ruined her birthday, then accused him of being cold, then got quiet... sat down... said it was like part of Mork had died. And she began to cry.

"If you think you can get to me by crying, you're wrong." He said, but then said her name, "Mindy," gently, worried. Then snapped to attention, his voice returning to monotone, however, it was more urgent than before. "Fall back, systems to May Day, control tear ducts, think baseball, baseball!"

He was monotone again and sat down beside Mindy, who was still crying.

Castiel turned to Alex to ask a question—and stilled. She'd fallen asleep, head curled into the hard wood headboard of the bed, lolling uncomfortably in the space between it and her shoulder. Her mouth was open just slightly, some of her hair was in her face. She was fast asleep.

"Ah, once again, I am in control," Castiel heard Mork say emotionlessly. "I can deal with you as any other person." There was a long pause and Mork's monotone voice softened. "A person with invitingly soft skin. Rosebud lips. And sweet little eyes that leak cute little drops that roll gently down your cheeks..."
Her head stopped when her cheek hit his shoulder and Cas didn't move at all, because if he did, he might disrupt her rest. She shifted a little beside him and he felt a rush of protectiveness. The television was now just a hum in the background. He didn't look at it, not at all. He could smell the scent of motel shampoo on Alex's hair, feel the pattern of her breathing against himself. He didn't move a muscle for a very long time, even though his fingers itched to touch the skin of her face.

He could see her left hand, resting, draped across her thigh, and his eyes drifted across her scarred knuckles. Above them, a smooth white scar, maybe two inches long, arced across the top of her hand. He wasn't sure what these scars were from, only that they were evidence of the life she'd lived, the pains she'd endured. He knew that on the inside of her hand a dark scar slashed across the center from a wound inflicted in Gabriel's hell world. Each physical scar she carried was a reminder to Castiel of how fragile this human girl was. She was a strong soul, but contained within a vessel doomed to mortality. And he knew that her physical scars did not compare to the numbers of inner scars and burdens she'd collected over the years.

Perhaps he could do nothing to remove any scars that she had already received. But after he recovered from this temporary weakness, he was resolved to save her from the future that awaited and to keep her safe from the future in which he was the one who caused her death. Whatever he had to do, he'd do it to make sure Alex lived.

She shifted against him again, making a soft sound and Castiel felt his vessel flush all over with warmth. Perhaps he should have been more reluctant to be close like this to her. But he didn't feel that way. He... he liked it. Cas remained unmoving the entire night, watching over her, at peace despite everything else, because he knew she was safe and with him.

Drowsy and comfortable, Alex snuggled into the warmth beside her, sighing a soft, sleepy sound, feeling like she could stay in this half-awake state forever, feeling rested for the first time in forever, if a little sore from the weird position she'd picked to sleep in. She realized, listlessly, that she didn't have the nightmare last night. *Hmm, that was nice.* Maybe it was finally over. The shape she was cuddled into suddenly moved a little bit and her eyes shot open as she realized, remembering—*she had been sitting beside Cas in bed watching TV and... then what?*—she was staring straight at a button on the familiar beige trench coat. Panicked, she jerked upwards and found herself looking up into Castiel's face, which was just above hers. *Oh my god.* She had been sleeping... on him, basically on his lap! Quickly turning red with mortified heat, Alex just stayed frozen, hoping if she did, maybe she'd wake up and *this* would just be some kind of freaky dream.

"Good morning, Alex," he said, and she had the brief thought, *I quit life.* He was looking at her softly. She pushed away, embarrassed for numerous reasons, the most immediate being—had she snored? Drooled? Dean and Sam gave her crap sometimes about drooling.

"G-good morning," she mumbled, mortified, her eyes going all over the place, a dead giveaway of how damn awkward she felt.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked. And she knew it was just him being weirdly polite and courteous like he always was, but seriously, *are you kidding me?* Alex wanted to fling herself into a distant galaxy. She needed to disappear. She didn't answer his question, just slid off the bed, all business. There were bigger things to worry about right now.

"We need to go find my brothers," she said, and grabbed her jacket off the floor, shrugging it on. She turned around to see Cas standing up and she stopped straightening the jacket, hurried over to him, already knowing where this was going.

"I can stand," he said, looking immensely excited (for Cas, anyway). He then attempted to take a
step and wobbled dangerously. Alex only just caught him as she reached him, bracing him with both hands. He'd grabbed onto her tightly, either arm.

"Okay, okay, take it easy," Alex told him, teeth gritted as she pushed him back up. "Don't get ahead of yourself."

He was stable again and they just stood like that for a couple more awkward seconds—Cas holding onto her as if for dear life and her hands flat against his strong chest. He seemed out of breath and Alex didn't know if this could get any more awkward for her. He was so... ugh. It was driving her crazy and she wanted to blush furiously at the thought of sleeping on him all night. "So. How about we go now," she suggested artlessly, wanting to leave pronto. Not only was she anxious to find her brothers, but she wanted to escape this embarrassing moment too.

"Yes. But..." Cas was looking down at his feet. "I think I need help walking."

"You think?" Alex asked sarcastically, moving to his side and pulling one of his arms around her shoulder.

Cas got a little proud smiles on his face. "That was sarcasm," he observed, and he sounded like a little kid who had gotten excited about spelling 'cat' right.

Alex couldn't help but crack an exasperated grin as she looked down, wrapped her other arm around his waist like before. "Yes, very good young grasshopper."

He paused, and sounded confused again. "I'm not an insect."

Alex had left the stolen car she'd used—a powder-blue Dodge Polara station wagon—behind the motel. She and Cas took about five minutes to walk the whole way, and he was highly ashamed of himself and his slow shuffle—she could tell. She put him into the passenger seat where he collapsed and had to pull his legs in using his arms pathetically. Alex said nothing, feeling for him. She'd been pretty messed up in her day too and knew how much it sucked to be held back by injuries.

She hot wired the car again (Cas watched with great interest) and they drove the fifteen minutes to the Winchester home. The entire way there, Alex was silent, thinking hard about Sam, Dean, Mom, Dad. Hoping to find them there, but not too hopeful in case it was the same as last night. But when they pulled up, she saw a new car in the driveway. The Impala. Her heart leapt in her chest and she parked her stolen car on the side of the street, suddenly breathless and shaking. Wherever they'd been gone to... they were back. Alex got out of the car, glancing constantly at the house for any sign of movement. She reached the passenger side, where Cas had pushed his door open and managed to get his feet on the ground. He braced himself to pull himself out of the car using the doorframe.

"Whoa, Grandpa," Alex said, thinking better of the entire thing and holding her hands in a stop motion. "You better stay in the car and be lookout." Cas paused and gave her quite the disgruntled stare. "Look at yourself, you can barely move!" Alex pointed out.

The angel was sullen, but not ready to comply. "I'm coming with you," Cas said, grunting as he found his full height. "Like it or not." And he started off without her, as if to prove a point. Alex was left to stare at him in slight surprise, close his door and mutter something about 'stubborn son of a bitch' as she went to catch up to him. She stayed close just in case his legs gave out or something. He was able to walk a lot better than even fifteen minutes ago, she noticed. That was good. Her attention turned to the matter at hand: she stared at the house across from her, heart racing in anticipation as they closed the distance. She had no idea what they would find.
The house was boxy, very sixties in its architectural style. It had a very small yard and a stoop of a porch. When they got to the door she stared it down, breathing heavily. She suddenly felt intimidated and afraid.

"What is it?" Cas asked her, noticing.

Alex steeled herself, eyes still on the door. "Nothing."

She took a deep breath then knocked three times and they waited for about fifteen seconds. The door opened and a beautiful young blonde woman stood there. Alex went still. Mom. Alex recognized her immediately from the photos—she was younger of course. And beautiful, so much more beautiful than the photographs showed. Alex stared at her, completely enchanted and dumbfounded. She forgot what she was doing.

"...Yes?" Mary asked, looking between them expectantly with a slight hint of apprehension. Alex swallowed. Mom was beautiful. Perfect. Young and pretty and so alive. "Can I... help you?" Mary asked, eyebrows furrowing at Alex's total silence.

"Oh—uh, hello," Alex said, and suddenly realized she had no clue what the hell to say or do—this was her mom. She hadn't even thought of making up a cover story, and internally began to curse herself for being so out of it. Mary was wearing a floral print apron... like she was baking. Alex glanced around behind Mom, saw nothing out of sorts. Mary was beginning to get weirded out, Alex could tell, and Cas was just staring at Alex, waiting for her to say something.

Alex busted out her best on-the-spot lie, trying to think of a way to get them in the house where she could see more and ask questions. "We," Alex said, gesturing between herself and Cas, speaking in an uncharacteristically perky voice, "uh, we are your new neighbors. Just moved in down the street. Thought we'd come over and... say hello!" Alex listened to how ridiculous she sounded. Surely to God no one would buy that crock of crap... but Mary's face broke into a pleasant smile.

"Oh, how nice!" Mary said, and stepped to the side, gestured for them to come in. Alex gave Cas a look from the side of her eyes, and hoped he got her meaning, which was 'don't say anything.' "Please, come in," Mary was saying, and then looked back into the house. "John, company!"

Alex paused, her stomach twisting at the mention of Dad and the knowledge that she was about to see him again. Mary had shut the door behind them and gestured toward the living room couch. "Please, sit down," she said graciously, and then seemed to notice Cas, who was moving very slowly and stiffly, walking on his own, but not well. Alex was staying at his side, hovering almost, making sure he made it to the couch.

Mary looked concerned. "Is... he all right?"

Cas sat down heavily. "Oh, uh yeah, he's... he's got ankle... arthritis... problems," Alex lied stutteringly as she sat beside Cas. The second she finished saying that, she realized how stupid that sounded, because Cas also looked physically ill. The arthritis claim wasn't enough. "And uh he's getting over a stomach bug," she said, feigning a nonchalant attitude. "It really weakened him you know?" she asked. Good God Dean would kill her if he could hear these ridiculous lies pouring out of her mouth. Dean—Sam.

Remembering herself, Alex leaned forward to ask Mary, who'd sat down across from her, about her brothers, to ask if she'd seen them—and then a familiar voice to her right startled her into silence. "Mary, what's going on?"

Alex froze at the sight of Dad approaching them from the hallway. He looked so much younger
and lighter, not even like the man she remembered. But she still stiffened, sat up straight, the smile
gone off her face.

"John, our new neighbors—" Mary stopped, trailing off, probably realizing she didn't know their
names.

"Alex," Alex supplied, then nodded her head toward Cas. "And Cas."

"I'm Mary," Mom said. "And this is John." She tilted her head to the side thoughtfully. "Alex. Is
that short for something?" Mary asked in polite interest. It kind of sounded like she didn't like the
name Alex from the way she said it.

This was so damn ironic. "Alexandra," Alex said, watching Dad's every move hawkishly as he
came around to sit beside his wife.

"Oh, how pretty," Mary said, smiling again.

Beside her, John took a seat, put an arm around Mary, smiled pleasantly at them. "And Cas—that
must be short for Casanova," John joked, but only Mary gave him a smile at the comment. Alex
was working her hands oddly in her lap, trying to smile, but she couldn't even fake one. Cas's face
was like stone. John frowned and looked at his wife, obviously feeling awkward, trying to make
conversation. "Isn't there an Alexandra in your family, Mary?"

"Yes, my great grandmother," Mary said, also a little awkward. The clock ticked loudly in the
silence.

This was going just fabulously. Alex cleared her throat and took in a deep breath. Being perky was
exhausting. "You know, speaking of family, I was, er, I'm looking for my brothers. Sam and Dean?
They said they were stopping by here yesterday but I haven't seen them since."

"No, sorry—" John said, shaking his head, then stopped, his eyes narrowing as he frowned. "Why
would they have stopped by here?"

Good friggin' question. Alex stuck her tongue out enough to wet her lips nervously. "Because—uh__"

"Because they were trying to stop an angel from the future from killing you," Cas said, breaking
his silence. John and Mary looked at him like he had two heads, then at Alex for an explanation.

She made a 'oh gosh, this happens all the time' face. "Don't mind Cas. Uh, he's a little loopy from
the um, allergy medicine."

Mary looked at her with narrowed eyes. Alex could see growing mistrust behind the careful smile.
"I thought you said he had a stomach bug."

Shit on a stick, she had forgotten that. "Oh, yeah, yeah, I did," Alex said, pretending to be totally
confident and at ease, but inwardly scrambling, inwardly freaking out. She laughed a nervous little
laugh, jerked her thumb toward a very unamused Cas. "He's got pretty bad allergies, to uh,
everything..." Alex couldn't stop the bad lies from coming, a total mess under her parents confused
gazes. "Grass you know and, and um also trees... bushes... it just all messes him up."

Crap. Crap! This could not be going any worse—Alex had never heard worse lies in her whole
freaking life. Mary, however, seemed to be giving them the benefit of the doubt, standing up and
giving them a smile. "Let me put on some tea."
Alex watched her mother leave. Mary could definitely tell something was up. Alex was inwardly cussing herself out for doing such a crap job of this. Dad was leaning forward over a knee, looking between them with a polite, if somewhat forced smile. "So, which house did you move into? I... don't remember one being for sale."

Of course not. "It's just a couple houses down," Alex answered vaguely, shrinking back a little under his gaze. He seemed to notice that he frowned slightly, then turned to Cas, apparently not interested in her anymore.

Dad was looking at Cas with a certain note of suspicion. "You got a job, young man?" Alex frowned at that comment—Dad had to be like twenty-five right now, and Cas looked like at least thirty-five... why did Dad call him that?

Cas looked at John without any expression whatsoever. "Yes, I am an anesthesiologist!" Alex put in fast, and gave Cas a meaningful look, to which he only frowned, clearly not understanding. Alex wanted to stand up and shout 'why?!'—she was definitely not sure if this could get any more ridiculous and the universe owed her an answer as to why this was going so horribly. But she just kept a smile plastered across her face, hoping for the best.

"So, you didn't notice two guys around yesterday?" she asked, trying to keep her face and tone pleasant. "One freakishly tall one with a lot of hair? The other one kind of smart mouthy and overbearing?"

John looked at her oddly, and shook his head. "No, can't say I saw them." He was still looking at Cas, still focused on the previous subject which Alex was trying to sidestep. "An anesthesiologist, huh? That's pretty impressive." He looked at Alex kind of appraisingly, then back at Cas again. "Now, this may be a little improper of me to say, but—Cas?—you look a little too old for this young lady here."

Alex's mouth dropped open and she looked at Cas, who was staring at John bleakly. Is that why he'd called him young man a minute ago—because he thought the opposite? Also: "He's not my boyfriend," Alex said, then immediately remembered she'd said they were the neighbors, so what else would they be if not significant others? Crap.

Dad looked at her with a darkening expression. "Oh?"

"No," Alex said, shrinking inside, trying to think of something to save face. "He's my—my..." she couldn't think of anything.

Cas was speaking again. "I'm her guard—"

"My gardener!" Alex said, giving Cas an exasperated look and not even bothering to hide it.

John looked at them as if he wasn't sure if they were joking or not. "Your gardener?"

Mary reappeared just then, a cup of tea in hand. She held it out to Cas with a smile. "Have some. Hot tea makes everything better."

"I'm not sure that's true," Castiel said with narrowed eyes. Alex nudged him with her knee, and he looked at her, got a weird look from the side of her eyes. He looked back at Mary, expression still a little perplexed. He took the tea. "But thank you."

Mary sat back down after telling Cas again to 'drink up' and Alex tried to think of something normal to say or comment on. "Your home is lovely," she said, but honestly she hadn't noticed one
damn thing about it. "Just the right size to start a family," she continued with false cheer.

Mary seemed to automatically beam at that comment, looked at John adoringly, who smiled at her, put his hand on hers. Alex's heart tugged a little, her facade wobbled. My God, they were in love. John was chuckling. "I can't wait to have a house full of boys."

Alex felt her smile fade a little at that comment. "John," Mary laughed, pushing him lightly, playfully.

"What?" he grinned. "I wouldn't know what to do with a girl."

"That's apparent," Cas muttered darkly. John heard that and frowned, and Mary too.

In fact, Mary stood up, smiled tightly now. "Alex, before you two go… can I get you to help me with something in the kitchen?"

"I'm... not good in the kitchen…” Alex protested.

Mary insisted. "It'll take two seconds, sweetie, now come on."

Okay, so they were about to be kicked out. And with no answers, either! Where the hell were Sam and Dean? Alex stood up, and John did too in unison, his hulking six-foot-two frame dwarfing Alex and Mary both. "I've gotta grab my jacket and head to work," John said apologetically, and walked toward Alex, held out his hand—and Alex flinched away by instinct. He frowned at her reaction, seemed taken aback. "Just… wanted to shake your hand, neighbor," John said, eyeing her cautiously, uncertainly.

Alex, recovered, feigned casual pleasantness again, reached out, shook his hand. "Right. Nice to meet you, John."

"You too, Alex." He seemed kind of guarded toward her now. Alex felt bad about it, too. This wasn't the Dad she'd known. Not at all.

John moved over to the couch and held his hand out to Cas, who still sat on the couch, holding his tea cup sullenly in both hands. He didn't make a single move. In fact he was looking at John with something close to loathing. John gave up, looking confused, and he walked back down the hallway. Mary clearly got the same awkward vibes everyone else was getting, but gave Cas a polite little smile anyway. "Drink your tea," she said, again, to Cas, then led Alex toward the kitchen.

Mom was super nice, making tea for the sick guy, insisting he drink it a couple times over—they walked into the kitchen and suddenly Alex was flying sideways into the wall. Mom slammed her there, holding her there with one hand—the other hand held a really huge hunting knife at Alex's throat. "Who are you?" Mary demanded. Surprised, Alex stared at her mom, more impressed with her than anything else. Maybe she should be alarmed that someone was threatening her life, but all she could think was that Dean hadn't been lying… Mom was badass! "I said who are you?" Mary repeated in a low hiss. "You've got hunter written all over you," she shoved Alex a little harder, demandingly. "Are you here to hurt my husband? What do you want?"

"I'm looking for my brothers like I said," Alex said honestly, and got another shove in reply.

"Stop with the lies and tell me who you are," Mary demanded.

Okay then.

In the space of one single second, Alex grabbed the handle of Mom's knife with one hand, slid her
other arm between their bodies in unison even as she savagely bent the knife out of Mom's grip easily, she used her arm as leverage and whirled Mom around, slammed her against the wall—and suddenly they were just as they had been before, but now Alex was the one in control, the one holding the knife. Mary looked surprised more than anything else. Alex turned the knife away, raised her eyebrows meaningfully, showing her mom she wasn't an enemy.

"...Who are you?" Mary asked again, but quietly this time.

Alex drew in a deep breath. Hell, she had no other clue what to do, so she told the truth. "I'm Alex. Winchester." She stepped back, letting mom go. "Your... your daughter."

Mary's expression went from 'did I hear you right to 'are you fucking kidding me' to 'wait...' in the span of three seconds. She opened her mouth to say something, but then stopped, looking at Alex carefully, scrutinizing her completely. For a brief second, Alex had this insane hope that Mom was going to look at her and see who she was, recognize her somehow... but that didn't happen. Mom's expression changed, went cold. "You're crazy," she said, and grabbed Alex roughly by her jacket—then her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell over unconscious.

"What the hell Cas?!" Alex exclaimed in horror—Cas had stepped in, touched two fingers to Mary's head, rendering the woman into an unconscious heap. "What did you do?"

"Michael," Cas said, breathing heavily, standing oddly. "He was here."

"Where?" Alex asked, suddenly stock still.

"In John."

Alex looked at him like he'd gone stark raving mad. "What?"

"I'm not sure how or why, but Michael used John—your father as a vessel."

"Her father?" Came a new voice. "The hell are you talking about?" John was there behind them, in the doorway, wearing a jacket and a freaked out expression—and then he saw Mary on the floor and fear flashed across his features, he took a step back, looked at Alex, then Cas in fear. "What did you do to my wife?"

"She'll be fine, John," Cas said flatly, uncaringly, then looked at Alex. "She put a dangerous amount of sedatives in the tea. Of course, they won't affect me. I don't think."

Alex gaped at Cas, then looked at Mom. Wow, that was double impressive. Sneaky.

"Who are you people?" John demanded.

Castiel drew himself up a little bit. "I'm an angel of the Lord."

John's expression darkened—an expression Alex recognized. "Buddy, drugs are bad," he said, and Alex suddenly saw, tried to warn Cas with a shout—she recognized when her dad was about to snap—John charged the couple feet between himself and Cas, slammed the angel up against the wall. Alex went up and tried grabbing John's shoulder to yank him off Cas, but John shoved her away, hard, and she fell down backwards. "What did you do to her?" John screamed at Cas, shaking him roughly. "Tell me, now!"

Cas just stared down at John his expression chilling, calm. "Do not presume to tell me what to do, John Winchester," he said lowly, and brought his two fingers to John's temple. "Now, forget."
John crumpled to the floor. Alex, shakily getting up from where she’d been shoved, looked at Cas in a mixture of disbelief and confusion. "Forget? Forget? You just erased their memories?"

He ignored her question, stumbled over to her. "Why didn't you tell me that your father mistreated you?" he demanded, and Alex took a step back, bumping up against the kitchen counter.

"What?" she asked, barely a whisper.

"You're scared of him," Cas said, almost angrily. "You were afraid when he tried to shake your hand."

"No I wasn't," Alex protested—possibly too passionately.

Cas just stepped closer, his expression so intense. "Did he strike you in anger?"

Alex went cold. "How dare you ask me that," she said, and it was supposed to be anger that she asked it with, but instead, her voice shook with total and utter fear.

Cas's frown changed from anger to deep sadness. Like he saw right through her, and knew the answer was yes. He looked so deeply affected by it that Alex couldn't keep looking at him. She swallowed painfully and spoke with a sharp, hard tone. "It wasn't... it wasn't a lot, okay? It was only when he drank a lot. And only when I deserved it," she said more angrily, then brushed past him brusquely, trying to shove her emotions down deep where they couldn't surface, because they hurt too much and she had thought she was done with this crap a long time ago.

Behind her, Cas hadn't turned around. They faced opposite directions. "How could a child deserve such a thing?" he asked quietly. He truly didn't understand. As he looked down at John Winchester's unconscious form, his fist curled tightly at his side in unadulterated anger. Ever since stepping into this house and seeing the man walk into the room, Castiel had been fighting fury and anger toward him. Because he'd known this man had undervalued his daughter, had failed to protect her and considered giving her away—but this new revelation he discovered just moments ago—that John Winchester had physically hurt or intimidated his daughter to whatever extent great or small—made Castiel feel like his blood was boiling beneath his skin, made him want to obliterate this man.

Alex turned around and looked at Cas, saw his fist, saw his angry stare aimed at her dad. He seemed entirely focused on John, breathing heavily, eyes heavy lidded and face like stone. "Cas." She said, but he didn't look away from her dad. She went over to him, grabbed his arm. "Cas! This guy right here—he's not the guy who pushed me around as a kid." He looked at her, his venomous expression fading. Alex's heart almost stopped when she realized his face right then—it was the exact same expression Dean had always had when Dad had gone off the rails and shoved her or yelled at her or, yes, a few times, struck her. Alex looked away, ashamed.

Cas's fist loosened, then relaxed completely, and he looked morose once more. Alex shook her head, let go of Cas's arm. This was a mess, a total mess. She put her hands on either side of her, palms facing in, frustrated. "Okay, just—just forget all this—" she said, chopping her hands forward, "Where the hell are Sam and Dean?"

He looked at her for a long, tense moment. "I won't forget this," he said, responding grimly to the first part of what she'd said. "But I'll respect your wishes if you don't want to speak of it again." He looked unhappy about it, but seemed to drop it, squinting around the kitchen, his eyes appearing to take in things that she couldn't see. "They're not here anymore," he said. "I'm fairly certain."

"How?" Alex asked.
"John and Mary's minds were tampered with recently, and Michael's presence... I can sense it... he must have sent them back."

"Their minds were tampered with recently? Wasn't that you just now?" she asked cynically.

He glanced at her. "No. Well, yes. But their memories were altered recently, before I even touched them."

Alex shook her head, unhappy. "Did you really have to do that?" It bothered her. And she hadn't wanted that moment with her mom to end... even if Mom had been about to kick her ass.

"I wanted to keep the timeline uncomplicated," Cas said simply, to which Alex gave him a look that said 'really?'

She didn't believe that for a second. "After all the crap about fate being unchangeable?" she asked angrily.

"There are certain rules which must be observed when dealing with time travel---" Cas was saying, but Alex, at the end of her rope, unintentionally channeled her oldest brother by cutting him off and shouting "bullshit!"

Cas's expression flickered as if in surprise, then became tightly drawn and Alex stood there breathing heavily for a couple seconds, then shut her eyes tight to keep it together. "I need a drink," she muttered before opening her eyes up again.

Cas looked surprisingly guilty, staring down at John and Mary. "I could... undo it..." he said, and his eyes falteringly came back to hers, waiting for her to tell him what to do. Alex looked at him in a mixture of unhappiness at him but also at herself. She was pissed that he'd done that, but... it didn't really matter if Mary and John Winchester remembered this weirdo couple in their house in 1978, did it? And when she thought it over objectively, Cas had said all that stuff about being an angel and then Mom had figured out something was up and attacked her in the kitchen—Dad walked in on it all... Alex's indignant anger was fading rapidly. Instead, she just felt sad, looking down at her pretty blonde mom on the floor. Then her dad, before he had even been her dad. This was beyond screwed up.

Cas squinted, put a hand to his head, and Alex glanced at him, then went to him—was he about to start spewing blood again? Then she realized he was listening to something, not in pain. "It's Dean. He's calling to me from 2010." He looked at her. "We should go."

Alex felt her eyebrows raise in trepidation, she looked at him apprehensively. "Cas, you can barely stand up now, how are you supposed to be able to make another trip?"

"It will be easier with just you," he said.

"Just as long as you're sure you'll be all right," she said, and looked at him carefully. He looked distinctly regretful, then met her eyes somberly.

"I'm not sure of anything anymore," he said, and if the mood had been lighter, Alex might have joked about him being emo. But he meant it, and she could tell. And it kind of worried her, honestly, all this talk recently about his 'bad choices' and uncertainty about making decisions, his insistence that he was useless and a failure. Something was going on with him. He paused, looked at her parents still forms on the kitchen floor. "I can still change it back."

Alex looked at them too. Memorized Mom's face. Looked around the kitchen at the gingham decor, the pretty blue teapot and matching cups neatly lined up on a shelf, the cross stitch that had
a mother duck with ducklings stitched onto it hanging on an otherwise empty wall. Little pieces of Mary Winchester, little glimpses into her mind and heart. Alex let out a soft breath. "No. It doesn't matter. I remember." She faced him and took in a deep breath, nodded once. "I'm ready to go now."

He'd touched their foreheads when he brought them to 1978. But with just Alex, he just nodded somberly, reached out, and grasped her shoulder instead.

"Jesus Christ, Sam," Dean was saying, sounding like he'd reached the end of his rope. "What the hell are we supposed to do?"

Alex and Cas were in the motel room where this crazy thing had all started, and Dean was sitting on a bed, faced away, Sam beside him, turned away too. In front of Alex, Cas pitched forward and she staggered as he pretty much fell forward onto her. "Guys, help me!" she gasped, and both brothers whirled at the sound of her voice.

Sam, closer, got to her first, grabbing Cas's woozy form easily, getting him under one arm. "Hey. Hey, hey! Whoa, I gotcha!"

Dean caught him under the other arm a fraction of a second later, and looked at Alex with complete and utter relief on his face. "You crazy kids," he said, "You made it!"

Cas looked almost drunk, staring at something that wasn't there. "I'm—uhhh," he mumbled, and his eyes rolled back as his head fell backwards limply.

"Not again," Alex muttered, and then pointed at one of the beds, chagrined. Her brothers hauled him over to the bed and flopped him down, then turned to look at her. She looked from Cas's unconscious form to them. "Hi," she said tiredly, and smiled at them, relieved, exhausted emotionally, so glad it was over.

Sam came over and hugged her tightly and she protested a little, "Mffmfff, Sam!" her face smushed up against his massive chest.

"We, uh, got a little worried," he explained, letting her go.

"A little?" she asked fondly, rubbing her jaw like he'd hurt her in the hug.

Dean was still beside Cas, looking down at him intently, checking his pulse and breathing. "Seems okay," he said. Alex came over to the other side of the bed. "How long was he out the first time?" he asked, seeming concerned about Cas.

"About three hour, maybe four hours," Alex said, watching Cas, remembering cleaning him up, remembering Candy Land, remembering sleeping next to him...

"So what'd you guys do when he woke up?" Dean asked, and even though he tried to sound casual, Alex heard the hidden, suspicious question.

She looked at him, completely deadpan. "We had lots and lots of sex." Dean's face went completely shocked.

Sam laughed out loud at that and Alex's serious expression gave way to a pleased with herself smile. Dean, of course, was giving Sam the evil eye, then made a face at Alex. "Ha ha," he rolled his eyes. "Very funny." He looked like he'd never heard anything stupider.

Alex looked at Dean challengingly. "What the hell do you think I did?" she asked. "I went and looked for you when you didn't show. Couldn't find you. Met Mom and Dad though." She shook
her head a little. "Good times."

Sam seemed interested in that. "Did they remember us visiting?"

"No," Alex said. "They don't remember any of it. Cas took their memories when we left, too. Don't
know how, he's so friggin' low on battery power." They all looked at the still form of Cas on the
bed.

"I could use a drink now," Dean said. "Beers all around?"

"Beer's not gonna cut it," Alex muttered in a harrowed tone.

"Bring out the hunter's helper," Sam agreed and Dean rolled his eyes, but complied. He got out
some plastic cups and a bottle of whiskey.

"What happened? With Anna?" Alex asked. Dean poured three generous drinks. She watched Cas
quietly as he explained.

"Well, Anna's dead—Michael ganked her, didn't seem to like her plan to kill Sammy. Michael used
Dad as a meatsuit." Dean chuckled darkly, handed a cup to Sam. "More on that later. My brain's
fried. But the short and sweet version is that Mom's fine, Dad's fine, Sam's fine. And we didn't
change a damn thing." He handed Alex her cup, looked at her, then Sam, then Cas. "Well… I
guess this is it," Dean said.

"This is what?" Sam asked.

"Team Free Will. One ex-blood junkie, one dropout with six bucks to his name, one punkass kid
sister, and Mr. Comatose over there. It's awesome."

"You're not funny," Alex commented, downing a huge burning gulp of whiskey. It helped her feel
better immediately.

Dean shrugged. "I'm not laughing."

"What are you talking about, anyway? Team Free Will?" Sam asked.

"They all say we'll say yes," Dean said. "And it's getting pretty damn annoying."

"Annoying?" Alex questioned, looking at him sidelong. "What if they're right?"

Dean took another drink. "They're not."

There was a pause. "They might be," Alex said. She didn't like it, but she wasn't going to avoid it,
either.

Dean looked at her, expression hovering between a glare and a grimace. "Don't say that, Al."

Alex shrugged and set her cup down on the dresser beside her. "I'm just saying. You've tried to
change the past twice now. And neither time worked. Why's the future gonna be any different?"

"Geez, Miss Optimistic," Dean said. "Because I've decided. Maybe we can't change the past, but
the future ain't written yet."

"Do you really think you can say no forever?" Alex asked. "Run from fate or destiny, whatever,
forever?"
"Fate?" Dean repeated, like it was a bad word. "Please. Don't tell me you believe in that BS."

Sam, who'd been quiet this whole time, sipping his drink, finally spoke up. "Michael got Dad to say yes."

"That was different," Dean said immediately. "Anna was about to kill Mom."

Sam looked at Dean intently. "And if you could save Mom... what would you say?" He hesitated a long time, then looked at Alex. "If you could save... Alex, Dean... what would you say?"

"What do you mean?" Alex asked, her frown matching Dean's.

Sam shrugged, set his drink down too, looking at his twin with a great deal of apprehensiveness. "Sooner or later they're gonna try to use you against us. I mean, they already have a little," Sam said, referring loosely to the whole Lucifer thing. Alex looked down, feeling much worse again.

Dean took a deep breath, staring at his now-empty cup. "Why do you think I've been such a pain in the ass lately? I know that. I'm just waiting for someone to swoop in and take her from us. And I can never decide if she's safer with us or without and I can't friggin' take much more."

Sam frowned, looking at the bed behind Alex and Dean. "Whoa—where'd Cas go?"

They all looked at the bed—empty. "Friggin' angels, man," Dean said, aggravated. He went over to pour himself more whiskey as Alex looked around with a slack jaw.

"My life blows," Dean said, and raised his once-again full cup. "Here's to that."

Alex ignored him, staring at the bed for a couple seconds, then decisively grabbing up her duffel bag. She grabbed her phone out of the side pocket where she'd shoved it last, threw a "be right back" over her shoulder. She hurried outside the motel room, stood near the chipped metal railing there and scrolled through her contacts. Found who she was looking for and hit call. It rang twice.

"Hello, Alex," Cas answered.

"Why do you always leave like that?" she demanded without ceremony.

There was a pause. "Like what?"

"Without a single word or a goodbye," She said, sounding a little madder than she meant to sound. She tried to calm herself, took a deep breath. "You were passed out on the bed and then you just disappeared—I mean... are you okay?"

"Yes," his deep voice replied. "Perfectly fine."

"Perfectly fine?" she repeated. "Like last time 'perfectly fine'?"

There was another pause. "You shouldn't worry about me."

She paused, made a face, then smiled helplessly, watching the traffic passing out on the highway in front of the motel. "Yeah well. Too late for that."

"I see," he replied, and Alex felt herself growing introspective at dangerous levels. She felt like she needed to tell him something substantial, something meaningful.

"Cas—" she couldn't think of how to say all she was feeling and thinking. So she settled on, "I hope you feel better soon."
"Thank you, Alex." There was a long pause. "Should... we end the call now?"

Alex shook her head, smiling to herself. As usual, she found his social awkwardness completely perfect. "Sounds good."

She didn't hang up though. He had gone quiet again, then asked: "Is this the part where we hang up?"

She held back a laugh, just barely. "Uh, yes," Alex said. Another long pause.

"Now?" Cas asked. Alex was laughing now despite her best efforts—these funny Cas moments were always so out of left field, and she wasn't good at not being one hundred perfect amused by them. "Yes, now," she said, grinning. "Bye." She closed her phone. And the realized someone was standing behind her. She turned.

"Finally called that guy from the bar, huh?" Dean asked, giving her a toothy grin. Shit, how long had he been there, and wait—what guy from what bar? Oh wait. Yeah, some guy had given her his number last week. She didn't even remember what he looked like. She ignored Dean's question and rolled her eyes, hoping he wouldn't ask again. He took a swig of the beer he was now holding and came to stand beside her, leaning over the railing. He looked at her long and hard.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?" she asked, guarded.

"You saw Dad. Met Mom. Trippy, right?"

"That's a good word for it I guess," Alex said and thought about it a minute. She smiled really faintly, remembering fondly. "Mom was… so beautiful. And kind of a total badass."

"Right?" Dean asked. He sounded so proud.

"I think maybe she might have been able to kick my ass on a good day," Alex said, grinning crookedly. "Wish I'd known her. Even just a little while." She looked at Dean with a more tense expression, her smile gone now. "You're lucky."

He made a soft little airy sound. "Not lucky enough." Dean paused, darkening, and Alex knew he was thinking about how Mom had died, wondering if he could have stopped it.

She picked at one of her nails in distraction. "Dad was… different."

"Yeah, uh. He was." They were silent for a really long moment. Dean seemed to sense Alex's internal thoughts.

"You'll drive yourself crazy if you think about it too much," he told her.

"Think about what?"

"What would've changed," he said. "If the fire never happened."

Alex didn't have to wonder. "Everything would have changed. Everything."

She oddly found herself remembering a very random moment from childhood—God, how old had she been… maybe seven or eight? She'd been small for her age then. Dad had been teaching them to shoot shotguns.
"Hold it tight into your shoulder or the kick can break your bone," Dad said, pulling the butt of the gun into Alex's shoulder tightly, yanking her arm up so that the heavy-to-her shotgun was straighter.

Dean, watching from the sidelines, looked uncertain. "Dad, I don't think she's—"

John gave his son a dangerous, silencing look. "Dean, we've been over this. Your sister needs to be able to shoot this damn thing if she's alone and unprotected, you hear me?" He turned back to Alex, who was struggling to hold the shotgun up. "Now line up the sights and fire and," he made a frustrated, impatient sound as she struggled, "for Christsakes, hold the damn thing into your shoulder like I told you."

She tried to do what he said, to stop pissing him off, to just do something right. The shotgun had been so heavy to her, and she had barely been able to lift it, let alone solidly aim it or anything. She'd squeezed the trigger and the gun went off. And she'd tried so hard to not cry from the immediate pain when the butt of the gun slammed into her little shoulder, but she hadn't been able to stop herself. Dad had looked down at her, seeming to be annoyed, disgusted that she was acting like that. "Stop that Alex. Don't cry about it. It hurts a little now but this will save your life someday, you hear me? This will save your life." He seemed to relent a little at the sight of her distress and patted her roughly on the head. He'd crouched down to her level. She remembered how strongly he smelled of alcohol. "Sorry, Alex. Maybe you're not ready for this, huh?" he stood up as if to walk off and a switch had flipped inside Alex.

Defiant, determined, she'd glared, cocked the shotgun (a feat in and of itself) and reassumed the aiming stance, already wincing. She'd fired another shot, and the pain had been even worse the second time. John—Dad—looked proud of her then. She did it a third time, barely able to hold back tears of pain. And finally she'd gotten a, "that's my girl." And then Sam said something and called Dad over. Dad walked away. And Dean, watching silently, saw Alex break down crying silently, cradling her shoulder alone.

The bruise and the pain had lasted for weeks.

"You okay? Alex?" Dean's voice startled Alex out of the memory.

"Uh, yeah. Just thinking," she said. He nodded. He seemed to get it. For all the times Dean was an asshole to her, they really did have an understanding when it came to certain things. And Dad was one of them. Alex cleared her throat, turning her head toward him. "You know, for a little while there, I thought you guys were dead back in seventy-eight. When I couldn't find you."

Dean looked at her, expression heavy, sad. He heard what she hadn't said. "I won't leave you, Alex, not forever. You know that."

Alex shook her head, cynical eyes going down into middle space. "I don't believe you," she said, being bluntly honest. "Everyone always leaves."

Dean took another swig of his beer. "Well, not me."

Alex shot him a threatening look. "Better not." She tilted her head to the side, thinking of something, and straightened up a little bit, poked him with her index finger. "Hey, also. You owe me a damn apology."

Instead of getting pissy or defensive or asking 'what the hell for' like she thought he would—Dean nodded and stared out in front of him. "For what Gabriel showed you. Yeah, I know. And I am sorry." There was a long pause. "I didn't mean it, I was just… trying to get Dad to take me with
him.” He sighed regretfully, and he sounded like he was talking to himself now. "The things I did to try and get on that man's good side." He let the thought go, turned back to her. "You're my kid sister and I'd do anything for you. You know that."

"Well, you should have apologized a lot sooner, jerk," Alex said, half-serious, half-joking.

Dean heaved a heavy sigh, getting uncomfortable. "I know. I just… these chick flick moments, man," he complained.

"Shut up," Alex teased, grinning at him, bumping his shoulder with hers. "You love them."

Dean's face changed and looked at her with maybe the most emotionally open expression she'd ever seen on his face before. He shook his head. "I love you."

Alex froze and looked at him in shock, not sure if she'd heard right. "You what? Are you… are you dying or something?" she asked. She wasn't really joking, either.

He looked a little crestfallen at her question. "Can't a big brother… tell a little sister… you know, that he loves her?"

Alex looked around for the hidden cameras. "Yeah... but you never say it, or I mean, not that often at least."

Dean set his beer down on the railing and leaned his hands both on it heavily. "I just don't wanna lose you. Or Sam."

"You won't," she said, confused by his quick apology, his expression of affection, and this cryptic statement about losing her and Sam. He turned his head and looked at her, then he reached for her, pulled her into a tight hug. Hugs from Dean usually comforted her. But this one just made her feel like something was really wrong.

That Night

In the dim light of the bedside table, the only one awake, Alex smoothed Dad's journal open, opening it to the first few pages; to the entries she'd always read the most. After seeing Dad earlier today… she felt like she needed to revisit these pages. The entries in the beginning were the most personal... they got more and more about supernatural stuff and less and less about Dad's thoughts as the journal progressed…. but in the beginning, it was just Dad, his thoughts, his worries, a glimpse into who he'd been before the hunt had overtaken him. Alex used to read and re-read some of these entries, because some parts of them had made her feel closer to Dad. She'd been able to tell from these that he'd really loved her once, that he hadn't always looked at her and seen her as an obligation.

December 4, 1983

Last night I was sitting in the kid's room, in the dark, and I heard these noises… Mike said it was the wind, and okay, maybe it was, but it sounded almost like whispering, like someone was whispering a name, under their breath, again and again… like something is out there in the dark, watching us… I stayed up all night, just watching them, protecting them. From what, I don't know. Am I protecting them? Am I hurting them? I haven't let them out of my sight since the fire. Dean still hardly talks. I try to make small talk, or ask him if he wants to throw the baseball around. Anything to make him feel like a normal kid again. He never budges from my side – or from his brother and sister. Every morning when I wake up, Dean is inside their crib, one arm wrapped around each of the twins. Like he's trying to protect them from whatever is out there in the night.
Sammy cries a lot, wanting his Mom. And Alex still doesn't make a sound. Sometimes her face scrunches up like she's crying, but no sounds come out. It scares the hell out of me and I don't know what to do. One twin can't stop crying, the other is just—silent. It breaks my heart to think that soon they won't remember Mary at all. I can't let her memory die.

December 11, 1983
Sammy has finally started sleeping through the night, and now that Dean shares a bed with him and his sister, he's out like a light as well. I'm not sure about Alex... before the fire, she always wanted to be rocked to sleep and I loved that time. She'd lay her little head on my shoulder and I'd rub her back. She would make these sweet little sleepy sounds in my ear. Now, she doesn't sleep unless she's sandwiched between her brothers. I sometimes try rocking her to sleep and she cries silently, won't hold still. It breaks my heart. I keep hoping things will return to normal, but they don't.

Alex paused sadly. That line in there about the sweet sleepy sounds. It always grabbed right at her heart. She'd always felt the love and tenderness of a father from him when she read that. That he loved to rock her to sleep as a baby and hear the sounds she'd made. The idea of him holding her close, her head resting on his shoulder in trust and attachment. Alex had all but memorized this entry when she was younger, because approval and affection were so few and far between from Dad. In fact, by the time she was old enough to read and write, he'd be all but emotionally dead to her. He'd kept her at arm's length pretty much until Sam left for Stanford. And then it had been far, far too late.

December 25, 1983
Didn't sleep again last night. Woke up in a cold sweat and realized it was Christmas. Where's Mary? That was my thought all night, and it stayed in my mind all day. Christmas without my wife seems unreal. Our celebration was clumsy... a crooked two foot tall plastic tree, a bunch of junk food stuffed in the stockings, and a pile of sports equipment for the boys... football, basketball, soccer. I didn't really know what to get for Alex, girl stuff was Mary's forte, and I got so depressed in the aisle of girl toys that I couldn't buy a thing.

I think about my reality. Mary will never see Dean hit a home run. She'll never see Alex learn to walk, or hear Sammy say his first words. She won't take Dean to his first day at school, or stay up all night with me worrying the first night he takes the car out. It's not right that she's not here, and that's all I could think about today—that and I really don't think I know how to parent alone. I'm so angry I can barely see straight – I just want my wife back.

The police have officially declared our case closed. What a Christmas present, huh?

Alex's eyes hovered over this line: I got so depressed in the aisle of girl toys that I couldn't buy a thing. Alex remembered the first time she read this journal entry and saw that line, she'd felt so guilty for being a girl; for being something that reminded her dad of his dead wife. After reading that, Alex had gotten upset (understatement, really) and brutally ripped all the arms and legs off her Barbie dolls, gotten the scissors out to cut her hair off. Dean had found her and calmed her down, stopped her from cutting off her hair. Held her tight while she cried in silence. Alex shook her head now, realizing how ironic it was, how Dean had done all the stuff a father should do for her throughout the years. He'd gotten on her case about her abysmal grades (she hadn't cared about school), he'd gotten pissed at her when she mooned around in teenage despair. He'd protected her and Sammy from dad's drunken rages. Her throat hitched as Alex thought maybe the reason she and Dean had always been so close was because they knew their Dad's anger better than Sammy did. They had always turned to each other for help making it through.

Alex turned the page and hesitated. She didn't like to read this entry, but she always did anyway,
unable not to. She didn't even know why Dad had kept it in there, honestly. There were a lot of torn out pages, but this one had stayed.

February 8, 1984

Today I don't know what happened. I was trying to piece together some things I'd found from local newspapers. Stuff about bizarre murders. I was thinking maybe they were somehow related to Mary's death, because the reports said the people had died in really strange ways—their insides had completely liquified. Well, I was trying to do all this and Sammy was fussing, Alex was getting into everything (she's toddling all over the place these days) and Dean was trying to get me to help him with this Lego thing he was building. He kept trying to get me to come over, and at one point he grabbed at my arm and asked Daddy please. I don't know what came over me, but all the anger and maybe some of the alcohol too, it just set me off. I snapped at him and shoved him away, harder than I should have, and he fell backwards into little Alex, who had been walking behind him. She hit her face hard on the edge of the coffee table. She made no sound, she never does, but she was crying, her eyebrow was gashed open and bleeding. I scooped her up and yelled at Dean, about what he had done to his sister. Sammy started screaming real loud when I did that. And Dean shrank away from me.

I'm left wondering what the hell this is doing to me. If I can do this at all. Sometimes I think I should just let it go and focus on the kids.

But this is something I have to do. I have to make sure Mary's death is avenged, if it's the last thing I do. Nothing else matters as much as that.

Alex re-read the last lines, the ones that made her heart clench. Nothing else matters as much as that. She believed those words completely. Her life, her brothers' lives were evidence of that. She shut her eyes, set the journal down onto her knees.

"He was a good man. I know he was."

Alex had said this to Cas the other day. She considered for a moment her words and the meaning, the desperation and heaviness behind them. John Winchester was a good man. Or at least, she believed that he had been, once. But over the years, he forfeited his heart in favor of a mission he could never accomplish. John Winchester had lost sight of what remained, blinded by the lure of retaliation and vengeance. Nothing—no one—had mattered to him as much as the thought of killing whatever had killed Mom. And everyone around him had paid the price of his obsession. Alex's heart broke anew every time she thought of the man her father had become. She had seen with her own eyes, just today, that he wasn't always that way. Azazel had changed all of their lives, forever. Wrecked the family almost completely.

And maybe Dad got what he wanted in the end—Azazel, dead—but at what cost? Dad was dead and gone. Killing Azazel didn't bring Mom back. It didn't fix any of the problems the Winchester family had been subjected to. Yes, Alex and her brothers had survived, but just barely, and to do what? To be on their own, left to deal with the devastating emotional aftermath. All they had left was each other, and even that was falling apart.

She thought of who John Winchester had been, and who he had turned into. A man who had left his children with a cursed existence. He was a good man. I know he was. And he had been. He had been. The darkness, the warfare, it had taken who he was. Alex opened her eyes again, bowed her head, reflecting sadly that this must be what happened when a good man went to war.

At that thought, she looked over at Dean, asleep, above the covers as always. Her eyes flickered to Sam's hulking outline on the other bed beyond. They were good men. The best. And they were at a war like no other.
She would give anything to save them. But somewhere, deep inside, she had a dark, creeping fear that nothing could save them. Nothing at all.
"The heart wants what it wants."
- Emily Dickinson

Three Days Later
Plainville, Kansas
Valentine's Day

Agent Wailer—a.k.a. Alex Winchester—shrugged off her suit jacket and laid it over the chair on top of Sam and Dean's. She wore her typical FBI getup—black dress shoes (not heels—she refused) and a pale blue button-up tucked neatly into navy slacks. She'd made an effort on the hair—pulled it half back and fussed over it, made it look sort of decent for once. She glanced up at Agents Marley and Cliff—Dean and Sam. They were rolling up their sleeves because this particular examination was about to get a little messy. Alex reflected humorously that this was so typical that they would spend Valentine's Day this way.

Usually when they ran their FBI sham, they divided and conquered—Dean always headed it up, took one of the twins with him while the other one checked into other leads or just sat it out. After all, three agents in one place was unnecessary most times and tended to raise eyebrows. But none of the Winchesters had wanted to miss out on this particular case. It was weird... even for them. A couple had literally eaten each other to death—leaving very little for the coroner to let them examine, but, still. The same night that this apparently ravenous couple had eaten it (Dean's pun, not Alex's), another couple had shot and killed each other in a double suicide. It wasn't clear if the deaths were related or not. Something supernatural was definitely involved, at least on account of the couple who ate each other.

Saint James Medical Center's coroner, a rotund and jovial old guy, had done what most people did: taken one look at their FBI badges and given the Winchesters free run of the place—just instructed that they be sure and put the body parts back where they'd found them—which was the refrigerator. Dean snapped on some latex gloves then tossed a pair to each of his siblings. Alex caught hers, yanked them on, then grabbed one of the disposable blue aprons that Sam and Dean were already wearing, putting it on as she watched Sam bring over several clear containers of bloody human remains.

He set them down onto the stainless steel examination table in the middle of the room while Alex looked through drawers for tongs. "Geez, there's not much left of these people..." Dean commented as he looked over the containers and took a seat at the head of the table. He pulled one of the bins to himself.

Alex sat down across from Sam and set down a handful of tongs then opened the container in front of her—some entrails. Eugh. Nice. She was suddenly rethinking her eagerness to come along to the morgue on this one. She poked through the guts unenthusiastically with tongs and offhandedly wondered where Cas was even as she was disturbingly drawing comparisons between how similar these guts looked to canned spaghetti. She paused, not seeing what was in front of her. It had been three days since they'd physically seen him. She had texted him yesterday, not able to hold herself back anymore, needing to just know that he was still alive, basically. Are you okay? She'd asked. He'd replied about a minute later: yes. And that had been that. She had almost texted him back about ten times after that, but had stopped herself each time. Nothing she thought of to write made sense. And she still kind of got the feeling he was avoiding her, or... something. She didn't get it.
Before, she'd never really been too concerned when he disappeared. It was just his mode of operation, appearing unexpectedly, leaving without notice—but now, after seeing him so banged up and weakened, it was hard not to worry about him, not call him and demand to get a status update on his well-being. This was new: she hadn't really worried about him before... he was a freaking angel for crying out loud—but the past few days worrying about him was pretty much all she'd done. Well, she'd also replayed the time in the honeymoon suite over in her head a million times. She thought about how she'd shared things with Cas that she didn't really share with anyone else. She thought about how she'd fallen asleep on him—and subsequently slept the best she had in months (and thought she might not mind doing that again...). But most of all she thought about how she'd forgotten, briefly, about the emergency surrounding them, the whole Anna set on murdering her parents thing—in some small, still moments there with Cas, an odd peacefulness had existed between them. Alex hadn't meant for it to happen but she'd felt close to him, safe. And now, there was a noticeable, underlying pang in his absence.

She knew what it was like to miss people—but she missed him in a way she had never missed anyone else. She stabbed at the entrails in front of her bleakly. This sucked.

Dean mumbled something to himself beside Alex and she glanced at him, any good mood she'd had fading a little. Her oldest brother had been pissing her off royally the past couple days. His confrontation with Michael in Dad's body had clearly shaken him up—that much was clear to her because he'd been a little shorter tempered and meaner than usual—and he'd been drinking more than what was normal too. Dean drank a lot period point blank, so... that was just great. He'd been full on trashed last night and raging about how the music on the radio these days was shit—he'd broken the motel clock by throwing it at the wall, then slurried about how Sam needed to get a damn haircut, and then he'd promptly passed out on the floor. Alex thought it might have been funny another time. But not right now. Dean was constantly losing his temper over little things... he'd shouted at Sam the other day when he'd taken too long to decide what he wanted in the drive-thru, then snapped at Alex when she'd accidentally let some lettuce covered in mayonnaise fall out of her sandwich and onto the back seat of the Impala. She could tell he felt bad about it afterwards, but he never apologized. Just got quiet and stony-faced. Acted like nothing happened, like nothing was wrong.

"Earth to Alex," Sam said, looking at her from across the table. "You okay?"

Refocusing, remembering what she was doing, Alex nodded. "Yeah, just a little tired," she said, which was true enough. The nightmares were still plaguing her and she was tired. Sam looked at her a minute longer before returning to his examination of a heart. Dean, at the head of the table, was listlessly eyeballing another heart.

"Hey." Dean pushed the container toward Sam, really serious. "Be my Valentine?"

He got an eye roll and a 'really?' face from Sam, to which Dean gave a cheesy, fake grin.

"Give me that," Alex muttered, and pushed the container of entrails at Dean.

He took one look at it and cracked another grin. "Spaghetti, anybody?"

"Dean." Sam stopped what he was doing and gave their brother an impatient, annoyed expression. Dean just chuckled at his own joke and stirred through the entrails with the silver clamps, not really being helpful. Alex rolled her eyes and picked up the heart from the container she'd just taken from Dean. Squish. The smell of human blood—metallic and cloying—was strong, Sam, who had returned to scrutinizing the heart in front of him paused, seeming to notice something.

"Hey—guys—there's like a weird little mark on this one," he said, frowning and pulling the on-
Alex was holding the heart in a gloved hand, squinting at a tiny little white mark she'd just noticed just above where the right ventricle was. *What the—?* "Yeah, actually—" she replied, intrigued, swiveling the magnifying glass toward herself and peering intently through it. Sure enough, there was a tiny little mark, like a brand there in the bright red tissue. It looked like a fancy letter E or maybe a 3, and it seemed familiar, but she couldn't place it. She held the heart out to Sam, who could compare the marks. "What do you think?"

Sam took it and squinted at it through the magnifying glass, then sat back, surprised. "Yeah." Sam frowned in deep thought, trying to figure it out. "These hearts both have identical marks." He glanced at Dean, then Alex, silent and thinking.

"Okay, why?" Dean asked, voicing what they all were wondering.

Sam ignored Dean, looked at Alex for a second opinion. "All right—am I crazy, or do these marks look *Enochian*?"

At that question, Alex grabbed the heart back from Sam. She scrutinized the little symbol again, remembering now where she'd seen something similar to it. "Huh. There's a symbol kind of like this one in the angel banishing sigil. Not *identical* but..." she trailed off and looked over the heart at Sam, who looked like he had a similar realization, that he was remembering too.

"Yeah," he said intently, sounding like they were onto something. He glanced up at Dean. "I definitely think it's Enochian."

"What like angel scratches?" Dean asked. He'd gotten up and was looking over Sam's shoulder.

He got a bratty look from his sister. "No, the *other* Enochian," she said sarcastically.

Dean gave her a 'you suck' face and stood up, fishing for his phone. "See if I share my candy stash with you ever again," he told her threateningly, putting the phone up to his ear.

Sam watched Dean walk off a couple steps then looked at Alex. He leaned closer to her, wincing playfully for effect. "He thinks there's still some left," he whispered.

Alex pulled an overly dramatic face. "We're so dead," she whispered back, and he cracked a grin at that point—and then they both dissolved into smothered laughter over the table full of bloody human remains.

"Cas, it's Dean," they heard their brother boom into the phone. "Yeah, room thirty-one C, basement level... Saint James Medical Center."

"I'm there now," came a familiar deep voice, and at the sound of it, Alex stood up and turned around, almost knocking over her chair.

Cas was standing in front of Dean. They were facing each other, phones still to their ears. "Yeah... I get that," Dean said.

There was a long pause, and Cas narrowed his eyes. "I'm... gonna hang up now," he said.

"Right," Dean said, and in unison, the two of the lowered their phones. Dean turned around, shaking his head, heading back to the examination table.
Cas pocketed his phone and turned his attention to the other Winchesters, approaching behind Dean. He looked fine—walking normally and appearing alert and well, back to his old self. Alex felt a little better to see it and hung back near the column at the opposite end of the table. "Hello Sam," Cas said first, and then his eyes slid slowly to Alex. "...hello Alex." He paused, taking in her appearance and his head tilted to the side just slightly. "You look nice."

The brothers both looked weirdly at Cas, who hadn't looked away from Alex. She looked a little surprised at his compliment. His arms hung at his sides and he had this open, matter-of-fact expression on his face, and the slightest hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth. Dean looked between them and cleared his throat, his features twisted into an unhappy expression. "Hey, Romeo—cut the chit chat and take a look at these hearts."

"Hearts?" Castiel turned his attention to Dean and walked around the edge of the table next to Dean, who was indicating the table full of human remains.

"Yeah, so, we got a couple who ate each other to death," Dean said. "And this is all that's left."

"Ate each other?" Cas repeated as if he hadn't heard right, a deep frown furrowing his brow. Dean shrugged. "Bon appetite."

Sam pushed the container toward Cas. "They both have these marks on their hearts. Looks Enochian to me. What do you think?"

Castiel picked up the heart in his bare hand, looked at the organ carefully. Alex watched him closely, noting when his expression changed from studious to apprehensive. "You're right, Sam. These are angelic marks." He sounded disturbed and glanced vaguely in Alex's direction. "I imagine you'll find similar marks on the other couples' hearts as well."

"So, what are they?" Sam asked. "I mean, what do they mean?"

"It's... a mark of union," Castiel said, and he sounded even more disturbed than before. "This man and woman were intended... to mate." He put the heart down, his hand now bloody, and, preoccupied, he shook it, wiping it against the edge of the container.

"To date?" Alex asked, thinking she had misheard.

Cas stopped wiping his hand against the container and looked at her kind of hesitantly. In the dim light of the morgue, his eyes looked so dark and full of something that made her go still, made her feel funny. "No... to mate."

Dean and Sam were exchanging a weirded-out look. "Okay, by who?" Dean asked.

Cas was rubbing his fingers together, looking at the blood left there distractedly. "Well, your people call them 'Cupid,'" he said. Alex, grabbing a paper towel from a small shelf underneath the table, frowned at him in surprise.

"Cupid? Heart and arrows Cupid?" she held out the paper towel, indicated his hand.

He looked at her fully—there was a pause—then he took the item and began to wipe his hand. "Thank you," he said. "And no, not really. There are no... arrows." He glanced at her again. "What human myth has mistaken for 'Cupid' is actually a lower order of angel." He glanced at Dean now, who looked more and more doubtful by the second. "Technically it's a cherub, third-class."

"Cherub?" Dean repeated dubiously.
"Yeah, they're all over the world," Cas said matter-of-factly. "There are dozens of them." Alex heard what he'd said, but paused, noticing he'd said 'yeah.' That was new, wasn't it? She watched him out of the corner of her eye, realizing that every time she saw him, he surprised her with the little things he was picking up, learning, implementing.

While Alex was noticing this, Dean's mind was clearly somewhere else. "Cupid? You mean the little flying fat kid in diapers?"

Cas stopped cleaning off his hand and looked at Dean with one of those squinty, I-don't-understand frowns. "They're not incontinent." Dean's face was priceless at Castiel's reply—he apparently had no response for that one. Alex either. She was watching with her arms folded, trying not to look too amused. Cas was looking at her again, frowning deeply and apparently thinking hard. She smashed her lips together, tried to look serious.

"Okay, anyway. So, what you're saying—" Sam started.

Cas looked away from Alex and cut him off, suddenly very intense, moving forward, adamant. "What I'm saying is a Cupid has gone rogue and we have to stop him—before he kills again."

The sudden burst of assertiveness startled them all. Sam looked at Cas for a couple beats, unsure of how to respond. Then in a little higher pitched voice than normal, he said, "naturally," making a weird face and nodding at the table.

Cas seemed to recognize that Sam didn't believe him and he turned to Dean, who was nodding patronizingly, narrowing his eyes and pretending to be sympathetic. "Of course we do."

Cas regarded Dean almost sadly, understanding that Dean was being facetious, and then turned to Alex slowly, reluctantly, as if expecting her to insult him, too. Alex wasn't looking at him—she was too busy giving her brothers her best bitchface at their responses. "I don't see the issue."

Dean made a sound that indicated he thought it was preposterous. "Come on, Alex, Cupid? Really?" He gave a cynical little laugh and head nod, conceding. "Well. Guess it makes sense for the romance novel addict to believe in Cupid."

The room fell completely silent at the very needless jab. Sam looked at Dean, eyebrows raised in surprise—Cas was looking at Dean too, eyes narrowed. Dean looked between Sam and Cas and put his hands up. "What?!"

Pissed off, Alex stepped a little closer to her oldest brother, brushing shoulders with Cas in the process. "You're being an asshole," she told Dean point blank. He looked like he'd never heard anything stupider. Alex held his gaze, getting madder when she thought about it. "Has Cas ever steered us wrong before? Why are you being such a jerk to him?" Dean made a face, and officially fed up with him, Alex rolled her eyes, huffed in disgust and turned around, walking a couple steps back the way she'd come. Cas watched her for a few beats, then forcefully refocused, looking between Sam and Dean. "These, uh, these couples, these people—as long as this Cupid is out there—they're in danger. We have to act quickly."

"Right. Of course. So," Dean said, still not convinced. He had his arms crossed. "How do you track down a Cupid, anyway, huh? How do we find this dude?"

Cas was thinking, looking at the floor and frowning, then he looked up again. "I suggest we find a place that is rife with romance."

Clearly not understanding, Dean looked at Cas impassively. "Speak English."
Castiel's frown deepened. "I am speaking English."

Standing at the back of the room next to another stiff on an examination table—one of the people who'd committed suicide—Alex looked up. "Like somewhere a bunch of couples in love would be?"

Cas met her questioning gaze steadily. "Yes, exactly."

"That restaurant around the corner," Sam suggested, looking at Dean and then Cas. "It is Valentine's Day after all. A lot of couples will be out for a date."

Cas seemed to hear Sam a couple seconds after he'd finished speaking—the angel looked away from Alex, a little disconcerted as Sam waited for a reply expectantly. "Uh, yes, excellent idea," Cas said, glancing at Dean and then Alex, who hadn't stopped looking at him once. "I suggest… he trailed off, eyes locked on Alex.

"Suggest what, Cas?" Dean asked impatiently, glaring at Cas and then Alex. Cas seemed to remember everyone else in the room and looked at Dean again. He seemed a little out-of-sorts. "I, uh, suggest we go there immediately."

"To stop Cupid from going Rambo." Dean summarized doubtfully, sounding less than enthused and still looking at Castiel closely, scrutinizing him. Cas seemed confused by the reference, but then seemed to decide that he agreed with whatever Dean was implying. "If that means that we prevent Cupid from further decimating the romantically coupled occupants of this town then… yes."

"Uh huh," Dean said and seemed to give up, threw his hands up then let them go where they smacked him on either leg. "Cupid. Okay! What the hell. Sign me up for crazy." He pulled off his flimsy lab apron and started slamming the container tops back onto the boxes of stuff they'd been examining.

Alex exchanged a look with Sam—what the hell was Dean's problem? Sam shrugged lightly, and she thought maybe he was thinking, 'well, that's Dean for you.' Annoyed but also reminded that yes, that was Dean for you, Alex resigned herself to deal with the bullshit. Sam stood up, took off his apron and gloves, starting to stack the containers up.

Still beside the suicide victim, Alex took off the uncomfortable plastic gloves she wore, tossing them into the waste bin. Cas went over to her, stopping right in front of her and she paused, hands on the apron string on either side of her neck. Cas said nothing, just stood there as she waited expectantly for him to say something. He didn't say anything, he just looked at her. She grew uncertain. He still he didn't say anything. She heard Dean slamming containers back into the cooler, but couldn't look away from Cas. She was actually getting sort of uncomfortable, fidgety under his gaze. Her tongue darted out nervously to wet her lips. Her stomach felt weird. Her head felt foggy. She had to work really hard to get words out. "So you, uh, you feeling better?" she asked.

There was a long pause. He almost looked like he was feeling... dreamy? It was officially starting to weird Alex out. "Yes," he said. "I am."

"Um, good." She thought she should take off her apron now but she couldn't really seem to move. His eyes were such an intense blue and held her there, and suddenly she was noticing every detail of how cute, no—handsome—he was, how captivating and kissable—whoa. Her inner monologue stopped at that point, asking... what? Did you just seriously just think that? She tried to push past the thoughts but her brain could only focus on his eyes, which were looking into hers so
completely, then scanning her face, then glancing over her hair.

He seemed intrigued. "Usually your hair is down..." he said, eyes now flickering back and forth between both of hers.

She reached up and touched the side of her head, trying to remember what it looked like. He liked her hair? She smiled at him shyly, touching the end of her hair below her shoulder. This pleasant, silly haze was taking over her mind. Almost like she was high or something.

"Let's move out, weirdos," Dean said, oblivious to what was going on behind him—he was shrugging on his suit jacket, already headed out the door without a backward glance. Sam was following, his suit jacket already on. He paused by the door.

Alex looked toward the doorway, away from Cas, and suddenly, all the ooey-gooey feelings were gone and she was left wondering what had come over her—maybe she shouldn't have eaten all that stolen candy, huh? Sugar rush. Yeah, that explained it. She chanced a quick peek at Cas, who looked similarly perplexed, staring at the floor with his eyebrows moving together. Weird. Her head felt a bit strange now.

"Today, guys," Dean called—Sam waited at the door for them, but Dean was halfway down the hall already. Alex hurried, yanking off the apron and grabbing her jacket. Sam let go of the door and followed in Dean's footsteps—Alex shrugged her jacket on, pulled her hair out of the collar as she headed for the door—Cas stood there and held it open for her, watching her walk through—and she was very aware that she was staring at him the whole time too, gawking almost. She almost tripped over her own feet.

Getting mortified with her behavior and seeming lack of control, Alex focused on the shiny marble floor under her feet. Beside her, Cas matched her stride as they walked down the dim hallway. She watched his shoes with great interest, noticing how big his feet were compared to hers. And then she suddenly felt him catch her by the arm, stopping her from walking—she looked up, confused, and saw she'd almost walked smack into a column. She looked at Cas, embarrassed—and also noticing how much she liked the way his hand grasped her arm. From up ahead, Sam came back into view, from around a corner he'd already rounded. "Guys," Sam said, impatiently, then paused, giving them a weird look. "What are you doing?"

Cas let go of her arm, and they exchanged a mutually worried look. So he felt it too. What was happening? "We're, uh, coming," Alex said, trying to act like everything was peachy, grinning at Sam with her best effort. But from the way her face felt, she realized she probably looked more like a frightened chimpanzee baring its teeth than anything else. Sam gave her an even weirder look and waited for them to get to him, then walked with them the rest of the way—Dean was waiting impatiently at the exit, and then led the way outside. The Impala was parked there along the curb, but Sam pointed east and led the way. "The restaurant's this way," Sam was saying. "Just like maybe two blocks, I think."

Silently, the group of four made their way up the sidewalk and past the medical center, Dean and Sam in front. There were some shops lining the street here—a bakery and a little gift shop, a drug store, then a florist. There were red roses and hearts all over the storefront and a huge display that said "Happy Valentine's Day" in swirly script. Cas looked at it curiously as they passed by, taking it all in.

On the sidewalk ahead, there was a bouquet of red roses laying discarded on the sidewalk, as if they'd been dropped in a hurry. Cas stopped in his tracks when he reached them. He stared down at them. Alex stopped too, turning slightly to look at Cas, then Sam and Dean did too. Cas then did a very curious thing. He bent down, picked one single red rose up, and looked at it for a long
moment. Then he looked up from it and to Alex, held it out to her. She looked at the flower and then him, confused. "...what are you doing?" she asked. Her brothers seemed to be wondering the same thing—Sam had a slightly amused, if perplexed look on his face, while Dean looked like he was thinking 'you have got to be shitting me.'

When Alex asked what he was doing, Castiel's expression fell just a little bit and he looked at the rose then back at her. He looked like he thought maybe he'd made a mistake. "Isn't it customary?" he asked.

Alex's eyebrows were raised then going together as her eyes narrowed. She wasn't sure if she were right or not, but as he stood there holding the flower out to her, with his bad posture and slightly confused expression... she couldn't see any other explanation. And she felt the ooey-gooey feelings coming back again as she noticed how far apart they were and how much she disliked that, how some of his hair stuck out on the side of his head and how wonderful that was. "Cas... are you asking me..." she paused, beginning to smile now, the kind of smile you smile when you just can't believe something, "are you asking me to be your Valentine?"

As if the thought hadn't occurred to him, he frowned, eyes squinted up, and he stared hard at the flower. "I... don't know." Cas looked up at her waiting gaze and he blinked a couple times, clearly not sure if he'd done the right thing or not. "Apparently... yes."

Alex felt herself smiling shyly again. Her hands were clasped together in front of herself—his frown was fading into a softer expression and she just wanted so badly to throw her arms around his neck where he could twirl her around like in the movies—

"Hey," Dean cut into her inner thoughts gruffly, "I thought there was a killer Cupid on the loose—you kids gonna stand there and flirt all day?"

Alex and Cas looked at Dean, and similarly, the weird thoughts Alex didn't quite recognize in herself ceased. Officially getting a little worried, she glanced at Cas, who looked similarly confused. But he was still holding the flower and looked so damn cute and oh God the little tuft of hair sticking out—

"Come on already," Dean barked over his shoulder, already walking away. Cas looked like he was about to drop the rose, but Alex reached over and took the flower from him. He looked at her, surprised. She grinned at him slyly, sidelong, and tucked the rose into her jacket. He hid a smile and looked down at the ground as they followed Sam and Dean. Alex noticed that they fell into step together. He had his hands in his pockets.

Sam stopped a minute later in front of a restaurant. "Pagrino's," Sam read the sign out loud, then pointed at the little sidewalk sign that was out. "Bring in your Valentine for ten percent off dinner."

"Excellent," Cas said matter-of-factly, raising his chin slightly, looking pleased. "We can receive a discount."

Dean gave a huge huff of air, disgusted but silent, and went into the restaurant. They followed him. It was dim inside, as swanky as a restaurant with booths could get. Pink roses in vases dotted the tables. Tables which were filled with couples. Cheesy hearts hung from the ceiling, tea light candles dotted every surface the restaurant had.

The hostess greeted them with a smile, looked over the four of them. "Table for two couples? Right this way."

Dean looked at Sam, who chuckled—the waitress had apparently assumed Dean and Sam, who
were standing in front, were a couple. "After you, dear," Sam said, motioning with a hand for his brother to go first. Dean rolled his eyes and started after the hostess.

Cas apparently thought this was a thing, because he parroted Sam with Alex—extended a hand, indicating she go first. "After you, dear."

Alex did just that, doing her best not to bust up laughing. She went ahead and went first, smiling to herself, thinking of the rose inside her jacket and thinking of Cas, his face, his voice, his hands... what the—? She had a brief moment of wondering, again, what the hell was going on. This was more than a sugar rush. She felt giddy and strange, like she had no reign over her own reactions or thoughts, or like they were muddled, not completely her own. She blinked a couple times, as if trying to clear blurry vision.

Dean was waiting at the half-booth the hostess had taken them to and was indicating Alex sit next to him. She did, in a daze, and Dean sat down in the chair beside her. Cas was getting into the booth side of the table, sitting opposite of Alex. She avoided looking at him, purposefully, as the weird stuff seemed to get weirder when she looked at him. A couple minutes passed, where Alex stared at her menu, not reading it, peeking at Cas from over the top of it occasionally, feeling her stomach flip flop, then looking away hastily. Each time she peeked up, he was staring right back at her, eyes dark and full.

Dean, watchful and suspicious appeared to be two seconds away from demanding an explanation. Alex tried harder not to look at anything but her menu. Their waitress arrived after a couple minutes of this awkwardness, smiling widely at Dean. "What can I get you folks?"

Temporarily distracted from watching Cas, Dean handed off his menu. "Cheeseburger, fries, Corona."

"And for your lady friend?" the waitress asked, smiling at Alex.

"Same thing," Alex replied, not really paying attention.

Dean was holding up a correcting finger at the waitress, kind of amused, if a little weirded out. "Uh, not a couple, lady." Alex barely heard him. Cas was looking around the restaurant, head turned to the side—the little shaggy curls behind his ears—they were distracting. In fact, the more she thought about it, the sight of those little dark swoops behind his completely perfect ear literally seemed to devastate her soul, she felt like if she couldn't reach out and just touch them, she might die. Her heart rate was increasing and her adrenaline was growing. She felt her hand, on her knee, clench. With great effort, she tore her eyes away, freaked out. Stare at the table. Just don't look at him.

But she couldn't help it. Alex chanced another quick glance at him—and at the very same instance, saw him doing the same. They both looked away quickly.

"For you?" the waitress asked Sam.

"Chef salad with vinaigrette and water, please," Mr. Health Conscious replied. Alex smirked to herself, momentarily forgetting her distress. Sam hadn't been so health conscious a few hours ago when he was snatching a Reece's cup from her and shoveling it into his mouth.

The waitress, still addressing Sam, turned to look at Cas. "And for your boyfriend?"

Alex had to glance up at that one—Sam looked entirely unamused. Cas, realizing the waitress was talking about him, glanced up. He'd been staring hard at the little pink rose on the table. "Nothing,
thank you."

"All right, shouldn't be long guys. I'll be back with drinks in a sec." The waitress left.

Cas cleared his throat, looking around at the Valentine's decor. God, even his frown was perfect, he looked so grumpy and sweet and she just really wanted to—Alex stopped herself mid-thought, forced herself to look down into her lap. What the hell!

"Valentine's Day is a curious human tradition," Cas was saying, staring at one of the little hearts hanging above their booth. "Claudius the second cancelled all marriages and engagements in Rome to try to recruit more soldiers to join his war, but Saint Valentine continued to perform marriages for young lovers in secret." He looked at Sam at this point, then Dean. "When his actions were discovered, he was sentenced to be beaten to death with clubs and to have his head cut off."

All three Winchesters looked at Cas—Sam trying to decide whether to be amused or horrified, Dean impressed and definitely amused, Alex kind of warily, breathing a little heavily.

"Wow Cas," Dean said, chuckling. "That's super romantic."

The waitress reappeared with drinks shortly and said she'd be back soon with their order. Alex cracked every single joint in her fingers slowly, feeling more and more anxious.

"I wonder if the couples in here know about the origins of what they're celebrating," Cas said across the table.

"Don't look at him."

"Maybe you should tell them," Dean wisecracked, taking a swig of his beer.

"Do you really think so?" Cas asked intently, and Alex could hear from his voice that his expression was probably cute and concerned and thoughtful and she really wanted to look at him but no don't do it. She glanced at Dean who looked like he couldn't believe his luck at Cas's naivety. She literally had to lock her neck in place to keep from looking at Cas.

"He's pulling your leg," Sam said.

There was a pause, then a disconcerted, "No he's not. I would feel it."

"He means that Dean is joking," Alex explained, looking at him without even being able to stop herself. Mistake number one, because Cas looked back at her. And their eyes locked. And her heart fluttered, actually fluttered in her chest. She saw him swallow, almost nervously—when had he looked like that before? Oh my god, it had been when he was at the strip club. But this time he didn't look scared as much as he almost looked predatory. It was her turn to swallow.

"Here you go, guys," the waitress said, setting down their food and startling Alex out of—whatever was happening in her mind.

"That was fast," Sam commented in surprise.

"Extra staff tonight, it's Valentine's," the waitress explained, the smiled at Sam. "Enjoy, lovebirds!"

"None of us are together," Dean muttered, not very amused about it anymore, but reaching for the ketchup bottle he let it go. He glanced at Cas, who was snapping out of the stare he'd been sharing with Alex. Dean missed seeing it by a millisecond. "So, what, you just happen to know Cupid likes the cosmos at this place?" Dean asked, focusing on slathering his burger in ketchup.

Cas watched him. "Uh—this place is a nexus of human reproduction. It's exactly the kind of—" he
swallowed, glanced at Alex, looked down, "—of garden the Cupid will come to—to pollinate." He had his jaw set firmly, then tugged at his collar a little, like it was too tight. Alex watched him do that, taking in every detail of that hand and the way it moved—

Dean sat back and stared at his burger, suddenly looking very uninterested. Across from him, Sam paused, a forkful of salad hovering in the air. "Wait a minute. You're not hungry?"

"No," Dean said, then got defensive. "What? I'm not hungry." Alex and Sam both looked at him like he was nuts and he rolled his eyes. "Take a picture," he said, "it'll last longer."

"None of us possess a camera," Cas said, not getting the slang at all. Alex looked down at her lap, hiding a smile.

Sam, ever the helpful one, turned to the angel. "Sure you do Cas, your phone has one," he said.

Cas paused. Alex peeked up from underneath her lashes—he was looking at Sam suspiciously. "You're... teasing me."

Sam set down his fork, good natured smile on his face, and held out his hand as he made a 'gimme' signal. "No, here, lemme see it."

Cas drew his phone out of his pocket slowly and handed it over to Sam. The phone looked so small in Cas's huge hand, Alex thought morosely. Longingly.

"Look, you push this button," Sam said, showing Cas, "the camera thing pops up… then push this button..." the phone made a cheesy camera sound. "Voila."

Cas seemed thoroughly impressed, taking the phone back and staring at it in wonder. "I'm—this is very ingenious." He looked up at them, as if he couldn't believe it, coming close to a grin. And that sight was way, way, way too much for Alex.

"God in heaven, someone kill me now!" she screamed internally, sitting there gripping the table with both hands, feeling like she was going to pass out.

Cas, fascinated with the phone, held out the phone, took a photo of the rose in the vase, looked at the screen, smiled to himself. Then looked at Alex, who wasn't ready and probably looked kind of shocked, deer in headlights—but the fake camera sound went off and Cas smiled at the screen where the definitely-horrible picture was now displayed—he then glanced back up at her—she swallowed, wanting to disappear. Cas seemed to feel Dean's pissy stare and held his phone out again, snapped one of him—that would be a good one, the glare clearly saying 'I hate you' was a memory to cherish. Cas then snapped one of Sam, who was mid-bite of salad and saying "hey!" a second after the picture was taken. "I wasn't ready," Sam said through a mouthful of lettuce. Cas, however, looked at his phone, pleased. "Now I have a photo of each of you," he said proudly. "Uh no, Alex lamented internally, wanting to sob a thousand tears forever and ever. And directly after that thought, she immediately frowned, baffled at herself. A thousand tears forever? Seriously? What the actual fuck was happening to her brain?!

"Lemme blow your mind again," Dean said, completely amused at Cas's lack of technical savvy. Alex, perturbed, looked sidelong at Dean, was wishing she could tell her big brother what was happening to her because she needed help, and NOW, but was pretty sure he'd blow a gasket. Unaware of her dilemma, Dean was addressing Cas with exaggerated slowness. "You can text pictures, too."

Instead of looking thrilled, Cas looked suddenly a little downcast. "I prefer not to text," Cas said, looking down at the phone kind of peevishly now, all the previous affection he'd had for it now sullied. "The buttons are so small and the fingers are so big. Every time I make a mistake I have to
write a whole new message."

He got three weird looks. Sam pointed at a key on the phone. "See this? It's a backspace button." He looked at Cas, smiling helplessly. "It erases mistakes."

Cas looked at it, frowning, then sat back in the booth. There was a long pause, and when he spoke, he sounded annoyed. "All this time that was there."

Why did he have to be so damn cute. So, so, so cute…? She felt depressed, staring at him sadly. He finally looked away from his phone and put it in his pocket.

Dean was guzzling his beer, looking around the restaurant in a cursory way while Sam stabbed another forkful of salad up. Alex was left to stare at Cas and feel her heart rate increase, her ability to breathe lessen. He felt her gaze and looked up at her from his lap, expression dark and intense, his chin lowered, his eyes darkening and devouring her almost, and Alex felt like everything else just went away, it was just them and the things she wanted to do with him—and then he seemed to shake himself, get a little freaked out, the dark desire in his eyes lessening in place of confusion and fear. He looked at her burger, almost sounding panicked. "I want that," he said, and reached for it.

Spell broken, Alex watched him in confusion. "Uh, sure?" she said, and he took a huge bite, chewed viciously, staring at Alex the whole time.

For a minute, she felt like herself again and watched him, completely mystified. Something was really weird about all this. No, not even weird, wrong. She was suddenly watching the way his jaw worked as he chewed, her head listlessly tilting to the side—how did he look so good even while chewing food like a moron? God, he was so damn hot that all she wanted to do was throw the table aside and then—she snapped back to attention, catching herself again. Cas had stopped mid-chew, looked to his left. "He's here," Cas said through a mouthful of food, suddenly alert.

They all looked at where he was looking—all they saw were couples. "Where?" Sam asked. "I don't see anything."

"There," Cas indicated a couple that was making out.

"You mean the same-side-of-the-booth couple over there?" Dean asked.

Cas set down his burger and announced: "Meet me in the back." Then he disappeared.

"Why can't he just walk like a normal person?" Dean complained, throwing down his napkin and getting up. Alex scooted out of the booth in a trancelike state, wondering if she were the only one feeling strange. She felt scared of herself and paranoid.

Dean lead the way back toward the kitchen, ignoring the questioning looks from the staff as they entered.

Alex leaned close to Sam as they followed Dean. "You feeling okay?" she asked him in a hushed, worried tone.

"Yeah why?" Sam asked, glancing down at her with a slight frown.

Alex shrugged, worried her lower lip with her teeth. "I dunno, I think something must have been in that candy. I feel kind of… uh, weird." Sam shrugged too, like he had nothing to offer or add. That wasn't comforting.
They found Cas in the dingy back store room with his back to them. His hand was outstretched unmovingly into thin air. "Cas, where is he?" Sam asked striding into the room and looking around in confusion. Just behind him, Dean and Alex came to a stop.

"I have him tethered," Cas muttered, then began to speak Enochian in deep, velvet tones. "Zo da ka ma mah rana. Manifest yourself."

There was a long silence in which Sam, Dean, and Alex all looked around the room expectantly. Dean's patience gave out and he walked toward Cas slightly. "So where is he?" he asked, his tone suggesting that Cas had led them on a wild goose chase.

"Here I am!" Came a new voice, and Alex jumped—beside her, Dean had been grabbed by a giant, naked, fat guy, who was bear-hugging him from behind and giggling madly, shaking Dean like a rag-doll. The shock alone of the sight made Alex freeze for a second.

"Help!" Dean wheezed, and Alex, not knowing what else to do, whipped out her hunting knife. Cas was suddenly beside her, holding his arm out in front of her. "There's no need for the knife."

"Are you sure?" she asked, turning her head to look at him in supreme doubt. He looked back at her, and again, the second their eyes met, they were both rendered useless, just staring at each other.

Alex felt her freaked-out expression fade. He was really the most handsome, gorgeous creature in all of heaven or earth, she thought to herself, then without warning the naked guy barreled into Cas, saying, "Hello, you!"

Alex jumped back in surprise as Cas was manhandled in an enthusiastic hug. "What the hell is happening?!" she demanded of no one in particular.

"This is Cupid?" Dean asked in marked disbelief.

"Yes," Cas managed to reply in a strained voice—it was a very tight hug.

Cupid looked back their way, set Cas down, setting his sights on Sam. "And look at you, huh?" Cupid exclaimed, striding happily toward Sam, who looked terrified. Alex cowered behind Dean, hoping to be overlooked by the very naked and flabby Cupid.

"No," Sam said, seeing what was about to happen and, turned fast on his heel to leave, but suddenly Cupid was in front of him and grabbing poor Sam into a very enthusiastic hug. This is the point in time where Alex began to slowly shrink back toward Dean, who she figured she could hide behind.

"Yes! Yes, yes, yes!" Cupid responded in growing enthusiasm.

Dean turned to Cas, not sure what to do and panicked. "Is this a fight?" he demanded. "Are we in a fight?"

Cas came forward to where Alex and Dean stood, shook his head slightly, eyes fixed on Cupid. "This is... their handshake."

"Handshake?" Cupid was hugging Sam with way too much affection, nuzzling his head into Sam's neck, eyes closed in what looked like bliss. "Well I don't like it!" Dean announced.

Cas seemed to concede, glancing at Dean for just a second. "No one likes it."
"Why does he have to be naked?" Alex asked despondently, watching Cupid shake Sam around and cuddle him. The sounds of grossed-out protest that Sam was making... were really pitiable. The whole scene was like reality television... horrible to look at, but you just couldn't look away.

As if he knew she was thinking about him, Cupid suddenly opened his eyes, looked right at her, grinned. "And Alex..." he said, like he was seeing an old friend he'd missed very much.

He let go of Sam (who looked traumatized) darted forward toward her, but in between Cas and Dean, Alex held her knife up fast, the glinting tip aimed right at Cupid's chest. "No, okay? No."

Cas had stepped up a little, in front of her, his shoulder and arm blocking half of her body from Cupid's approach. With the multiple deterrents, Cupid stopped and sighed, made a sad face, then decided to be coy. "Playing hard to get, huh? I guess I'll let it slide for now. But I'll get a hug from you yet, cutie!"

Alex shrank a little closer to Cas, not taking her eyes off Cupid for a second. She'd never thought a hug could be scary before.

Cupid heaved a deep, happy, self-satisfied sigh. "All right, so—what can I do for you?" he asked happily.

"Why are you doing this?" Castiel asked, no nonsense.

"Doing what?" Cupid asked, wrinkling his nose playfully, a wide, open-mouthed smile on his face.

"Your targets—the ones you've marked—they're slaughtering each other."

Cupid's face fell immediately when Cas told him that. "What?" He almost completely shocked, then sad. "They are?"

"Listen, birthday suit, we know, okay?" Dean accused harshly. "Don't play dumb—we know you been flittin' around, popping people with your poison arrow, making them murder each other!"

"What we don't know is why." Cas said, much calmer than Dean. In between and behind Dean and Cas, Alex watched Cupid worrying his lip with his finger. He looked positively heartbroken.

"You think that I—" Cupid started, and his chin quivered. "That I would—" he wrung his hands over his belly. "Well, uh... I don't know what to say." His voice broke, he put a hand on his face, and began to cry, walked around Dean—Alex edged herself back and around Cas, who was turning to watch Cupid—who had gone to the back of the room and was giving them a great view of his saggy ass as he bent forward and cried softly.

Sam finally approached Cas, Dean, and Alex, and the four of them watched in disbelief as Cupid's shoulders shook. Alex put away her knife finally. "Great. We made Cupid—giant, crying naked fat man—cry," she said dryly.

Behind her, Sam hesitated. "Should... should somebody maybe... go talk to him?" he asked.

"Yeah, that's a good idea," Dean said, and clapped a surprised Alex on the shoulder. "This seems like your area Alex," he said, and nodded toward Cupid.

She gave him an 'are you serious' look. "What? Cuz I'm a girl? What if he hugs me?" Dean shrugged, as if to say, 'who cares'. Alex huffed, looked at Cupid's back hesitantly. "Fine. I'll try," she muttered.
Wincing, she approached him slowly, gingerly. Cas trailed her slightly, taking a couple steps forward, watchful.

"Hey, uh—*champ.*" Alex said to Cupid. He was still crying and faced away,. "Uh… we didn't mean to upset you… uh…"

Suddenly Cupid turned around, shaking with tears, grabbed her and pulled her close, even as she made a surprised sound. Behind her, all three men had jumped in surprise. "Oh god. Please stop," Alex protested, squeezing her eyes shut and trying not to feel things. He was hugging her so tightly.

"Uh, *gross,*" Sam muttered, while Dean and Cas were taking action.

Dean was pushing, kind of in vain (angel strength and all) on Cupid's shoulder—"Hey, get your junk off of her, man!"

Cas successfully pushed Cupid and Alex apart with his hands, one on either's shoulder, telling him almost threateningly, "that's enough, Cupid."

Cupid looked a little befuddled, but then just looked at them appealingly. "Look guys, I would never—*ever*—kill anyone! I love *life.* I love *love.* Love is more than a word to me, you know. I love *love.* I love it! And if that's wrong, I don't want to be right!" He looked at Alex, who was once again kind of behind Cas, peering out from behind his shoulder.

Cupid seemed to be waiting for her to agree with him. Dean shrugged at her, and Alex looked back at Cupid, not having a clue what he was talking about. "Yeah... uh, love is... so *great..." she said, and Cupid grinned now, put his hands on his hips—*ughhh—*Alex looked away.

"I knew you'd agree with me, Alex!" Cupid announced jovially.

"Yeah. Uh," Alex looked back at him, kind of squinting, trying not to see all of him. "Just, um, tell us what you know, okay?"

"I was just on my appointed rounds!" Cupid explained with great emotion and worry. "Whatever my targets do after that—that's nothing to do with me. I—I was following my orders." He seemed to get an idea then, looked at Cas, enthusiastic again, optimistic. "Brother! Please brother. Read my mind. Read my mind, you'll see."

Cas pivoted his chin down, stared into Cupid's eyes deeply for a minute, and Dean cocked an eyebrow at Alex, as he were asking 'you seeing this?'—then Cas looked at Dean, resigned. "He's telling the truth."

Relieved, Cupid sighed dramatically, crossed his eyes for a second. "Jiminy *Christmas.* Thank you!"

"Wait, wait, you said—you said you were just following orders?" Dean asked.

"Mm-hmm!" Cupid nodded up and down rapidly.

"*Whose* orders?" Dean demanded. He was approaching Cupid now, and Cas moved back a bit, Alex stepping back with him in tandem.

"*Whose?" Cupid laughed merrily at Dean's question, his eyes crinkling up in mirth. "*Heaven,* silly. *Heaven.*"

Clearly getting pissed, Dean spread his hands. "And why does *heaven* care if Harry meets Sally?!"
"Oh, well mostly they don't," Cupid responded, suddenly calm and reasonable in the face of Dean's rage. "You know, certain bloodlines, certain destinies." Manic, he grinned at the Winchester siblings, ending with Alex, pointing a vague finger at her, then waving it toward Sam, too. "Oh, like yours!"

"What?" Alex and Sam asked in unison, then exchanged a brief glance. In front and beside of Alex, Cas questioningly tilted his head to the side and she glanced up at him, yet again noticing those damn curls behind his ears—she couldn't look away, lost in thoughts of reaching out and touching him...

"Yeah, the union of John and Mary Winchester," Cupid was saying. "Very big deal upstairs, top priority arrangement. Mmm-hmm."

Alex snapped out of it, frowning to herself.

"Are you saying that you fixed up our parents?" Dean was asking in a deadly tone.

"Well, not me, but..." Cupid grinned again, "Yeah! Well, and it wasn't easy, either. Ooh, they couldn't stand each other at first!" Alex looked at Sam, whose expression was unreadable as Cupid continued. "But when we were done with them—perfect couple!" Cupid chuckled deeply and his belly jiggled.

"Perfect?" Dean repeated, incredulous, like he were daring Cupid to be serious.

"Perfect!" Cupid repeated happily.

"They're dead!" Dean all but shouted.

Cupid's smile faltered into sympathy. "I'm sorry, but... the orders were very clear. You and your brother and sister needed to be born." The manic grin was back. "Your parents were just... meant to be!" He laughed again, put his hands in the air in front of himself, began to sing and wave his hands back and forth, off in his own little world. "A match made in heaven—heaven!"

Dean looked like he was about to lose his mind, stepping closer to Cupid threateningly. "Okay listen douchebag!" he thundered at maximum volume, and Cupid froze in shock. "Stop the damn singing and tell me right now—" Dean jabbed a finger back at Alex, who was watching her brother with uncertainty and then disbelief. "Does she have one of your angel tattoos on her heart?" Dean demanded in a rage.

Cupid, confused and clearly a little afraid, cowered back slightly. "My what?"

Alex, mouth hanging open and thinking she knew what Dean was getting at, glanced up at Cas, who was looking back at her, inscrutable, but... my god. She almost thought, from the look on his face, that he was thinking the same thing... did the two of them have the marks? But why would Cas be thinking that too, because he hadn't seen 2014 like she had and—my god, his stubble, it was so beautiful and rough looking, she wondered what it would feel like to rub with the palm of her hand—shit, shit, she tore her eyes away from him, shaking almost.

Dean was in Cupid's face now. "Your angel mark things have a habit of getting the people I love killed," he roared, "so you better fucking tell me right now—" he grabbed Cupid by both shoulders.

Sam protested, "Dean, whoa!" and darted forward, pulled his angry brother back. Cas had an arm out to stop Alex from intervening, but she wasn't moving at all. It was safer here with him.

Cupid shrugged cautiously, his previous fear replaced with a huge, stupid grin. "Like it or not
Dean, some things are just meant to be!” he said vaguely, and Dean's expression smoldered in hatred. "It's a whole new world!” Cupid exclaimed. He began to sing again. "A whole new wooworld, a new fantastic point of vi—"

Dean yanked himself out of Sam's grip, hauled back and punched Cupid… and then promptly whirled, bent over, holding his fist, his face distorted in pain. "Son of a bitch," he managed, strained.

Sam threw his hands up in exasperation. "Seriously, Dean?"

Dean responded by groaning and looking back at where Cupid had been standing—but he was gone. "Where is he? Where'd he go?!" Dean demanded through the pain he was clearly feeling.

Cas, annoyed, looked at Dean plainly. "I believe you upset him."

"Upset him?!" Dean retorted, walking off a few steps, shaking out his fist.

Sam, trying to control his anger, followed, dead serious. "Dean. Enough!" He told him intensely.

Dean stared back angrily. "What?!"

"You just punched a Cupid!" Sam accused.

Dean's immediate, fiery response was, "I punched a dick!"

Alex, finally leaving her hiding place, tried a gentler approach. "Calm down Dean," she said, to which he just put his hands on his hips and pursed his lips, stared at the ceiling angrily.

Sam looked at his twin for support, who shrugged helplessly. Sam looked so done—he had clearly had it and wasn't going to put up with it any longer. He was barely holding in his anger, Alex could tell from the way he moved and talked with his hands. "Um... so are we gonna talk about what's been up with you lately, or not?" Sam demanded of his brother.

Dean stared back for a beat, then his glare returned at full force. "Or not." And without anything further, Dean brushed past Sam, didn't look at Alex, just stalked out of the room, leaving his siblings to stare after him in something between disappointment and dejection.

A tense five seconds of silence passed. "I mean, that was out of line, right?" Sam asked Alex in frustration, turning to her with a conflicted expression.

"Yeah," she agreed, shrugged and shaking her head, feeling disheartened by the entire thing. Dean flying off the handle, freaking out over the heart-mark. God, though, she wondered. Did she, maybe? She glanced at Cas, who was frowning intensely at Sam. Did he? Were they meant to be together, is that why they'd been together in 2014?

"What do you mean, Sam?" Cas asked. "About… what's been… 'up' with Dean lately?"

Sam shrugged, exasperated. "He's been weird lately. I dunno."

"If by weird you mean 'jerk' then yeah I agree. But it's just his personality." Alex said cynically. She didn't really mean it, but it sadly felt kind of good to insult him after the past few days.

Distracted and on edge, Sam shook his head. "No, it's not. There's something bothering him."

"Everything is bothering him," Alex retorted.
Sam gave her a look like he knew that, but hadn't wanted to say it. He sighed heavily, resigned. "Lemme go find him."

Sam left, heading the direction that Dean had gone. This was ridiculous, Alex thought to herself. Dean punching Cupid, interrogating him about Mom and Dad and herself and then trying to lay him out. Alex turned to Cas, realizing that they were alone—and she suddenly was afraid of what she might do in this crazed mindset of hers—but just then Cupid reappeared in front of them, looking around with a wide-eyed, cartoonish expression. Without even thinking, Alex clutched at Cas's arm so tightly that she slammed flush into his side. She immediately noticed how solid and warm he felt beside her and she never wanted to leave his side or—dammit! Alex gritted her teeth together. She wanted to smash herself in the foot with an anvil—anything to stop thinking these crazy, distracting thoughts!

"Is the mean man gone?" Cupid asked anxiously. *Who, Dean?*

"Yes," Cas said, understanding. "The mean man is gone."

"He hurt me," Cupid said sadly. Then shrugged, his expression changing quickly to upbeat once again. "He tried to hurt me." He waved his hand in dismissal. "But it's okay. I'm fine!" he laughed openly, and Cas looked down at Alex then.

She knew she shouldn't, but she looked back, and there they froze for a second, then Cas blinked hard, looked away, rattled, looked at Cupid in confusion. "Is there... uh, is there a reason you've returned?" he asked Cupid.

Cupid just folded his arms across his hairy chest, gave a long and happy gusty sigh and smiled at them. "Oh. I just wanted to admire you a little longer." He began humming *Whole New World* again, and Alex stared at him, utterly lost. Cupid clapped his hands together and rubbed them gleefully. "Yes sir, this is a good one! Possibly the best one ever!" he exclaimed. And then disappeared as suddenly as he'd appeared.

Alex stared blankly at the spot where he'd been. "What...?" she asked, and looked at Cas for an explanation. Then noticed that his jacket had gotten a little messed up—probably when Cupid picked him up to hug him. "Your coat's a little crooked," she said, and grasped the lapels, straightened the coat. And then didn't let go. She could feel his eyes boring down onto her and she was suddenly very, very aware of how close he was and how badly she wanted to yank him to her and kiss him until there was no tomorrow—she looked up into his eyes and saw his expression was dark and full of intent. His hands came up to grasp her around the wrists, his expression wobbled, brief confusion flashing across his eyes. Then it was gone and he was looking at her like he wanted her, his hands slid down from her wrists, skimming the length of her forearm and then his hands came to rest on either side of her hips, melting her like butter—his face was slowly tilting down toward her—

"Uhh, guys?"

They froze. Sam was at the door, looking really, really confused. Cas and Alex looked at him blankly, still completely frozen. "Uh, pretty sure Dean ditched us." Sam squinted at them, came forward a couple steps. Cas and Alex separated at this point, looking at their feet and the ground in general. Alex hugged herself, Cas's arms hung useless at his sides. "Is... something going on?" Sam asked, confused and suspicious and also trying to hold back a smile too it looked like.

"Nope," Alex said, forcing herself to look up at him. She had a wan smile plastered across her face and Sam didn't look like he believed her—at all—but he nodded (eyes still narrowed in suspicion) and then looked at Cas, who was looking back at Sam with a priceless expression: wide, innocent,
eyes, his mouth in a line, forehead all wrinkled up from how high his eyebrows were raised.

Sam cleared his throat, gave them both one more 'yeah right' glance and then dropped it, mercifully. He cleared his throat. "Listen, Cas—you mind zapping us over the the Palm Motel? Room twenty-six?"

No sooner than had he finished asking the question than they were standing in the motel room. Sam looked impressed or startled. "...I guess that's a yes." He thought of something, frowned. "Should have gotten my salad to go," he said sadly. Cas disappeared, and the twins looked at the spot where he'd been standing, mystified. Sam took off his suit jacket, sighed tiredly, then looked at Alex the way he did when he knew something was up. "Okay, so what was—" he started, but then Cas suddenly reappeared with two familiar plates—Sam's half eaten salad, and Alex's burger (one a huge Cas-sized bite missing).

"Your salad, to go," Cas announced.

Sam again looked impressed, then took the plate, shrugging, nodding, in a little bit of a better mood. "Uh, thanks, Cas."

Cas held out the remaining plate toward Alex who was avoiding his gaze. She felt like herself again, and deeply disturbed. "Not too hungry," she said, sat on the edge of one of the beds, troubled. Cas looked personally affronted that she didn't want the burger. "But you didn't eat anything," he stated. He set the plate down, looked at her piercingly. She stared at his feet. "What can I get you? What would you like?" he asked. She glanced up at him. He was being so weird. Well, he was always weird, but this was weirder than usual. What would she like?

You, she almost said, and went wide-eyed, staring down at her lap. Shit, get a grip Alex! "I'd like… a um, a, uh, cupcakes," she said down into her lap, saying the second thing that came to mind. Cas was suddenly gone again. "No, I wasn't serious," Alex protested into thin air, then let out an exasperated breath.

"He's a spastic little guy, huh?" Sam commented, eyeing Alex closely.

She said nothing, just chewed the inside of her mouth, thinking hard, ready to change the subject. "Okay, Sam, if Cupid's not the culprit for those weird murders... something else is, right?" she asked. He clearly saw what she was trying to do and looked at her like 'really?' but she just continued. "The question is, what? I've never heard of a bump in the night that uses angel marks to target victims. I don't remember anything like this case happening ever before."

"Me either," Sam replied automatically, set his plate aside. "So about earlier—" he tried again, but was interrupted by Cas appearing again. He was holding a box marked Magnolia Bakery—best cupcakes in the US.

"I got cupcakes," he said simply, looked at the box. "The best cupcakes in the US." Alex and Sam both looked at him speechlessly. Alex stood up slowly, taking in the sight of him standing there in front of her, so close and within reach. He looked so damn ridiculous and perfect there in that ill-fitting trench coat holding that box of sweets and she was tempted to grab him, whirl him around, slam him down on the bed, have her way with—

The door to the motel room opened and Alex swallowed, blinked. She was literally starting to sweat. This was not good. She almost felt like she might act on these urges, they got more intense every time, more consuming. More insatiable. It was Dean coming in, and he started when he saw them all. He must have forgotten that the angel could zap them anywhere faster than Dean could drive. His expression went from troubled to guarded in one second flat.
"Thanks for the ride, Dean," Sam said to him.

Dean tossed his suit jacket onto a coat hangar on the wall. "Shut up." He stopped, sights set on Cas. He took one look at the cupcake box and Dean pointed at him roughly, looking murderous. "You. Me. Outside—now."

Cas complied, still holding the box, and Dean held up a hand, looked at him hard. "Leave the damn cupcakes, Cas!"

The angel set down the box on the kitchenette counter, then followed Dean back out the door. Alex and Sam, who had watched the exchange in shocked silence stared, then Alex stood up, not sure if she should let this happen—Cas glanced back at her uncertainly, and Dean, already looking at Alex, gave her one of the most commanding glares he ever had. "Stay here, Alexandra," he growled, "don't even think about following us." Alex felt her mouth drop open, shocked into stillness.

"Alexandra?" she repeated in abject disbelief as the door slammed behind the two men. He hadn't called her that since… since Dad died and he'd flown into a fit of rage and trashed the Impala. Sam looked similarly shocked. The twins looked at each other. What was happening?

Alex got up and went into the bathroom, avoiding Sam's questioning gaze and reality altogether. What was happening to her? She looked in the mirror, seeing a scared-shitless face staring back.

Outside the motel room, Cas and Dean stood in the flickering light of the dying overhead light. It was dark out now.

"All right look Cas," Dean started bluntly, not bothering to be polite or watch his tone. "I've tried to bite my tongue but I can't anymore—all that googley eyed crap in the restaurant and will you be my valentine shit—what the hell was that, huh?"

Cas looked unsure, speechless even, and Dean stepped a little closer, lowered his voice. "I don't know what your weird deal is with my sister, Cas, but it needs to stop, and pronto, you hear me!?"

Dean was getting out of breath, he was so livid. He walked a couple steps off from Cas, trying to calm down. "Listen," he ranted, whirling around and jabbed his pointer finger down for emphasis, "I may not have much in this hell-hole world but I got Sam and I got Alex and I'll be damned if I let either of them sign their own death warrant!"

"Dean, I—" Cas tried, but Dean cut him off, coming back toward him angrily, his index finger waving angrily.

"I saw the future, Cas, the future where Alex is dead and Sam is Satan's muppet, so don't think you can just explain away this shit!"

Cas tried to speak again, but Dean refused to give way. However, he was starting to sound less angry, more desperate. "Cas, man, Alex's death warrant is you! So you tell me what I'm supposed to do when I see the way she looks at you—when you do nothing but stare at her all day long!"

"Enough, Dean," Cas said grimly, looking down to his right.

"Enough?" Dean repeated incredulously.

"Yes, enough," Cas said, and looked at the other man squarely in the eye. "You're... mistaken." He let those words hang for a beat, then took a couple steps away from the motel, down off the sidewalk and into the parking lot. He stared up at the sky solemnly. "Dean I've... I've seen this future to which you're referencing." He looked away from the sky, eyes going down and to the
side, in Dean's direction. "I've seen everything."

Behind him, Dean was momentarily shocked into silence. "Everything?"

"Yes," Cas confirmed heavily. His eyes flickered over the sky above him once again as he looked up. "I know that in it, Alex dies because of me. And Dean, I promise you—I will not allow it to happen. Any of it." He turned back around to face Dean, who was stepping off the sidewalk, joining Cas on the pavement, his expression terse.

"I apologize Dean," Cas said wearily. "I don't mean it—the things you accuse me of—the way you perceive my relationship to her. I'm her protector. There is a special, profound bond between angels and the ones they protect." He paused, then looked at Dean openly. "I feel the same bond for you."

Dean made a face and recoiled just slightly, looking Cas up and down. Unexpectedly, a little humor returned to his voice and demeanor. "Well I don't know how I feel about that, Cas."

"If to a lesser degree," Cas clarified quickly, realizing Dean's implication. "After all, I was never assigned as your guardian. Simply your rescuer."

Dean shook himself, because Cas sounded convincing and sad and worried and Dean didn't want to be suckered. He remembered 2014 too clearly. "Yeah that's all great Cas," he said, voice returning to a gruff, assertive tone, "but explain to me how you and Alex end up together— together—" he emphasized meaningfully, "four years into the future from now."

Cas's stoic expression flickered. "I'm—I'm unsure." He had looked away from Dean. "It doesn't happen unless I'm human." He drew in a breath and refocused, looked at Dean again. "Dean, I'm an angel. She's a human. We're not compatible. Please, understand this." Cas's expression was inscrutable. "Think about it, Dean. I don't feel things the way you feel them. I'm not human. I'm incapable of… that."

"Of what?" Dean asked, not following.

Cas looked irritated that he had to spell it out. "Human romance. Love." His eyes faltered away. He sounded bleak. "Whatever you want to call it."

"...But when you lose your angel juice it's a different story," Dean stated darkly, a question without being a question, and Cas said nothing, just looked down.

"This is why it's more important than ever, Dean, that we find a way to stop Lucifer. To prevent that future from happening." He shook his head slowly, deliberately, and to Dean, the angel looked his age momentarily—thousands of years old and so weary. "I don't want Sam to be taken by Lucifer," he said. Paused, staring unblinkingly at the ground. "I don't want Alex to die." His voice had softened, but then he set his jaw firmly, looked at Dean unflinchingly, his voice lowering again. "I'll do whatever it takes to prevent these things."

There was a fierce and rigid resolve in Cas's voice and demeanor and Dean let out a deep, disturbed breath, trying to figure out how to react. This situation, his assumptions, Alex and this angel—every time Dean thought maybe he was going nuts and making stuff up, something else happened that supported that creeping fear that Castiel and Alex were hurtling toward each other. Dean was distracted as hell in his own thoughts and world right now, but he had caught some weird moments between Cas and Alex today, and he wanted to believe Cas, that it was just some kind of weirdo guardian angel protector crap—Cas was an awkward dude to begin with but—the way this guy looked at his sister. He just wasn't sure. Maybe it was that deep down, he didn't like anyone but himself and Sammy to be protective of her. He kind of felt like no one else had the right. Not after
all Dean had been through to keep her safe throughout the years. Alex was his responsibility, and more than that, one of the only things left Dean loved in the world. Cas just wanted to swoop in and take her from him, and he didn't like that.

He eyed Cas carefully. Maybe it wasn't romantic for Cas, but Alex—that was a different story. Dean knew it on instinct that she was majorly into Cas, had some kind of fantasy crush on him and Cas didn't make it any harder for her with his weird gazes and comments and—dammit, this wasn't good. This whole thing just bothered him at his deepest levels. However, for the moment, he decided, grudgingly, to play peace keeper. "Yeah, good," he said absently. "Fine. We'll touch base with you tomorrow."

Cas looked confused, took a stuttering step forward. "I should stay and watch over you."

**Wow, he thought he was being subtle, didn't he?**

"*Over me, Cas?*" Dean asked conspiratorially. He felt a surge of protectiveness, possessiveness, righteous anger. "*I'm* her protector, Cas. *Me.*" He stepped back, not dropping Cas's gaze. "Always have been. Always will be," he said solemnly, almost feeling like he was laying claim to Alex in that moment. And she wasn't a piece of property like that, but Dean knew the only person in the world he trusted to keep her safe was himself. No one else. Cas looked awash in confusion now, of course. He always looked confused, the damn super-powered moron. "Conversation's over, Cas."

Dean regarded Cas a second longer, sarcastic now, defensive. "I'll let you know when you're needed."

And he turned, leaving Cas standing there. When Dean got to the door and glanced back, Castiel was gone.

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Dean reentered the motel room to find Sam standing by the shut bathroom door, arms folded—he looked very unhappy.

"Oh, so you ran him off, too?" Sam asked, noticing Cas's absence.

Dean just gave him an impatient look, sidestepped. "What are you *talking* about?"

Equally impatient, Sam pinched the bridge of his nose, then let it go, expelling a heavy breath, gestured to the closed bathroom door. "You upset her."

Dean made a face. "*I* upset her? Was I the only one that saw the weird ass shit between them today?"

Oh *definitely* not—but Dean did *not* need to know what Sam had seen. Sam would figure that whole Cas and Alex looking like they were about to kiss thing *later*. Right now, he needed to get Dean to explain himself, to calm down. "Dean—" Sam started, then paused, restarted. "Okay, look, that's beside the point. You gotta level with me, man. What is *with you* lately?"

Dean shot his brother a dangerous glare. "I told you before—screw off."

Sam got a little madder but stood his ground, approached Dean, controlling himself. He wasn't going to back down on this one, wasn't going to let his older brother push him around and set him off. "No, Dean, I want to *talk* about this."

Dean, disgusted and cagey yanked his jacket down from where he'd hung it just a couple minutes ago. "Forget this, I'm going out."
"You just got back!" Sam protested. He didn't get a response—Dean slammed the door in Sam's face.

Sam spread his arms out in helpless frustration, ran a hand through his hair, circled back toward the shut bathroom door. Great, just great. Both of his siblings were refusing to talk to him and had him going crazy.

First there was Dean, acting like nothing was wrong when clearly something really was, and now Alex… something was wrong with her, too, and maybe had been for awhile, now that Sam considered. Maybe since Dean had died, since Sam had left her alone with Bobby. He felt a twinge of guilt. If Alex falling apart was in any way his fault… after all the crap he'd put her through… Sam leaned against the wall, hung his head, scrubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand. She didn't deserve any of this—the constant hardship she was dragged through, the uncertainty of what tomorrow would bring. The Michael Lucifer thing hanging over her head. She must be freaked, he realized. At the thought of being left alone in the world if the angels got their way with himself and Dean.

Sam had gone out into the world and had friends and acquaintances, but Dean and Alex—all they'd ever had was each other. If he and Dean died or disappeared, who would she have? It was a sad jumbled little world they lived in. Not many people would understand what the Winchesters went through, the things they fought, the dark things they carried.

Out of the blue, Sam found himself remembering something from childhood—the series of crayon drawings Alex had made of these animal characters from her imagination. There had been three animals, and each of them represented one of the siblings—there was Bear, who was Sam, Lion, who was Dean, and Mouse, who was Alex. Bear and Lion had been huge animals with fierce claws and superhero capes. Alex had drawn Mouse, tiny, cute, furry little Mouse with a machine gun and or a machete in the illustrations. She'd written/drawn all these zany little adventures for the three of them. Sam's heart swelled unexpectedly at the memory. For all the crap in their childhood, there were some good memories, too, mostly to do with her and Dean. And dammit, he loved them both a lot. Maybe he wasn't good at it, but he loved them as best he could.

He looked toward the bathroom, into the wall at his side. She was in there, probably sitting on the floor and staring into space. He knew she wanted to be left alone, but he really felt like she needed someone to talk to. Yeah, he was pretty frigging curious about what he'd seen back at the restaurant—that embrace between Cas and his sister—but he could wait on finding that out, he just wanted to make sure she was okay.

It was weird though, catching them like that, and had definitely surprised him. Maybe Dean, who Sam had thought was being a little nutso before—maybe Dean was right about them. He pictured them together, as a couple, thought about it hard. And maybe he was a sucker or something, but the thought of an angel and a human finding happiness together didn't seem as bad as Dean seemed to think.

He stopped, deciding that he shouldn't be thinking about this too hard—he might have misinterpreted what he'd seen, after all. All he knew for sure was that his sister was upset and he didn't want her to be. Sam raised his hand, knocked lightly on the door. "Hey, Mouse?" he paused, listening. He hadn't called her that in forever… definitely not for a couple years at least. Would she even remember?

"Yeah?" she asked after a minute.

He couldn't tell, from her voice, what she was thinking. He paused, then settled on, "I'll be out here if you need me."
There was a long pause. Then a quiet reply that made him smile softly. "Okay, Bear." She did remember.

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**The Next Day**

Castiel sat in Big Frank's Burger Hut, eating yet another burger. It was around dinner time and he had been here all day, alone in a booth and surrounded by a growing amount of shiny silver wrappers. He dimly reflected on how strange this was. He had eaten perhaps forty of them in the past few hours, and had no plans of stopping. They were the only thing that seemed to help. He swallowed slowly. It was interesting. The combination of ingredients seemed to meld perfectly—warm melty cheese, cool strips of shredded lettuce, the savory meat patty, the tang of some kind of sauce, the acid of some onion, the dryness and softness of the bun. The slight crunch of the sesame seeds on top. It was quite enjoyable. He found that he liked how the differing textures and tastes came together and ceased to be separate as he chewed each bite, the teeth rendering the solid food into a different substance altogether.

Yesterday, at the restaurant with the Winchesters, he'd begun to feel hungry, filled with an overwhelming desire to consume. And the food sitting in front of Alex had been a good distraction from that desire. Out of something he thought was desperation, he had grabbed that burger—needing to do something physically and not sure what, and then had realized the burger tasted good, which made his other thoughts simmer instead of rage at the forefront of his mind.

His other thoughts. *Her.*

He took another bite, trying to concentrate on the taste of beef instead of anything to do with *her.* The constant flow of burgers seemed to be the only thing that worked, distracting him from the overwhelming thoughts of Alex—being apart seemed to help, too, which troubled him immensely. Last night, he'd made himself vanish, but had stayed close to Alex to watch over her until he realized he couldn't. That the foreign desire grew worse the longer he watched over her (she'd just been sitting on the floor in the dingy bathroom, stone faced), the more anxious he'd grown until he'd known he had to leave her presence.

There was some great danger over this town, he could feel it, sense it—and the great irony was that he needed to stay away from Alex, leaving her defenseless all because his vessel and his mind were working against him somehow. It must have something to do with what was happening here because... he had almost kissed her yesterday, not a single thought of 'no' or 'don't' entering his mind until Sam had appeared. This was troubling, perplexing, and he was uncertain. Greatly uncertain.

Cas paused, a burger in front of his mouth, but he stared over the top of it unseeingly, picturing Alex, wondering where she was and what she looked like, if she was thinking about him too... then he caught himself and quickly took another huge bite of burger, trying to focus on it instead. There was a heightened sense of alarm in the back of his mind as he wondered how much longer he could stay away from her and sit here and eat burgers, because he needed to be near her and protect her—what had she been doing all day, was she safe? Was Dean protecting her? Was Sam?

He thought of what Dean had told him last night. *'I'm her protector, Cas. Me.'* And he felt a surge of helplessness. Right now, this was true. And Cas didn't want it to be. He was supposed to be her protector eternal. He wondered about Dean's frantic question to Cupid about if Alex had the mark on her heart, the symbol of union. Everything Cas had told Dean last night about his devotion to protecting Alex, his incompatibility—he wanted to believe it himself. Only, he knew he was walking a fine line between truth and lies.
Cas glanced over, hearing someone approaching—he saw a familiar pair of black boots walking up to his table. And… bare legs? He looked up, following the path of bare legs to knees, then he saw the pattern of flowers—then the familiar tousled brown hair and the pretty face and bright, shy indescribable eyes. "Hi Cas!" she said, grinning widely at him, looking entirely delighted to see him. "I was across the street shopping and I saw you!" She sounded very upbeat, more than usual. Not completely herself.

"Alex," he said, standing up quickly. Several wrappers that had been on him fluttered to the floor like leaves off a tree. He’d noticed immediately what she was wearing, because it was different than anything he’d ever seen her in before. She was wearing her cargo jacket over a dress—floral print with a high waist and just-above-the-knee length… Cas was staring at where her legs ended and the dress began. He was suddenly intensely worried and couldn't look at her, but he also needed to look at her, take in every detail, consume the sight of her if that's all he could have—the desire to do so was overwhelming, but he clenched his fists at his sides, stared at a linoleum tile on the ground, fighting hard against his rambling longings. "I need more burgers," he mumbled, sliding back into the booth and grabbing the last one on the tray.

She seemed to notice the wrappers for the first time. "Did you... eat all these?" she asked, looking at the wrappers scattered around his booth with a strange expression. She slid into the booth across from him and he almost smashed the burger completely in his hands. He glanced at her—accidentally—and couldn't tear his eyes away. "Since when did you eat, Cas? And so... damn... much?" she sounded like herself again and was still looking at the wrappers, maybe trying to count them. He noticed the freckles he loved scattered across her face, the wild hair, the way her eyes darted across the wrappers. He was entranced. He was sure that he could look at her for all eternity times a thousand. She looked up at him, waiting for an answer. He returned the gaze, intensely desiring to be closer to her and forgetting her question completely. She seemed to be drawn into his unblinking gaze, then she visibly made herself look away, turning her head down and to the side, fast. "Something weird is happening," she said, sounding a little scared, looking disconcerted. "When I look at you, I get... I get stuck."

Similarly, Cas had looked away, his heart racing. She was right. What was happening to him—and why couldn't he control himself? It seemed to be easier when they didn't look each other in the eye—but why? It didn't matter. "We... we just shouldn't look at each other," Cas said, uneasy. He stared at the burger in his hands. In fact maybe he should leave right now, because he just wanted to toss the table aside and—

"Yeah, yeah, I think you're right," she said, but sounded disturbed. She got quiet for a minute. When she spoke again, she sounded worried. "How long do we have to… not look at each other? Is this permanent?"

Cas set his burger down, hands both resting loosely on the tabletop. He stared at the tray. "I don't know."

There were a few seconds of tense silence.

And then she slid her right hand across the table, towards his left hand. She stopped just short of touching him, and he risked a glance up at her—she looked deep in concentration, looking at their hands about to touch, like she was trying to hold herself back. He was responding in kind to the gesture before he could even have a second thought—he slid his hand out further, grasped hers gently. Her eyes flicked up to his, scared, unsure. "Cas..." she said, a question, a plea, a statement all at once. He couldn't look away from those eyes—his grip tightened on her hand—she drew him like magnet to magnet, and he was helpless, never wanting to be parted from her side, wanting to lessen the space between them, wanting to—
He flinched, shaking himself out of the trance, pulling his hand back, breathing hard in surprise. Alex looked similarly shaken up and put her elbow on the table, her head down and a hand over her eyes, so all she could see was the tabletop below her. She let out a frustrated sigh and cleared her throat. "So the burgers, Cas? Why."

Cas looked down at the sea of silver wrappers on the table. "Yes, it's strange. I—it's the vessel. It seems to be starving." He paused. "Jimmy—he—likes these. Liked these."

"Jimmy?" she asked. She sounded surprised. And possibly a little sad.

He felt the way she sounded as he thought of the man whose body he'd taken. "Since Raphael… killed me… and I was brought back. I've heard nothing from Jimmy. I thought—I thought maybe he was gone."

"But I thought you said…" she paused, and it took all of Cas's willpower not to look at her, to see what beautiful expression might be on her face, what subtle movements her eyebrows and mouth might be making. "I thought you said that everything he was still remained, just was like, overshadowed by you?"

"Yes, I remember telling you that," Cas said, distracted by his thoughts of her and of Jimmy and of what he thought of it all. He picked at a foil wrapper, trying to unwrinkle some of the wrinkles in the metallic material. "I'm not sure. I used to hear him sometimes." He let out a deep breath, reflecting. "I don't anymore."

She was quiet a long moment. "You sound sad."

Cas looked up at her at that point, unsure how those words from her mouth could affect him so deeply, make him feel—there was a very loud gurgling sound nearby and they both looked over at the soda fountain—where a slightly overweight woman was drinking soda straight out of the fountain, clawing at the nozzle with her hands wildly. She looked like she was drowning herself in it almost, it was puddling around her feet and she was choking on it as she shoved her face further into the stream of fizzy liquid. Alex jumped up and darted over, pulling the woman away by the shoulders, saying "Hey! Hey! Stop!"

The woman struggled for the soda fountain, trying to get back to it, yanking her arms forward and saying, "No! I need it, I need it!"

She broke Alex's grip and rushed back to what she'd been doing. Cas was right behind Alex—he'd followed her immediately, protectively, but he didn't know what to do—Alex apparently did though because she grabbed the woman again, hard, whirled her around with a grunt and punched her in the face, hard—the woman went cross-eyed and fell over sideways, unconscious. Alex winced, shaking her fist out. "Son of a bitch," she muttered.

Concerned, Cas turned her toward him even as he stepped around to face her and took her wounded hand in both of his. "Why did you do that?" he asked, looking at her hand, then at the woman on the floor, who was laying face-up in a puddle of soda.

Alex shrugged, kind of distracted and disturbed. "Saved her life, didn't it? Seemed like a good idea at the time..."

In his hands, her hand suddenly curled its fingers around the outer edge of his palm. They looked into each other's eyes at the exact same moment and Cas wanted so badly to kiss her, to shove her into the nearest wall and break her, have her, possess every part of her—
Alex yanked her hand back, regaining clarity, and when she did that, his returned momentarily, too, and he took a step back, horrified at these thoughts of breaking her, fearing that he was losing his mind. Alex looked around the restaurant, upset. "Cas, look around—something is happening to the people in this town—to us."

She looked down at her shoes, avoiding looking at him. "I saw some people in the dress shop trying to kill each other over the bargain rack and there was this one guy I saw who was jamming like handfuls of cigarettes into his mouth on the side of the street. Now this—"

She was cut off by the sound of loud shouting to their left. The cashier was screaming into her phone behind the counter, crying, bawling really. "Why, Jared?! You promised me! You don't love me! You promised you'd love me forever! Am I really that worthless?!" The girl began banging her head into the corner of the wall repeatedly, violently, hard enough that blood began to come out of her forehead where a wound rapidly was being made—and then Cas was suddenly standing behind the girl—he'd moved through space and wind swept through the restaurant—he touched her shoulder and she went slack, fainting. He looked questioningly at Alex, who had gone still, in shock at it all.

"Good, Cas, good," she said tensely, and looked around the restaurant with growing anxiety. "What is going on in this town?"

"We should leave," Cas said, suddenly right beside her again. She jumped slightly. "This place seems unsafe."

"Holy crap!" Alex exclaimed, laying eyes on a couple two booths away—they'd thrown their food onto the floor and were climbing all over each other and were literally ripping off each other's clothes. She stared a second longer than took quick action. "We gotta go," Alex said—Cas had her by the sleeve of the jacket and was already half-pulling, half-guiding her out of the restaurant. Out on the street, it was chilly and overcast. "Cas, what is happening?" Alex asked. Cas had his hand on her back lightly, protectively as they walked. He was looking around constantly, searching for any sign of danger.

"Could a witch be behind all this?" Alex asked, glancing up at him.

She slowed down, and he did too. "No, this is too much for a witch—perhaps it's—" he trailed off, looking at her. They had stopped walking and they were beside a long, blank brick wall. He looked at her up and down, forgetting what he'd been saying or doing. "You should wear dresses more often," he said, and leaned toward her, his hands grabbing her waist, and—

Her phone rang, and startled, they stopped. Cas looked at what he was doing and pulled away, flustered. He hadn't even thought, he'd just acted. He wasn't sure if he should stay with her or leave, because he didn't seem to have control anymore.

Unnerved, Alex pulled the phone out of her jacket pocket and answered, walking a couple steps off. Her cheeks were red. "Sam, hey." She paused. "What? A demon? Why?" Cas watched her closely, not letting her get even two steps away. He needed to be near her. "Yeah, okay." She ended the call and put her phone back into her pocket. "Sam said he ran into some demon guy with a briefcase and he thinks it has something to do with what's happening here in town."

Cas reached for her to transport them. "We should go there immediately."

"Don't touch me!" she exclaimed, shying away from his hand, not looking at him. "It's... just, uh, I can't, just, um, just don't." She sounded shaky. "Let's just walk. I wanna walk, okay?"
She turned around and began walking again. And that's when Cas saw the two demons in male vessels round a corner up ahead—he saw their true, abominable faces. His stomach seemed to rocket upwards in alarm, and he was, without hesitation, drawing his angel blade and shooting forward, putting himself between Alex and the demons, shouting at her "stay back!" even as he viciously stabbed the first one in the chest. The demon let loose a blood curdling scream as his skeleton flickered and he died.

The other demon had turned and was running away—indicating they had not expected this fight, so what were they doing here—Cas didn't have time to consider this, he was yanking his blade back out of the first demon's chest and he flipped the blade smoothly in his hand so that he gripped the sharp end—he drew back and sent it torpedoing through the air where it plunged into the second demon, who screamed and fell forward, dead.

Instantly, Cas looked back at Alex, who was coming to him, grabbing his arm. "Are you all right?" she asked, concerned. He looked at her, vaguely out of breath—he tore his gaze away before the dangerous thoughts could begin.

"Demons," he said, and looked around, wary, vigilant.

"Why—?" Alex asked, her features wrinkling up in confusion.

"I don't know," he said. His voice deepened. "But we're not walking any more."

He grabbed her, and they disappeared off the street.

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**About an Hour Later**

"This town is not suffering from some love-gone-wrong effect," he'd explained about an hour ago. "It's suffering from hunger. Starvation, to be exact—specifically... famine."

Cas's words rang in her mind, inspired the following mantra: *It's not you, it's Famine. It's not you, it's Famine. The freaking horsemen of the Apocalypse Famine.* In the backseat of the Impala, Alex was stone-faced, clenching her hands into fists repeatedly in an attempt to do something, anything, to distract herself. It was getting worse with every passing moment, she felt crazy.

Yesterday had been bad enough, this afternoon (the impulse shopping? Twirling in front of the mirror and wondering what Cas would think of her dress?!) had been worse, now this. She could barely think.

After getting attacked by the two demons, Cas had spirited them back to the motel room where Sam had just gotten back to with a mysterious briefcase. Dean had been waiting there for them, and they opened the briefcase—which had contained a human soul. Cas had then seemed to have an 'ah-ha' moment, saying that the town was under Famine's curse, that Famine wanted the souls of these people and was killing them using gluttony, desire, starvation. *It's not you, it's Famine.*

In the backseat of the Impala, Alex was growing beyond restless. It had been bad enough when Cas had whisked her back to the motel. Like a caged animal, she'd paced the back of the motel room, barely able to hear what Sam, Dean, and Cas were discussing. Her thoughts were screaming at her, begging her to just let her look at Cas, just look at him, but when she did, she lost any semblance of brainpower in favor of increasingly frenzied, sexual thoughts. She'd catch herself and for a minute she'd be horrified at how out-of-control she felt, how possessed by the crazy hunger for the angel in the trench coat.
She felt like she wasn't sure what was going on anymore, she was so, so, so preoccupied with Castiel and every passing minute she was less and less capable of hanging onto her sanity. She was barely able to concentrate let alone form a coherent thought.

The Impala was pulling to a stop in front of a Biggerson's restaurant. "Demons," Dean said up front, looking at the men in suits out in front of the building. "Just like we thought." He paused, irritated. "Cas, you gonna stop stuffing your face with burgers for a minute? You remember the plan?"

Cas stopped, turned to Dean. He'd been eating burgers constantly the past hour, more and more frustratedly... if it were possible to eat a food out of frustration. Alex tried to remember the plan, tried to think it through, anything but thoughts of him. The plan was to... Castiel—no, to, cut off Famine's ring and break this spell and—God the curls behind his ears—shit—no, the plan—she tried, she really did, not to stare at Cas's profile from where she sat. He was staring into space, jaw clenched tightly, a burger hovering in front of his face, but his mouth was closed. God, his mouth—her hands were literally trembling now, she had to fight with herself to keep them still. Her thoughts went from coherent to complete mush, yammering in her mind and howling at her to touch him, just touch him, you need him so much and just—touch him, Alex, take him!

Panicking, not remembering about the demons or the plan or anything, she shoved the door of the backseat open, tripped over her own feet, breathing heavily, not even noticing where she was going, just had—to—get—a—way—now or she was seriously going to rip the car apart to get to Cas.

She was aware that she was in a dark parking lot and stumbling in no general direction—then she saw that a man in a suit was bearing down on her, his eyes black as night. She reached back to where her knife always rested in the belt loop of her jeans and—oh shit, she was wearing a dress, where was her knife?! Before she had a chance to react any further, the demon went flying backwards into the side of the building, sending brick and rubble flying. Confused, Alex whirled and saw Cas striding toward her, his hand outstretched—had he just done that to the demon?

Cas didn't stop when he reached her, he grabbed Alex roughly by both arms of her jacket, and took them away from there—she felt the slight head rush of moving through space. They were no longer in the parking lot, they were instead somewhere dim and cold. Shivering, for a moment clear-headed, Alex looked around. "Where are we?"

It looked like a walk-in freezer—about five feet by five—and Cas, similarly confused, still holding her by the arms of her jacket, looked around, horrified almost. "Wrong place—the restaurant—I meant to take us away from here—it's... Famine... he's close, I can't seem to focus—I—" He started with surprise as Alex grabbed him by his lapels, trying to pull him to her. "What are you doing?" he asked, panicked, putting a hand against either of her shoulders, holding her back from himself.

"I'm losing my mind," she said, similarly panicked, sounding less and less sure. "I need—" she said, her voice cracking as she visibly strained, trying to stop herself from saying it, but she couldn't, she was breathing hard like she'd been running for an hour, "you," she managed, the word full of emotion... and as soon as she'd said it, her expression grew dark, full of desirous abandon. "Now," she said, voice lower and demanding. Cas felt his entire body flush over as if in a pleasant fever at those words, the way she said them, the look in her eyes—and he was suddenly fighting harder than he ever had before.

The past hour had been difficult enough, but he'd been able to muddle through with the food as a distraction, but now there was nothing to distract him from her, nothing to stand in the way and she was trying to pull him to her—no, no.
He couldn't let this happen, not here, not now, not under the spell of Famine, she was vulnerable and he couldn't protect her from the things he wanted to do to her—not much longer—he was literally shaking from the effort as he held himself back from her, kept her at arms length. He was breathing hard now, terrified. "I have to take us out of here—" he said, but he wasn't moving and he wasn't taking them away, he was just realizing it was already much too late. She stared at him, breathless, struggling to get to him, making it so very impossible for him to resist... her eyes, her mouth, everything about her sealed his fate completely. She looked so perfect and she was so close and he needed to touch her, kiss her, be with her—it was over, he realized dimly, his own thoughts fading away into the chaos of furious desire. He couldn't fight it.

"I'm sorry," he only just managed to say, the last clear-headed thought he could muster as he gave in to the powerful torrent of desire. The hands that had been holding her back now pulled her to crash against him as he claimed her waiting mouth with his—she made some kind of relieved, wanton sound, her arms already wrapping around his neck and she grabbed a fistful of his hair, hard, pressing her body against his desperately, making soft little sounds that set him over the edge, turned him into a desperate man. He pushed her against the cold metal shelf behind her, so fast and hard that some bottles fell down and shattered around their feet. In response, she pressed her hands into his chest and shoved him backwards aggressively—he slammed into the opposite shelf, knocking several boxes off and he stared at her in complete awe for the couple seconds that she broke the kiss. She gripped his coat tight in both of her hands, yanked him to her, kissing him savagely, a strangled moan escaping from her mouth and into his. Another surge of heat flushed Cas, driving him to the point of insanity.

In a trance, out of control, Cas crushed her against him possessively, his strong arms wrapped around her, one of his hands finding its way up between the jacket and the dress, to the warm, bare skin of her back and suddenly, he wanted more and needed the jacket gone—he fumbled, pulling at it as they stumbled back to the other shelf, mouths refusing to part—he vaguely felt her pushing at his jacket and coat, making a groan like she was frustrated.

Her jacket came off finally and he threw it aside haphazardly, one hand now on her bare back and he made a frustrated sound. His other hand cupped the top of her shoulder, then grazed down the front of her, trailing down over her and then grasping her hip, thumb digging hard in against the bone there as he pulled her to himself. Alex gasped—literally gasped—but it was a sound wrought with some kind of primal pleasure he'd never heard her make and Cas felt something in him break and he groaned throatily, barely able to contain himself—he needed more, this wasn't enough, and he grabbed frantically at the side of her thigh through her dress. He was desperate for something, but he wasn't sure what.

She was still pushing at his coat and jacket and he let her go for a second, yanked them off clumsily for her, straining himself—he didn't want to stop kissing her for even a second as he practically ripped off the pieces of clothing—the second they were off of him, she caught his tie in her hand and pulled him back to her, making a frantic, relieved sound—she seized the front of his shirt in both hands and ripped it open brutally, the buttons breaking off and skittering around on the metal floor, leaving his chest and torso bare. She pressed her palm flat against his chest then trailed it down, down, down, ghosting her fingertips along his rapidly rising and falling ribcage, then his hipbone, then the place where his belted slacks started. He quivered, breaking the kiss, his eyes squeezed shut, mouth hung open right above hers, and then he let loose a higher-pitched, helpless sound as her hand trailed further down, brushed him over his pants, making waves of pleasure and need surge over him. He seemed to snap, grabbing her by the back of the neck, kissing her harder, bruisingly, his other hand crushing her to him at the small of her back.

Frenzied, he whirled her around, slammed her into the front door of the freezer, a solid metal wall and she gasped again—Cas grabbed her roughly underneath each leg, right behind each knee,
lifting her up—she was hungrily searching for his mouth again, grabbing each side of his face in both hands as she wrapped her legs around him and he lifted her up—his hands stayed there for a minute, in the hollows behind her knees… and then they slid up torturously, skimming the bare backs of her legs and then running over the curve of her hips and upwards to grasp either side of her waist.

Cas was dimly aware, somewhere far away, that these things were coming to him at an alarmingly natural and terrifyingly fast pace—including what he did next, without even thinking. He rocked his hips into hers—and the pressure and friction between their bodies rendered him useless, took him soaring high and feeling like he could just let go, reach the limit of the sky itself and tumble down, fall forever—the second he ground his hips toward hers, a choked, primal sound escaped Alex, they broke the kiss and she grabbed a fistful of his shirt, hanging on to him for dear life, her expression dazed, her eyes heavy-lidded, her breath coming in shallow little gasps—and Cas was mesmerized by her like this. He had no choice but to grind into her again, pulling at her furiously, needing her closer, needing more of this pressure and sensation, more of her. Writhing against him, her body and the sensation of it against him caused him to let out a low sound in the deepest part of his throat, almost like he was in pain, but he wasn't—not at all and he felt frustration overtaking him—it wasn't enough—

That thought stirred him out of the mania and he realized, stronger this time, that this was really happening, he couldn't control himself; he wasn't sure what would happen if he didn't stop this—with every ounce of willpower he possessed, he pulled back, just for a second, trying to escape, trying to save them. "I can't—I can't hold back—much longer—" Cas managed desperately, strained, not even sure how to put it into words. He wanted to crush her underneath himself, demolish her completely, possess her in every way, destroy her. "I'll hurt you—" Cas said, despairing, because he couldn't pull away anymore, he was barely holding himself back as it was. In his arms Alex suddenly looked different, like she'd come out of a trance or woken up. "What—" she said, looking at him, confused, a little disconcerted—but her confusion faded, she didn't say anything else, she saw him and touched the side of his face slowly, gentle, her thumb brushing against the side of his lower lip. Her eyes searched his, searching for something… something that she seemed to see, and holding his gaze fervently until their lips met, she leaned in, kissed him simply. His stomach seemed to flip inside out at the gentle touch and for the briefest moment, Cas knew that was Alex kissing him like that, not Alex under Famine's influence. It was her, and it was him, and his whole body reacted, responded—he touched the side of her face too, with the utmost care, lost in her presence and touch. And then he felt the pervasive thoughts taking over again, his hands tightened on her, and he was trying so hard to pull away from her, save her from what his thoughts wanted to do to her. But Alex whimpered, feeling him attempt to pull away. "Don't stop Cas—" she made a pathetic sound, "Uhh, please," she begged, grabbing a fistful of his shirt, refusing to let him go. He was stronger than her, physically. But in that moment, she was his weakness, and he was no stronger than her. His willpower was forgotten at her touch, her plea. He couldn't help himself. He let go, gave in, forgot his worries and fears, his desire intensifying a hundredfold, he had to have her, now. His hold on her had weakened for a few seconds, but with renewed vigor, he slammed himself into her, instinct took over, blinding him. He wasn't sure how but they crashed through the solid metal refrigerator door, completely breaking the door off its hinges—but neither was paying attention, busy barreling into the kitchen where, out of control, Cas crashed them into a countertop, kissing Alex wildly, noisily.

Pots and pans clattered to the ground loudly even as Cas turned and threw Alex up into one of the empty corners, denting the plaster wall a little bit in the process, but neither seemed to notice, Cas was grabbing her animalistically, one hand on her ass and another up against her back, fingers dug hard into her skin and she had her head back, noisily almost sobbing when he pressed himself
against her again. She had her legs wrapped around him tightly, was fumbling with his shirt, no
maybe his pants, breathing loud in his ear, then pulling back, finding his mouth again, biting down
hard on his lower lip, enough to draw blood. Agonized with unsatisfied desire, Cas growled against
her lips, a sound that started out low, then changed into a higher pitched gasping sound as they
moved against each other raggedly. Cas pushed at her dress, and Alex felt two of his fingers curl
around the band of her underwear and brush against the skin beneath it—she whimpered, distressed
at the fire of his touch—that combined with the feeling of him against her there, right there even
through their clothes was almost too much for her. A tortured sobbing sound escaped Alex’s mouth
and she grabbed onto his shoulders with both hands suddenly, hard, losing her mind—

There was a loud clattering noise somewhere behind them. Startled, Cas and Alex froze as a
familiar and shocked voice uttered, "holy SHIT."
It's Complicated

"I love you as certain dark things are to be loved... in secret, between the shadow and the soul."
- Neruda

Brothers weren't supposed to see their sisters in this kind of situation.

He'd rushed through the door into the restaurant kitchen, hearing a lot of loud noises like there was some kind of fight or struggle happening—but the second he'd entered the kitchen he'd realized he'd had it so wrong. In the space of a second, he took it all in: Cas pinning Alex up against the wall—her bare legs tightly wrapped around him, her dress shoved up to the top of her legs—one of Cas's hands was there at the base of her hip bone inside the dress—his trench coat and jacket were both missing, his white dress shirt was bunched down around his shoulders halfway off—they were kissing each other with wild and passionate abandon, and the way they were moving against each other, the sounds they were making, especially his sister… were sounds that had him thinking that mother of god he'd walked in on them having sex. Stopping blindly and abruptly mid-step, he'd clumsily knocked into the counter, sending a pot clattering to the floor.

"Holy SHIT," Sam uttered in something like horror, frozen and staring, unable to look away. Alex and Cas stopped making out and froze, looking over at him in dazed surprise... then in slight confusion, as if they were coming out of a haze.

Sam stared, aghast: Cas had a bloody lip, there was a huge gash on Alex's arm and some smaller scrapes and cuts and crazy red marks like where she'd been grabbed repeatedly, their hair was disheveled, their clothes were a mess—they looked like they'd been in a fight. As their eyes cleared they seemed to see him and take in their surroundings, then they looked from Sam to each other, surprised, breathing hard, horror flashing across their faces as if they hadn't completely known what they were doing. They untangled, Cas pulled away, stumbling back even as Alex Shakily leaned back into the corner—and there was a flash of semi-relief when Sam realized they hadn't been having sex—Cas's pants weren't open or down—but oh god Cas had clearly been ready… Sam looked away, traumatized. Clearly embarrassed, Cas stood off a few steps from Alex—the angel was looking at her hesitantly and in shock, and then down at himself, seeming to be clueless and surprised at himself. Alex was avoiding looking at either of Cas or Sam… and she was really, really out of breath with an expression of utter mortification.

"What—what's—" Sam stuttered out, at a loss. Was this Famine? Had Famine done this? Because… wait. Sam looked between them in disbelief. "I… I broke Famine's spell like five minutes ago, guys."

At that, Alex looked up at him, temporarily seeming to forget her embarrassment in favor of severe confusion. "Five minutes ago?" She seemed to think that was impossible. "I was in the Impala five minutes ago," she protested. "You weren't even here five minutes ago."

Sam looked back at his sister, not sure what she was talking about. He'd been at Biggerson's for like ten minutes, saved Dean from Famine and his henchmen demons… broken the spell, then been told by a frantic Dean that Cas and Alex were missing and you check in here, I'll look outside... and literally ten seconds after Dean went outside, Sam heard the sound of pots and pans falling and what he'd thought was the sound of Alex crying out in pain… and then he'd walked in on them.

From where Cas stood a few steps off, he spoke up slowly, looking at the ground. "I think that I…"
accidentally… moved us forward in time by a few minutes." He paused, embarrassed. "I was very…" he swallowed, looking down uncertainly, "uh, distracted."

"Jesus Christ," Sam muttered, even more mortified than before, bringing his hand up to cover the lower half of his face. He didn't need Cas to explain any further—he definitely got the implication. This was way, way too much for Sam to process—and when he glanced at Alex, he saw her cheeks were bright red and she looked absolutely beside herself with awkward, burning embarrassment. Sam gathered himself with a deep breath, putting his hands on his hips and trying to breathe normally.

His sister straightened up as if to walk forward but faltered, made a sound of surprise and pain. Her arm shot out to catch herself against the wall and she leaned heavily against it, wincing, teeth gritted together. Sam and Cas moved toward her at the same time in concern, but Alex took one look at Sam approaching and she shrank away in what was clearly fear. Stopping short, Sam wondered why—then his heart clenched as he realized and remembered. He wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand, and away came the bright red demon blood. Ashamed, understanding, Sam held his hands up in a gesture of yielding. "I'm not gonna do anyth—I'm fine," he assured her. Last time he'd been high on this stuff, he'd hurt her.

Alex had allowed Cas near to her and the angel was now holding her up gingerly—she wouldn't look at him though—Cas was looking at Sam in dark suspicion. "No, you're not fine," Cas said darkly. "You've had demon blood." The way the angel stood with Alex holding her close was fiercely protective; almost possessive and Sam was stilled by the sight of it—then there was a twinge of anger and protectiveness on his end.

"I said I'm fine," Sam repeated, a little hostile when he spoke this time. He made for his sister again, because she looked like she was in agony and she wouldn't look at Cas at all and what if, what if Cas had done that to her and she hadn't wanted it? Angel or not, Sam would kill him where he stood if the guy had in any way harmed his sister—he felt up to the task, too, demon blood humming through his veins and making him feel sharper than normal, stronger than normal, buzzing with power.

"Stay back, Sam," Cas said threateningly, his voice carrying great command. Sam did stop but not because of Cas. From behind Cas's shoulder, Alex was looking at Sam with big, scared eyes. Eyes that remembered what he'd done to her the last time he'd been high on this stuff. Sam felt a wave of shame overcome him and then sadness that she didn't want him near her. His bravado faded a little and he grew pensive. He had tried to resist it; the desire to drink demon blood. But he hadn't been able to, not at all. It had been over before it had begun. Maybe that's what had happened here, between these two, Sam reflected uncertainly. They'd been unable to resist, thanks to Famine.

Alex made another sound of pain, and it was easy to tell she was restraining herself—that she was hurting a lot more than she was letting on. "What's wrong with her, Cas?" Sam asked, overcome with worry, his focus shifting.

"It was me," Cas said, sounding disgusted and sickened and terrified. "I did this."

Alex looked away, groaned and shut her eyes tightly, hissing in pain. Sam felt sick but had no choice but to remain standing there, removed from the situation. Cas turned back to Alex, horrified concern returning to his face again. He was cautiously holding her by her arms, giving the impression that he had no idea what to do but felt entirely responsible. "I'm… I'm so sorry Alex," Cas stumbled verbally, sounding frightened and shellshocked—something Sam had never heard in the angel's voice before. Cas withdrew his left hand from where it grasped her arm, looking at her bright red blood that came away on his fingers. The sight of that seemed to make Castiel sink
deeper into despair. He looked at Alex again, shaking his head blankly, at a complete loss. His voice almost broke as he sought her gaze and she purposefully avoided meeting it. "I didn't… I didn't mean to do this to you," he managed in an unsteady voice.

In Cas's hesitant, careful grip, Alex swallowed, overwhelmed by the pain and by Cas's pleading, gentle statement. She couldn't really focus at the moment. The pain was bad—really bad. She'd felt it distantly when the kiss had ended, when they had untangled from each other, but it had suddenly hit her full force—pangs and aches in her back, her arms, her legs—from where Cas had slammed her around and grabbed her hard, thrown her against things without restraint. Her shoulder actually hurt the worst maybe, and she breathed out unevenly, realizing it was dislocated. She glanced at Cas, so embarrassed. The pain had felt like pleasure under the spell, but now it was just pain—crippling, almost unbearable. On the side of her arm she was aware of a searing sensation—she moved her arm out a little, looked down at it—there was a huge, bloody gash there—had that happened when they'd crashed through the freezer door? There were a couple other places on her arms that felt scraped or cut, and she could tell that she'd have bruises all over come morning.

She winced, gritted her teeth together, groaning in pain. She could feel how concerned and ashamed and unsure Cas was, which only made it worse for her… because a minute ago the way he'd been moving against her had rendered her into putty, had her literally seconds away from… from… she swallowed and shut her eyes, realizing how close she'd been to an orgasm. Jesus Christ. She hadn't been able to control herself at all and just remembering the way their panting breaths and guttural moans had sounded… Alex wished she could disappear right now. As if the pain everywhere wasn't bad enough, her ears felt like they were burning off, and her stomach wanted to be sick out of humiliation. In the heat of the moment it had felt so right and she hadn't wanted anything more than she wanted him—and now she couldn't look at him at all; too afraid that she would see judgement or condescension or worst of all, disgust. Had Cas really wanted her? Or was it just Famine's spell? Cas had suddenly seemed really fond of burgers, too, and he'd never given those a second look before...

The sound of a door slamming somewhere nearby, probably the main entrance, startled them all. "Sammy! Sam!" Dean's muffled voice thundered from another room.

Alex's pulse rocketed in alarm and beside her, even Cas seemed to realize this was bad. Reacting at the same time as them, Sam's expression chilled over then just as quickly became urgent. "Cas. Clothes—now," he said and turned, going quickly out of the doorway and into the main part of the restaurant to intercept Dean. Cas disappeared—literally—from Alex's side and she felt her stomach drop in shock—he just left? How the hell could he just—

She didn't get to finish the thought. Cas reappeared in front of her, looking normal again—everything back to normal, like he'd regenerated or something. His bloody lip was gone, his hair wasn't a wreck, the buttons on his shirt were back, his tie was there (crooked, of course), his jacket and coat were back in place. It looked like nothing had happened at all, it was like he'd erased what happened completely. He stood in front of her wordlessly, holding her jacket out to her with a hesitant gaze. She took the jacket blankly. Their eyes met. It was the gaze of two people who had no idea how to face what had just happened between them. He looked so concerned and lost. But all Alex wanted to know was… had that been him? Was that him who had wanted her like that? Because she knew during what had happened between them her mind had not been her own, not entirely—but at her deepest level, beyond the madness of Famine's spell… she had wanted him. Still did.

She looked away, unable to maintain eye contact. She couldn't tell from looking at him what was going on inside his mind anyway. She was so, so confused. To the point of agony.
She reflected in dazed apprehension that perhaps whatever had just happened with them—the highly intimate moment… the first time she'd ever been touched in that way at all… it had been caused by a spell. There was a very good chance that this would drive some kind of wedge between them and ruin whatever flimsy friendship they'd had before. She worried that the moment they'd been sucked into would mean she would lose more of Cas than she had, which wasn't even enough to begin with. The idea of this devastated her completely, causing her throat to seize up in the sudden threat of tears. The physical pain—the utter passion and wild abandon of the moment they had shared—the standstill now and the not knowing how this would affect them—she couldn't help it: her expression broke and crumpled into a hurt expression.

Cas felt ruined completely seeing her like that. *He had done this. He had caused this. He had hurt her physically.* In fact, if Sam hadn't intervened, Castiel felt certain that he would have killed her under Famine's spell. This chilled him to the core. The other couples had killed each other, but he was an angel, a hundred times more powerful and stronger than Alex and he *would* have killed her if they had continued—it was in fact a miracle that he hadn't hurt her worse. This knowledge caused him some of the deepest distress he'd ever known.

And even though part of him wanted to disappear from her, hide in shame—free her of the abominable sight of him—there was a stronger need in himself to help her somehow, and he was acting before he'd even thought it through. He touched the side of her shoulder, not sure why, and then briefly reflected that perhaps she would scorn his touch, after… after everything that had just happened. After what he had done to her. But at the touch of his hand Alex looked up at him, startled and gone still. She didn't reject him or pull away, she just looked at him openly, and Castiel thought of how she was so painfully beautiful to him, even like this. Her eyes looked like they might be shining with tears. Tears he'd put there. Castiel felt physical pain ripple in his vessel. And his hand, of its own accord, went from her shoulder to the side of her face, the touch somewhere between tenderness and despair. *How had he done this to her? How could he have lost control like that?* Briefly… just briefly… the things Anna had shown him in the future flashed before his mind's eye.

Then they heard a loud commotion—the sound of Dean coming in and Sam talking loudly—and Cas pulled back abruptly, rapidly distancing himself by a few feet and leaving Alex agonized. There was an ache of pain in him at the sight of her standing alone, an ache in a place that wasn't physical. This distance from her was too much, but he had no other choice.

Dean stormed in loudly, closely followed by a worried Sam. He just missed seeing Cas touching Alex. "*Jesus Christ, where were you two?*" he demanded irritably, then he looked around at the destroyed kitchen—the pots and pans everywhere, the freezer door ripped off its hinges. He then leveled Cas with a demanding, sharp gaze. "Where the hell did you poof off to? You were outside the restaurant and then you just Batman-ed away without a word?!" Dean sounded enraged.

"I… tried to take her someplace safe," Cas attempted shakily. He wasn't lying, but to Alex, he sounded guilty. Before he could slip up and make Dean suspicious, Alex found her voice, covering clumsily with the best story she could come up with.

"We, we ended up behind the restaurant… got attacked by more demons out there," Alex lied, scared out of her skin for Dean to look at her. Which he finally did.

He took in her messy appearance and the cuts and the big gash on her arm. She held her breath without realizing. And for just a moment she reflected that she shouldn't be this terrified of her own brother.

But when he saw the way she looked like she'd been beat up, Dean's rage had disappeared instantly
and was replaced with shock—he went to her, took her gently by the shoulders—she winced—he didn't even touch her that hard, but the skin was tender. It would be bruised badly later. Dean saw her wince and looked her over in genuine concern. "You're hurt," he said, and Alex looked at him kind of in surprise. Besides the talk they'd had after she got back from 1978, this was the first time he'd sounded genuinely caring toward her in weeks.

Dean touched the side of her head, scrutinizing her in worry, then he turned to Cas, expression darkening. "Jesus, Cas, did you just let them beat on her while you stood back?" he asked. Cas was silent, guilty, and looked down in response. Holy shit… this was just horrible, Alex thought, barely able to keep her composure. But she had no choice.

"Relax, Dean, I'll be fine," she said, trying to get Cas out of the line of fire, not sure he could stand up under it. Dean turned his attention back to her, shook his head in dissatisfaction, but let it go for the time being and heaved a deep sigh. He set his sights on Sam who was standing off and watching. Sam still had the demon blood on his face. Dean slowly went to the other side of the kitchen, closer to his brother. Distracted and tense, Dean picked up a cast iron skillet from the counter that Sam stood next to. Hefting it up Dean smiled down at it humorlessly, twirled it a little in his hand. Everyone else looked at the skillet, unsure why Dean was suddenly interested in cookware. Then in a sudden burst of movement, Dean used it like a baseball bat and full-force hit Sam in the back of the head with it. Sam's six-foot-four frame went rag doll and he crumpled down onto the floor, unconscious.

"Dean what the hell?!" Alex demanded in a shock-high voice. Beside her, a little closer now, Cas was looking at Dean in uncertainty and misunderstanding.

Dean slammed the pot down on the counter angrily, wrathful. "He's hopped up on demon blood, Al!" He pursed his lips and his expression was dark. "After last time... I don't feel like taking chances," he growled, staring down at Sam in a mixture of disgust, horror, and sadness. After last time. Alex looked from Dean to Sam, troubled, feeling like she was totally out of the loop. She wasn't entirely sure what had happened while she and Cas… uh… but could tell whatever it was had shaken her oldest brother up badly. Dean was stooping and grunting, yanking Sam's unconscious form up and then supporting him by slipping an arm around Sam's waist and yanking his brother's arm over his shoulder. Sam's massive head lolled forward limply.

"Cas, take us to Bobby's, now," Dean commanded intensely. "I need to get him on lockdown stat."

There was hesitation on Cas's part, a slight, fumbling glance in Alex's direction… and then they were gone from that place.

"Alright, ready?" Dean was bracing Alex's shoulder with his hands and she had this look of grudging dread on her face. She squeezed her eyes closed, nodded yes, bracing herself for the oncoming pain. "One... two... three!" Dean counted, and on three he forcibly slammed her shoulder back into place with a loud crunch. She made a horrible, pained yell and then let out a deep, tense breath, her cheeks puffing up as the pain radiated.

Cas stood a few steps back, watching her in distress, uselessly holding the box of medical supplies Dean had shoved at him a minute ago.

Brutal. Across the centuries, Castiel had come to associate this word with wars and violence... the Khmer Rouge killing fields, the first World War, the Massacre of the Innocents in the first century. The unrestrained violence, the mercilessness, the disregard for the preciousness of human life—the dark tangle of violence, anger, and betrayal that resulted in death and destruction—that was brutal. He'd understood the word at a certain level, associated it with physical acts and periods in history.
But Castiel reflected that this felt brutal to him: To helplessly stand by and see Dean fixing up Alex's wounds. Wounds that he had inflicted. In a frenzy of passion—a passion he hadn't known himself capable of—he'd lost control almost, he'd been moments away from ending her life without being able to stop himself. It hurt him inside and gave him so many dark, tormented thoughts. He had done this. It was unforgivable. She was avoiding his gaze, and had been, since... since the spell had been broken.

Once Sam, still unconscious, had been handcuffed and put into the panic room, Dean had immediately set to work looking over Alex's injuries more thoroughly. He'd decided she needed stitches on her arm.

"Hand me that, Cas," Dean commanded, giving the angel a side eye.

Cas complied, handing over the supplies indicated to Dean but with no great certainty. Alex sat on an old chair that had been there in the basement and Dean had pulled up a big storage box to sit on. He rummaged through a crate of supplies and got out an alcohol pad then took Alex's arm in his hand and swiped the disinfectant across the gash there. She breathed in sharply, let out a sound of repressed pain. "Stings bad," she mumbled, strained. Dean was getting out a needle and a spool of shiny black surgical thread. Cas watched with increasing discomfort. Many angels cared little about humans in physical pain as the soul was what counted and lasted—bodily harm was transitory. But for Castiel, the thought of Alex in pain, especially pain dealt by his hand... it was abhorrent to him.

"Shouldn't you take her to a medical professional?" he asked, trying to stifle the clear tones of anxiety in his voice.

He received a sharp glance from Dean in return. "Cas, after thirty years of patching my kid siblings up, I think I got a simple stitch up."

Alex glanced up at Cas and their eyes met for a brief, torturous second.

He tried not to remember her there against him, in his arms, so close and physically arousing. He felt a mixture of shame and confusion wash over him as he looked away from her. Shame because in his deepest thoughts he had liked what they were doing—he had wanted it—not with anyone else, but with her. And he didn't completely understand what that meant or why. In fact, he almost never understood the why behind his actions and it was becoming more and more frustrating. In the past he didn't need to understand his actions as he hadn't been responsible for them. He just did what was commanded. There had been a comfort there in not having to decide wrong from right. Yes, he had felt the increasing pull of doubt, the increasing desire to do what he thought in his own mind to be right... but now he was on the opposite end of the spectrum, wildly piloting himself through life and situations with nothing to steer him but his thoughts, convictions, and feelings... all of which were constantly clashing, circling each other, fighting each other for dominance, warring within him, leaving him uncertain of himself.

"Ready?" Dean asked his sister.

Cas's attention refocused into the scene before him... like it or not.

Alex grabbed the whiskey bottle Dean had brought her and took a very long pull of the dark liquid then set it back with a hiss, regarding Dean with what looked like dread and tenacity alike. "Do your worst," she said, a humorous comment said without any humor. Cas watched, unable to look away, worried.

Dean took in a deep breath and muttered something like "here goes nothing." Holding her with one
hand by the elbow, he carefully stuck the needle in at the bottom of the wound and made the first
stitch. Alex's whole body tensed perceptibly and she let out a pained little sound that she attempted
to stifle. Dean paused and looked at his sister in a disquieted way. "Sometime today, Dean, Jesus,"
she managed in between clenched teeth as she stared up at the ceiling, every muscle in her body
rigid and screaming.

"Yes ma'am," he muttered, refocusing and continuing his work, stitching the open wound back
together as quickly as he could. Each stitch seemed to pain Alex worse. She sat very still, eyes
screwed closed, lips pressed together hard and going inwards. She was breathing hard through her
nose and her face became more and more scrunched in pain—she squeezed her hands and clenched
her free one onto the chair, then hit her fist against her own leg a couple times in some kind of
effort to redirect her brain. Cas had to look away finally, turn and shut his eyes. But he could still
hear the tight, strained way she breathed and her fidgeting. Languishing in self-loathing, he again
cursed himself for doing this to her.

A minute later, it ended. "Done," Dean said, tying off the thread and cutting off the excess,
handing his sister a clean rag. Alex let out a deeply relieved breath and took the rag to hold it
against the wound to stop the bleeding.

"Thanks," she said soft and low, and her voice was still tight with discomfort. Dean gave her a wan
little smile and patted her on her other arm where there were no injuries and he started to put away
the supplies he'd been using.

They both started when they heard the sound of Sam banging against the side of the panic room
where they'd cuffed him. "Guys? Guys!"

Everyone went still and quiet and looked toward where the sound had come from.

"Hey! I'm in here, help me! Help me!" Sam sounded alarmed and in anguish. Dean set down the
box of medical stuff and stood up, went to the door of the panic room, slid open the slat just a little
to peer in. Sam saw it. His cuffs rattled loudly. "Dean! Dean! You gotta get me out of here!"

Dean looked like he was thinking about saying something, then heaved a heavy breath, shut the
viewport, his expression grave.

Watching silently, Cas and Alex remained where they were as Dean came back, grabbed the
whiskey bottle, and leaned against the wall across from Alex. He was stone-faced as he took a
swig.

"Lemme outta here, please! Help!" Sam's shouts intensified.

Dean closed his eyes even as Alex put an elbow on her knee and her face in a hand. To Castiel,
they were suddenly and irrevocably the picture of defeat. Sam continued to shout and as Cas
watched Alex and Dean become morose, glut, deflated… Castiel felt the same way himself,
touched with empathy. But he knew that Sam wasn't himself right now, that this was something
that was temporary, not permanent. He wondered if he should try to remind them of that, take a
chance and try to help again. So, he did. "That's not him in there," he said quietly. "Not really."

There was a pause where Alex peeked up at him solemnly and Dean let out a soft breath. "Yeah,"
Dean agreed heavily. Sam was groaning now, maybe weeping even. The sound was muffled a little
by the walls. Alex's face was tight with a pain that wasn't physical as she listened to the sounds.
Her gaze dropped to the floor. Dean was making a similar face to hers.

"Sam just has to get it out of his system," Castiel continued, attempting to comfort them somehow.
"Then he'll be—" fine? Cas glanced at Alex, who looked doubtful and worried. And Cas realized he didn't know if Sam would be fine. With the angels looming over their heads, the threat of Lucifer… the future he'd seen… Cas trailed off, silent.

And Dean, suddenly tenser than before, straightened himself, expression unreadable. "Listen, I just, uh… I just need to get some air."

Alex watched Dean go, her eyes flickered toward Castiel and then away, her hands clasped and pressed between her knees now, her expression tense and troubled. She looked conflicted, and the sight of the marks and the blood smeared along her arm made such intense guilt wash over Cas again. Sam's shouts echoed again, muffled and frenzied.

Cas looked at Alex slowly, barely able to bring himself to even look at her. The reality of what he'd done to her kept sinking in as he looked upon her. She was so small in the grand scheme, so young and vulnerable and he should have been able to stop himself from all of it. But especially from hurting her. He wondered if she had truly desired to wrap herself around him like that and kiss him with fire, passion, organic primal fury. In the moment it had felt real. It had felt like if he didn't move forward, crush her to himself, that he would die from desperation. In fact, he almost still felt that way. That if he couldn't hold her, protect her, touch her… he would die.

Disgusted with himself, Castiel looked away now. He had only been in a human vessel for two years but the troubles it came with, the burden of emotions and thoughts that seemed interwoven with feelings (feelings that were devoid of logic)… it all confounded him completely. He couldn't fathom how Alex could contain the noise in her mind if it were anything like his or how she shouldered the burden of it and survived year after year, giving the impression that she was handling it, coping. He felt somehow weaker than her in that respect. Yes, he had seen centuries come and go, kingdoms rise and fall. But this human in front of him had felt, had been betrayed, abused, forgotten, misused, overlooked, hurt, dragged through the metaphorical fire… all of this for her entire life thus far.

In moments like this, Castiel felt that perhaps he might fall apart. So he wondered, briefly, how she held herself together like she did… and how they would move past what had happened between them. His darkest fear was that the future he'd seen in 2014 would come true. That this was another step in that direction. Toward her dying at his hand. Nothing seemed more unthinkable. Still, the fleeting image of them together, content, living a normal life… it stayed with him and it warmed him even as it frightened him past the point of no return.

Silent and still, Alex looked up at him finally, her eyes veiled and afraid and hurt, a little guarded. In the background, Sam's screams continued.

"Are you... alright?" Cas finally asked her, filled with dread. The question made her look down and away, he noticed her breathing quickened and her mouth moved oddly. She stood up unevenly, trying to hide the way she was struggling.

"It's whatever," she replied in a dismissive mumble. He heard anger and sadness alike in that strange, foreign statement. It's whatever? Her words almost hurt him somehow.

She hugged herself, a hand on each opposite arm, facing halfway away from him where he could only see her profile. His eyes swept over to where her stitched up wound would be. She held the now-bloody rag there still. He coveted for his ability to heal. But somehow he felt that even if he could take away the physical pain, she would still be hurt, she would still be avoiding his gaze like that. He didn't know what to do. How could they have been so close a few moments ago and now… this? He could see that she was watching him out of the corner of her eye. They were only a few feet away from each other, but it could have been miles—that's how stark and alone Cas felt.
He felt confusing loss, because for a few snatched and hazy moments, he had felt the opposite of alone. There in her arms he'd been in her atmosphere and it had been a place where he felt so many new things, a new definition for the word 'close'—and it hadn't been just physical, this closeness. It had transcended that. It had set his heart beating faster, his convictions rooting deeper, his feelings soaring higher. It had felt right, even though he knew, logically, it had been wrong. ...Hadn't it?

"Alex! Dean! Someone help me!" Sam screamed, and Alex tensed, looking up, conflicted.

Cas glanced in the direction where she looked, then back at her. "He'll probably be like this for a few days," Cas told her gently, cautiously. He was unsure how she would react to him now.

Alex finally looked at him and didn't look away. But she was apprehensive and guarded. "Cas… what… what was happening?" her voice was barely above a whisper. "What were we doing?"

His stomach jerked at her blunt question and his gaze faltered away. He knew that she wasn't asking what they were doing, but what it had meant, because… he wanted to know, too, so intensely. He needed to know if she had wanted it, too, if below the current of the spell, that she had wanted that from him. He remembered that moment of clarity where he had fought back, broken away—and she had looked at him and seen him. Alex's question hung in the air. 'What were we doing?' He didn't have the answer, or maybe he did he just didn't know how to articulate it.

"We were…" he began, uncertain, not possessing any clear idea of how to answer. And then the fear deeper than any ocean on earth overtook him when he again thought of the future Anna had shown him—he felt that if he admitted to her his deepest desires and affections, he risked everything—he risked her. And his mind screamed at him in quick succession, you have to tell her! and then she can't know! In agony, Castiel realized he was trapped. He had no other choice but to hide more of himself and his true convictions from her in order to save her from the future; he no other choice but to continue the lie he had started. The lie he had invented by taking away her memory of him kissing her in the panic room.

He steeled himself for what he was about to tell her. "It was… Famine's effect on us—" he said. He wouldn't look at her as he lied. It was too appalling—he didn't know if he could see her when he said what he said next. "It was—the vessel."

Alex sounded like she'd had the wind knocked out of her. "...W-what?"

"It was the vessel," Castiel repeated, jaw clenching tightly.

There was a long silence. "I… I don't believe you," Alex finally replied, but she sounded very uncertain of herself.

Castiel forced himself to look at her, and her expression made him want to die, but he couldn't let it sway him. He continued in the abominable lie, believing this was what was best, what would save her. "Jimmy… he um—he liked brunettes."

Alex's expression became almost angry at that remark and she came closer to him, eyes narrowed like she was suspicious. "Amelia—his wife?—was blonde."

Cas fumbled, feeling caught. He'd forgotten that. Alex's anger had transitioned into some kind of desperate hurt. "You can't tell me—" she wavered, "that all of that was just—that all of that wasn't you." She was almost begging him now for the truth, letting herself be vulnerable. "None of it?"

Cas met her gaze. His conscience screamed at him that this was wrong. But he didn't know any other way to protect her. "I'm sorry," he replied stiffly, loathing himself. "It wasn't."
Alex stared at him, blinked, took a couple deep, fast breaths… then exploded. "That is such bullshit, Castiel!" she pretty much shouted, then her expression crumpled and she turned away, walked to the opposite wall and leaned there heavily, a palm against the wall. Her body seemed to have trouble breathing, her shoulders were trembling.

She'd bowed her head and let her palm become an angry fist against the wall. Castiel watched her in a mixture of sadness, shock, and hurt. He should leave. He should walk away. He should let her be angry at him and become bitter, because that would distance them. That would save her. But the sight of her alone and hurting was too much for him to bear and he regretted what he'd said. His misery increased tenfold—nothing he did and no choice he made seemed right. He went closer to her, stood just behind her, uncertain. And then put a hand gently, so gently, onto her back, onto her right shoulder blade.

Alex's head came up, but she stared straight ahead and she didn't make to look at him or turn around. She seemed to have gone cold. Her voice was calm, low, quiet. "Don't touch me." He didn't understand but he did as she said and took his hand away, feeling stung inwardly somehow. She turned her head slightly toward him, but wouldn't look at him, not even sidelong. "Just leave me alone, Castiel," she said evenly, voice low and measured, blank. She called him by his full name. She usually called him Cas.

Confused, Castiel didn't move yet. Usually her anger made her volatile—but she was quiet and placid, a still shining lake instead of a stormy ocean. This disturbed him more than anything else. She wasn't reacting like he'd thought she would. Castiel felt overcome with despair and frustration and regret. He couldn't heal her, he couldn't comfort her—he couldn't fix this even though he so desperately needed to do all three. He tried again, his hand hovering just above her back. He wanted to touch her so badly, reassure her in some small way, tell her that at least that he didn't despise her. "Alex…"

"I said leave!" she snapped, voice trembling, turning away from him pointedly.

Castiel took his hand away, his entire vessel feeling so disappointed and wounded. He stepped back and disappeared, giving her what she wanted and fading away into the melancholy of shame.

Sam's shouts had dissolved into pitiful moans and Alex shut her eyes tight, dug deep for composure. There was no way she could stay in here and listen to his cries for help and not do anything. She turned around in a robotic fashion and listen to his cries for help and not do anything. She turned around in a robotic fashion and made her way out of the basement, trying to escape everything: her feelings, her brother's distress, reality in general. She walked up the stairs slowly, unseeingly. Each step she took was heavier than the last. Her heart felt like it was a twisted mess of pain. It overshadowed any physical pain she felt. In fact, she wanted to feel more physical pain than what she was feeling right now so that it would overpower her emotional duress. She let the rag drop away from her arm wound, not caring anymore.

"Hey kiddo, you okay?" Bobby asked her. He was near the top of the stairs in his wheelchair. Alex had forgotten he would even be there but… she couldn't find anything in herself to respond to him at all, just shook her head a little and walked right past him. She felt like the second she opened her mouth, she'd lose it. She was in pain of the heart, body and mind and no one, nothing was more important than just getting the hell out of here right now. In a haze of painful limps, Alex went outside and into the darkness of night, struggling her way to the end of Bobby's road, trying to hold herself together, trying to shove the painful feelings down and away. For now, the stabbing sensations in her thighs were distracting from those feelings. Until she thought of why her legs hurt so bad where Cas had grabbed her with his super-human strength hands. *God.* Overhead, thunder rumbled.
She reached the end of Bobby's road. This is where the old rusted Singer Auto Salvage sign arced over the dirt road, and on either side of it there were junked cars. Alex leaned heavily against one of the old vehicles, both palms on the hood above the wheel well. She couldn't stop the thoughts from coming.

His words and what they meant to her echoed through her mind. 'I'm sorry. It wasn't,' he'd said. She'd heard: it wasn't me who wanted you that way. It wasn't me who practically ravished you in furious passion. It wasn't me who looked at you with eyes full of desire and need. It wasn't me who touched you like you've never been touched before. It wasn't me who almost pushed you over the brink. It wasn't me. It wasn't me, it was all this body I inhabit. How could you even think that it was me?

She shouldn't be surprised, is what she kept telling herself. He was a friggin' angel, a creature from a totally different realm… he'd existed for thousands of years—who was she? Some little blip on the radar. One single grain of sand on the beach. How could this being want to be with her like she wanted to be with him? She felt cursed, because only she would get loopy under the spell of an apocalyptic horseman and make out with her guardian angel and then, and then make the mistake of thinking he wanted it too. But dammit! How couldn't he have?!

She remembered the conviction and passion he'd kissed her with, the desire he'd clearly felt for her… she wanted to stomp her foot down and cry out in frustration because her instincts were screaming at her that it was not fantasy, she wasn't crazy and there had to be something to this!— because Castiel had told her, and recently too, that the vessel and Jimmy were dwarfed by who he was, that Jimmy was gone pretty much. So how the hell could that be true that the vessel wanted her, not him?

If it had been a person other than herself, would Cas still have acted? Still done all of that? Because she remembered that moment of clarity where the ragingly lustful feelings had ebbed away and he had pulled back, and she had seen him, seen such soulful things in his gaze… things in his eyes that were never there at any other time… and she had kissed him then, and he had returned the kiss without hesitation—God and out of all of it, everything that had happened in that restaurant kitchen, that shook her the deepest and hurt her the most. It had been real. It had been them. Why would Castiel lie to her about this? Why was this happening to her, at all? She was in love with an angel who couldn't, wouldn't, or didn't love her back. Maybe some combination of all three. But she so badly wanted him to. So badly.

Angry at herself for her feelings and sadness, Alex flew into a fit of rage, whirling around unevenly, fists clenched at her sides as she looked at the sky wrathfully, eyes glistening. "Castiel, you fucking coward!" She screamed. Her voice broke at this point. "Liar!"

She sat down on the hood of the old car miserably and put her face into both of her hands. What kind of hopeless lovesick child was she, anyway? It was the worst kind of pain to want someone who didn't, apparently, want you back. She had bigger things to worry about, the fucking planet was falling apart—but Castiel was something she couldn't stay away from in her mind. She thought of the first time he healed her, his gentle touch and the awe she'd felt for him. She thought of the second time he'd healed her, directly going against what Uriel had said, doing it with Uriel in the same friggin' room, doing it anyway and looking at her like he did. Maybe that was when it happened—her, falling in love with him, or starting to—she didn't know, she just knew that it had happened and now she didn't know how to fall out of love with him. At the current moment she wanted to be anyone else except Alex Winchester, anyone else but the person feeling these things —

The sound of feet shifting on gravel nearby snapped her out of her thoughts. She jumped up and
was shocked to see Cas standing in front of her, his expression miserable and a little reluctant. The very sight of him reduced her to nothing, and she thought that just a few minutes ago, she'd had him in a way she'd never had anyone else...

He was looking at her with heavy eyes. Her misery increased when she realized how badly she wanted to rush into his arms, to be held there in safety. This thought only further infuriated her with him—how could he be the one to devastate her internally and at the same time be the one she wanted comfort from? In an attempt to protect herself from further pain, she became outwardly hostile. "I thought I told you to screw off," she said angrily, crossing her arms and looking away sullenly.

He ignored that, stepped a little closer. "I've upset you," he said. He sounded soft, gentle, concerned which should have only increased her rage, but instead, it broke her down. Dammit she had been determined not to let him do this to her again, but she just couldn't hold it all inside… the anger, the sorrow, the rejected desperation. Her shoulders sagged, her crossed arms loosened. "No shit," she said, and even though she wanted to shout at him, she could barely manage to speak. "You—you kissed me like that, touched me like that and then said it wasn't you." She blinked against watery stinging eyes. Disgusted with herself, she raised a hand to angrily dash away a tear off her face.

He saw the tears and his expression wavered. "Alex, I—"

She shook her head, trying so hard to hold it together. "God, Cas! How do you think that makes me feel?" She asked accusingly. Did he really not know? His expression was mournful. How could this man have been so tangled up with her in pure passion, make her feel so amazing and part of something grand and beautiful… then say it wasn't even him? She told him how shitty it made her feel before she could stop herself. "It makes me feel stupid and worthless and cheap."

Castiel became almost angry when she said that, and came even closer, his trench coat brushing up against her knee. "You are none of those things," he said intently and held her gaze, looking at the young woman in front of him, who was suffering at his hand, yet again. He was so torn and so unhappy with himself. Perhaps this was his curse, that anyone who he cared for so deeply would only be hurt by him. And even though he knew the future was grim for them, for her, he couldn't keep on with the charade, with this choice. He just couldn't. It wasn't right, and he needed to tell her the truth. He grasped her gently there at the elbow and prepared to make his confession, even though the heart of his vessel hammered, his stomach turned, and he felt an unhinged sense of fear that telling her this would offset events he couldn't control, would make her hate him, would repulse her from him completely. But with Alex standing there in front of him looking heartbroken and in pain, he knew he had to do this. So he did.

Hesitating, Cas began. "I lied to you, Alex. It wasn't Jimmy who…" he stopped here, looked down, trying to summon the courage. There was no turning back. His voice softened. "It wasn't Jimmy who... desired you that way," he admitted guiltily. Alex went completely still. Castiel's eyes slid up to hers and his veins coursed with anxious tension. "It was me."

Her jaw slowly slackened and she looked like she couldn't believe what he'd said. He knew from her expression that she wanted to hear more. "I… wanted…" he cast around for a way to say it, then helplessly settled on, "you."

She continued to stare at him and began to shake her head in stuttering confusion, her voice dazed and not fully convinced. "Why did you lie?"

Cas withdrew from her slightly, ashamed and unsure how she could not be livid with him yet. "I
thought—I'm not entirely sure what I thought." It was an honest answer, because Cas was questioning his motivations and logic very closely now—they seemed unsound and also ineffective. "Perhaps that I was keeping you safe," he said and swallowed. This truly was the point of no return. He looked down. "From myself."

"Safe from you?" she asked, sounding like that was a foreign concept.

Castiel felt another pang of regret. He had explained this to her, the forbidden nature of romantic angel and human relationships, the danger therein. Only, she didn't remember it. He had taken that from her. "It's... hard to explain," he explained in a very tense voice.

Her expression grew a little less soft. "Try."

It was halfway between a plea and a command, and Castiel found himself suddenly faced with another choice: lie more to cover it up, leave and avoid the truth... or be honest and end the deception now. He didn't allow himself enough time to choose the coward's way out. "Anna showed me the future," he said. "Before we went back to nineteen seventy-eight. I saw the Croatoan virus, Lucifer using Sam, Dean... burnt and broken." Alex didn't look very disconcerted. Dean had told Cas about that and she was aware of those things... so those things weren't news to her. But what he said next, she hadn't known. "And... I saw us," Cas said, barely able to look at her. "What you and I became." There was a short silence of bated breath—Alex's eyebrows raised up. "I saw you die," he told her, and the pain at the memory of the image seeped into his voice and face. "In great detail. And it happened because of me."

Alex frowned, at a small loss. "But... but Dean... he changed it, didn't he? When he brought Sam back in, found the Colt. He says he changed that future."

Cas let out a heavy, troubled breath. "No. I don't think he has, Alex," he paused. "I have to change it. I can't let Lucifer take Sam or..." he trailed off, then looked at her sorrowfully, "any of it."

"Any of it?" She had a hurt and confused face. "I don't understand..." she looked at him in despair. Just like the last time he'd told her that they couldn't do this. Wrecked inside, Castiel realized what he had to do. He didn't want to. He was afraid of what she would think of him, but he had made up his mind and he looked at her sadly, reached for her.

"What are you doing?" she asked apprehensively, looking at his two fingers coming to the side of her forehead. She didn't move away or attempt to dodge his touch though.

Cas paused, looked at her directly in the eye. "I took something from you," he said gravely. "I'm giving it back."

"Wha—" Alex started, but his fingers touched her skin, and suddenly, she remembered it like she'd never forgotten at all.

_The night before Carthage. Reaching out, touching Cas's hand. Him looking at her openly, fully, longingly. Sam interrupting them. Alex freaking out and fleeing to the panic room._

_Cas coming after her, asking why she'd done that, why she'd touched his hand. She'd lied, said she didn't know—afraid of being rejected. But he'd pressed. He hadn't let it go. He had seemed desperate for an answer and he'd refused to leave her until she answered him. And the alcohol, the idea that her life might end the next day had given her some kind of bravery and she remembered asking him, fumblingly, if he had feelings for her._

_His answer? "The truth is... I think about you much more than I should."_
Hearing that had stunned her, had elated her, had scared her all at the same time. "Me too," she'd said, unable to believe the moment.

But then it had all faded away when he said "we can't." And she heard him explain that angels and humans weren't allowed to be together, that it was forbidden and volatile... she'd heard it but hadn't understood how it was fair or right because she wanted a chance, just a chance to be with him because how she felt wasn't going to go away.

And he'd turned to leave, but she hadn't let him, she'd seen a sliver of hope and had clung to it, but he'd become strained, then had tried to intimidate her, to frighten her away. He'd grabbed her close, trying to scare her. But there in his arms, feeling his heart hammering through his coat and against her chest, she'd been nothing except intrigued—she'd seen it—literally seen the shift in his eyes from determination to fear and then to desire and conflict. She could see him fighting himself, but he lost. He'd kissed her then. His first kiss, a kiss she hadn't fully known how to give, but quickly learned. His mouth had been so sweet and earnest at first before the kiss deepened into something more fervent and searching. And maybe it become too much for him, because he'd pulled back, shaken up.

She remembered that when he pulled away he had been panicked, been shocked, telling her he shouldn't have done that, that it had been a mistake. And she'd been crushed. Crushed. And then when he'd realized he hurt her—his expression had changed, for a long moment he'd just looked at her and then he seemed to decide something. He'd reached for her, she'd asked what he was doing. "Making this right," was the answer, and she'd known suddenly. That he was going to take this memory from her. "Cas, no!" she'd exclaimed.

"I have to," he'd said, agonized as she struggled against him, and he'd looked at her, sadly. "I am much stronger than you, Alex."

But Alex had struggled still. Please don't take this one beautiful thing from me, her heart had cried out, even as out loud she had begged him, "please, no, Cas, don't do this!"

He'd looked into her eyes, and she'd known he meant it when he said, "I'm sorry."

But he took it from her anyway.

The memory rushed into her mind in just a couple seconds and Alex blinked a few times, stunned, then looked at Cas, completely overcome at the revelation. He looked grim and resigned, ready to receive her wrath. But all she could do was drop her eyes away, stare blankly at the space in front of her unseeing, trying to figure out how she felt about this. He'd kissed her and the way he had done so had revealed more than words could ever say—that he felt for her like he felt for no one else, that he held things in his heart for her that were substantial and tender. No wonder he'd taken the memory away. He couldn't lie to cover it up, the unspoken things she now knew that he kept from her. Her eyes flicked up again to his. She knew now. She knew, and her heart swelled because this changed everything.

At her speechlessness, Cas was puzzled and apprehensive. "Aren't you... angry with me?" he asked, seeming somewhere between disbelief and almost disappointment.

"Well yeah but..." she replied automatically, then trailed off. Alex looked at him and saw a man—an angel—who felt like everything rested on him, and more than that, her entire life and well-being. And maybe that's what Heaven said a guardian angel had to shoulder, but in her opinion, Heaven was full of a bunch of jackasses and they needed to re-write the rule book. Especially when it caused Cas so much pain, so much confusion. But he wasn't even her guardian angel because of Heaven's orders anymore. No. He'd clearly chosen long ago to be her protector of his own free will,
despite what Heaven said either way. And that was why she wasn't so much angry as she was just torn.

She got it, she did—that he took the memory for a variety of reasons, that he believed he was doing the right thing. He thought them being together was the reason why she died in the future. He'd told her they couldn't be together and it had wounded her and he hadn't wanted her to have to deal with more pain. It was obvious that he was afraid of it, of the thought of them being together. So was she, honestly.

So, no, she wasn't angry even though from anyone else doing the same thing she would have been livid. She was... honestly? Relieved. Because she had been right about him and she wasn't crazy and now the dreams about the panic room made sense and hell yeah Castiel needed the ass-kicking of his life for pulling that shit but right now...? Right now she was just reeling from learning the truth: that this angel cared for her more than he was willing to admit. He had also clearly said they couldn't be together though. Herein lay the difficult feelings and the great sadness. She gently grasped his upper arms, sought his gaze as he waited for her to reply.

"Cas I—yes I was hurt. It... it hit me hard." She paused. "But... I mean, we could have made that decision together." She shook her head, mournful, unable to believe what she was saying. "To walk away from whatever this is between us." Her eyes fell away from him. "If that's what has to happen."

His eyes flicked up to hers and they were anguished. "What's between us is cursed." His statement was like a ton of bricks. "All I ever do... is hurt you. I damage you. I kill you in the end."

At that comment about him literally killing her, Alex looked at him a oddly. "Aren't you being a little overly dramatic?"

"No. I saw it, Alex." Cas was deadly serious, and withdrew from her, troubled. "You were infected with the virus with me right there beside you. I didn't save you from being bitten and... and I... you begged me to... with a gun... before you could turn..." he looked to his left, expression sickened. "And I did it. With the gun." He paused heavily. "And there was... a... we had..." he trailed off, shook his head, decided against saying whatever he'd been about to say. He looked back at her intensely. "I won't allow this to happen. It's my task to protect you. Preserve your life, not destroy it."

Even though he looked terrified, like he'd seen some horrifying crap—even though he was telling her about her brutal death in the future where he was forced to shoot her to death—it seemed so far away, so unthinkable that Alex couldn't quite identify with Castiel's horrified concern. "You told Dean once that all roads led to the same destination," she pointed out hesitantly. "And every time we've tried to change the future before... it's never worked." It was dismal of her, but realistic. Dean hadn't been able to stop Azazel from killing Mom. They hadn't been able to stop Lucifer from rising. What else had fate sealed in as unavoidable?

Cas looked even more intent, even more convicted. "I have to try. I won't risk your life."

What life? She didn't expect to live long anyway, she never had—and honestly if she had to live the rest of her life without Cas, she would rather die young and take the time they had to be together. Lame? Maybe, but the way she felt? Yes. Alex struggled to find words, her mind a tornado, the walls of her emotions weakening, threatening to break down. Everything they'd shared so far... everything between them... it was too important and too valuable to just drop and walk away from. This angel had practically been her first real friend outside of her brothers. He was the one who had given her a voice and life and a part of himself. He'd been her first kiss, the first and only person who had ever touched her intimately, the first person who had ever truly made her believe she was
beautiful. The only person to inspire such heartfelt longings beyond the physical. The one who had
died for her once and would die for her again. Who else in the entire world could ever, ever
compare, even a little bit?

She had no idea what kind of relationship they would have or how it would work, none of that
but... the thought that they couldn't was unfair and overwhelming, everything opposite of what she
wanted. "So you're saying..." she trailed off. Gathered herself, wishing that she would say this and
he would reprove her, say she'd misunderstood. "That we can't."

Their eyes met.

"Yes." he said. "That's what I'm saying." His reply sounded quietly devastated.

No—everything inside of her begged no, because she didn't want to just give up. She couldn't. She
felt her pulse speeding up, her entire body buzzing with nerves. "But Cas—" she moved toward
him. He wasn't far. "I don't wanna walk away from this," she admitted, her emotions in overdrive.
And then she asked the question that left her completely vulnerable to getting hurt again. Because
she had to know, once and for all. "Do... do you?"

Her question seemed to stir something inside of him, something he visibly fought. Something that
made his jaw tighten and his mouth move briefly and his forehead tense up. He looked at war
within himself, and for a minute, Alex thought he was going to turn from her and walk away.
Please, please don't, she thought to herself. Then his expression softened. He seemed to give up or
give in, push aside himself for a moment.

"No," he said brokenly, conflicted. He reached out and touched her gently underneath her jaw, his
thumb resting over the middle of her chin—his eyes dark and holding so many unspoken things,
but most of all, a tenderness and affection. The skin underneath his hand came alive with surprise
and thrill alike. Her heart jumped inside her chest and he shook his head just slightly, seemingly
helpless as he gave his final answer: "I don't."

His hand swept back, tracing her jaw, resting against the side of her neck as he closed the distance
between them, pressing his lips to hers softly, fervently, surprising her and relieving her and
making her dizzy with every amazing feeling in existence. Alex melted into him, feeling Cas's hand
now gently cradling the side of her head, her pain was temporarily forgotten. His mouth was hesitant and
shy almost, but searching and earnest, and together they found a deeper, slower kiss than they had
ever shared before—a kiss that was unsure and desperate, open and undisguised. Maybe they both
knew they shouldn't, but neither could help it. Maybe it was a mistake, they probably shouldn't
have, but there was no turning back. Even without a spell, they couldn't find it within themselves to
resist each other.

It was a kiss that said I don't know what's going to happen next. But I need you all the same. The
kiss was deepening even more and becoming more mutually passionate, more and more heavy. It
didn't need to make sense. Alex wanted him—needed him—desperately, and that was fact. One of
his arms was around her waist and tightened just slightly—he was being delicate with her,
obviously still torn up about the way he'd physically harmed her just a little awhile ago, doing the
same thing... kissing. Except this was different. They weren't gale force driven to destruction and
harm, they were just two people who desperately wanted each other and needed this, couldn't
handle the reality that they shouldn't be together. He was making her feel so warm all over and
ready for something she thought only he could give. He was eliciting a feeling of pure bliss as he kissed her and in response she whimpered softly, wishing she knew how to be brave enough to deepen this moment even more...

"My my," came a low, velvet voice. "Am I interrupting something?"

Alex and Cas pulled apart fast, startled at the sudden intrusion, because they hadn't heard anyone walk up. In front of them, smiling slyly—"Crowley," Castiel said lowly, eyes narrowing. He immediately stepped in front of Alex, putting himself between the demon and herself.

Crowley chuckled, giving the impression of casual pleasantry. "Castiel, I presume… we haven't yet had the pleasure." Crowley glanced at Alex, then back at Cas, seeming pleased. "And dear me, if the rumors about the two of you aren't true."

Rumors? What rumors? Castiel maintained a hostile expression and didn't ask. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Crowley shrugged, took a couple steps to his left, shot Cas a coy glance. "Just popped in for a quick visit with littlest Winchester."

Bristling, Cas didn't take his eyes off of Crowley for a minute. "What could you possibly want with her?"

Crowley had stopped and he stood with his hands in his pockets, an overly concerned look on his face as he peered at Alex where she stood behind Cas. "Dear me, Alexandra love, you're not looking too well—guardian angel fall down on the job today?" his expression changed and he looked pleased with himself again, held a finger out in thought. "Oh, that's right... he's the one who did that to you." He made a tsk sound and wagged his finger once. "Domestic violence, such a shame."

Cas's expression fell completely in shock.

"Get lost, Crowley," Alex said.

Crowley just smiled at her. "But you and I have things to discuss, remember?"

Cas looked back at Alex questioningly, then at Crowley. His expression was dark again, murderous. "What things, Crowley?"

Crowley's maddening smile remained, he wiggled his eyebrows once, clearly enjoying the power play. "That's for me to know, mate."

Castiel strode across the remaining three feet between them and grabbed Crowley roughly, threateningly, by the front of his suit jacket. "You won't touch her."

"What, only you get to do that?" Crowley asked, eyes glinting, completely apathetic to Castiel's show of aggression. His voice lowered a little bit. "Tell me, Castiel… did you like it? Batting her around like that? If I didn't know any better I'd say the girl picked a boyfriend a little too much like Daddy dearest."

That comment touched a raw nerve Cas hadn't even known existed and in a sudden fit of rage and anger, Cas moved to slam Crowley to the ground—but the demon vanished out of his grasp, reappearing beside Castiel a few feet off and out of reach. "Ah-ah-ah!" Crowley chided, nonplussed. He straightened his jacket. "Just had this dry cleaned. No horseplay for me right now, thanks."
Castiel now held his angel blade in his hand and looked at Crowley dangerously, pointedly. Crowley's eyes slid to the blade, his eyebrows raised—he looked at Cas then his eyes slid to Alex, who was standing beside a junked car, leaning heavily onto it with one hand. "Funny, that." Crowley looked at Cas with a fascinated, superior little smile on his face. "Haven't you heard gambling's a sin, choir boy? I'm surprised you're willing to bet her life."

"What do you mean?" Cas asked darkly.

"Just look at yourself, angel wings—I'm not the one here who's a danger to her." Crowley's smile twitched just a little. "That would be you. Falling right into step to dance the same old song..." he trailed off meaningfully, seeming to suppose they would know what he meant.

At their confused looks, Crowley sighed, rolled his eyes. "You know the one—goes a little something like Lucifer coming over to Sam Winchester's for a stay, never leaving? Dean going off the deep end? Cas here a real boy? Alex the tragic victim of gun violence?" More shocked silence and Crowley grew impatient, snarky. "Yes yes, I've seen the future, too, the whole bloody thing—" he paused, pretended to be introspective. "I laughed, I cried, I learned about myself." He smiled, eyes crinkling pleasantly, only it wasn't pleasant.

At the lack of reaction he got from Alex and Cas, he seemed to tire of the act, momentarily. "Look—I don't want it to happen, either, for different reasons though. My kind needs to survive. Couldn't give a rip if you two live or die, but... still. Irony's not lost on me." He gave them sly looks again. "After all, I saw the show you two were putting on just a couple tics back. Riveting stuff." He chuckled.

Cas didn't respond to anything Crowley had just said, just darkened again. "Leave. Now." His jaw tightened. "Or I lay you to waste."

Crowley almost smiled seductively at Castiel at that point. "Mm. I like it when you get all assertive." He looked at Alex, then back at Cas. His expression was challenging, self-assured, amused. And the demon disappeared.

Cas looked around intently, for any sign of Crowley as he went back to Alex, who was still leaning onto the car, looking unsettled. "What did he mean, he had things to discuss with you?" Cas asked, deeply concerned.

Alex looked at him in the eye and without even thinking, lied. "I don't know." Now she was the one keeping secrets.

He didn't catch her in the lie, he was still looking around them, appraising the immediate area, his blade still in hand. "I don't like this. How did he know where you were?"

Bobby's address wasn't exactly a secret, and the outside wasn't warded... but Cas was right. It was disconcerting. He looked at her finally, and it was hard to really face everything they had been through together today. He seemed to have similar thoughts, because his expression changed slightly, became more doubtful and introspective. His jaw was tense. "As much as I don't want to admit it... Crowley is right. I—I'm gambling with your life." He paused heavily. "Every time I... give in to my feelings... it's just endangering you."

"But—" she began to protest, thinking she could reason with him, change his mind.

"No, Alex," he said with dark, resigned finality, a voice lacking the emotional depth it had held a minute ago. It was unsettling how quickly he'd changed from emotive to emotionless. "We can't. We won't."
He touched her on the shoulder, and they were suddenly inside Bobby's house where it was dark and quiet except for the sound of Sam's muffled shouts downstairs. Startled by the sudden change, Alex blinked rapidly, looked around to orient herself, not sure why he'd done that.

"Stay inside, where the demon warding is," Cas told her brusquely, avoiding her gaze. And he disappeared without another word, without any warning whatsoever.

Startled, Alex waited a couple seconds—he hadn't just left like that... had he? "Cas? Cas!" Alex stood there a second, waiting for him to reappear. "Come back!"

He didn't.

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Two Days Later

Outside, drunk as hell and pissed at the world, Alex laid on the hood of the Impala, staring up at the night sky. Everything was spinning and she felt sick. She sat up, wished Dean would come out here and get onto her, cuss her out, fight with her. Anything to distract her from the hopeless bullshit she was dealing with internally. Cas had disappeared and wasn't answering any of her calls—after Crowley had shown up, it had just been over apparently because she hadn't heard from him since. This frustrating circumstance was the inspiration for her current drunken state. The pain of longing for him, of actually having had these moments of closeness with him—and then nothing. Nothing. No explanation and no resolution. Just more uncertainty and heartbreak. And tears. There had been a mortifying amount of tears.

She cried so much more now than she used to and felt so much more than she used to. And it was Castiel's fault. Dean, when he'd caught her crying recently, had thought her tears were because of Sam.

Sam was in the middle of crazy demon blood withdrawals... Dean was mostly avoiding her, being totally standoffish and depressed... life sucked overall at the moment.

Alex slid off the Impala hood and into an uneven standing position, picking up the discarded whiskey bottle from where she’d dropped it on the gravel in the salvage yard. She tried to get a couple last drops out—but it was empty. Infuriated, she threw it with a loud shout, as far as she could... which wasn't far because she was wobbly and uncoordinated. Miserable, she began making angry mumbling noises like a child might—she couldn't even throw things right!

"Little old for temper tantrums though, aren't we?"

Alex whirled, stumbled, and then made a face. "Ohh, just great. Just who I wanted to friggin' see!"

"Miss me, darling?" Crowley asked her, swaggering over to her casually. She hated this dude so much right now, well, always, but right now especially. He was getting cocky too, showing up in the salvage yard now?

"No," she said, and jerkily stumbled to him, trying to be threatening. "I didn't miss you... now get your skanky demon ass outta my face before I—"

He winced a little. "Before you what, dear? Regurgitate your stomach matter onto me?" He lightly touched her on the fronts of her shoulders with the tips of his fingers and pushed away delicately. "Think I'll pass."

She tried to think of something cutting or mean to say, but her mind felt so garbled. "You suck," she settled on slurringly, then realized how stupid that comeback was. Crowley let it go, even
though he made an unimpressed 'really?' face.

"Anyhoo," Crowley commented dryly. "Thought anymore about what I told you, love?"

Alex looked at him with a blank expression. About her having something to do with killing Lucifer? Yes, she hadn't stopped thinking about it since he'd told her—and in fact, Cupid had mentioned casually that she needed to be born as well as Sam and Dean. Did that mean something? Well, if it did, she wasn't about to tell this jackass any of that. She gave a much too enthusiastic: "No."

The corner of his mouth tugged upwards just slightly, knowingly. "It's permeated your every waking thought, hasn't it." His voice was dark velvet. "Well, I've found some interesting factoids since our first little chat." He fixed her with a coy gaze. "Ever heard the one about a pure soul being able to destroy evil from the inside?"

Alex tried not to look surprised that he'd found that, the same thing she'd found recurring through so many religions and myths. "Uh, no."

"Right. Well. Lucy's evil, yeah? And guess who's the pure soul who can apparently destroy him?"

Alex stared at him hard, waiting for him to say, then when he kept just looking at her, she felt her mouth hang open stupidly. He meant her? "Are you kidding me." Alex squinted at him, not even incredulous. She was at the point of laughter. "Buddy. I am not a pure soul." She laughed bitterly, shook her head, sighed in over-amusement.

Crowley seemed to have expected as much, shook his head faintly. "Humans. You have higher standards than the rest of us. See, a pure soul doesn't mean what you think. It has nothing to do with hail Mary's or piety, not really." He grinned now, started counting on his fingers. "A pure soul is three things. One, it's human." He pointed at her. "Check. Two, it must be whole, not diced up to bits or somesuch. Check. Three... and this one's my favorite... the soul must belong to a virgin."

Alex's face fell. "Check." Crowley's smile was positively devilish. "Although you came kind of close a couple days ago to being kicked out of that club, aye?"

Alex glared at him vengefully, wishing she had the demon knife with her. "How the fuck do you hell monkeys always know all this shit about my life?"

Crowley just smiled slyly. " Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Yes you asshole, that's why I asked."

"Heavens you're a saucy drunk," Crowley commented mildly, then waved a hand in dismissal. "You're missing the point. You've got a pure soul. You're a Winchester. It's painfully obvious that there's something to this."

Alex tried to poke him in the chest with her index finger, but missed and got the top of his shoulder instead. "You know, I have a damn good mind to tell my brothers you've been stalking me, Crowley." She chuckled, a slurred sound. "You won't like them when they're pissed, and trust me, I tell them you've been coming around and oh-ho there's hell to pay for you my friend."

Crowley raised his eyebrows challengingly. "What? Moosey Sam gonna get me? He's not even on two legs. And Dean. Ah, Dean." Crowley clasped his hands behind his back, took a few steps to his right. "Now Alexandra, I know you won't tell them a thing. We both know that." He looked at her conspiratorially. "You tell them there's a possibility that you're involved in this whole end-of-the-world shindig... and they never let you out of the house again." He chuckled. "Ironic, isn't it?"
They tell you that you're their equal, that you're a great hunter... but at the end of the day, actions speak louder than words." He shot her an appraising glance. "Haven't you ever wondered why they're so protective of you? Why angel boy is so protective of you? It's 'cause they perceive you as incapable and weak, love. They don't think you should make your own decisions. *Well.* I do." He feigned an epiphany. "*Well well—*a demon being the only feminist in the group! How's that for irony?"

Alex looked at him mistrustfully, fighting the desire to actually listen to him or agree with him. "You just want me to kill Satan for you so you can keep the demon party going," she said, then made a 'pfft' sound and rolled her eyes. "*Well joke's on you, jackass. I'm not part of it. Your rumors are wrong,* so go find someone else to piss off."

Crowley, however, just gave her a deeply unnerving look, stepped closer. "*Now, now. I wouldn't be so sure of that if I were you.*"

"Whatever, Crowley," Alex said. "*Now fuck off.*" She glanced him up and down, finally coming up with a good insult. "By the way, your suit is tacky as hell. Looks cheap."

"This is Armani," Crowley said, affronted. Alex smirked at his reaction, and he seemed to realize himself, and was suddenly all pleasant, cool smiles again, passively aggressively tearing her down. "No worries, pet. I understand. Upset about the boyfriend, aren't you? He never calls, never visits, never tells you how he feels anymore..." he sighed with mock sadness, then he smiled again. "Sad day when the only one on your side is a demon in a tacky suit, aye?"

She opened her mouth to cuss him out again, but he disappeared, leaving a shaken, pissed, and abysmally wasted Alex behind. She would drunkenly mull these things over for the next few minutes, try to stumble into the house but pass out on the stairs. She would then be found by Dean who would sadly pick her up, haul her inside, and reflect, yet again, on the unending times he'd failed his brother and sister alike, and how close to just being done with everything he was.

Because nothing was changing, nothing was getting better. Everything was going to hell, and every day was just another damn failure on his part.
"He went down, down, down... and the devil called him by name."
- Tom Waits

Four Years Ago

"Dean, it's me," John Winchester protested, sounding sincere, confused, and betrayed. He stood completely still while staring at his son, who was currently holding him at gunpoint.

"I know my dad better than anyone," Dean growled back, the colt steady and unwavering in his grip, his expression a fierce glare. "And you ain't him."

"The hell's gotten into you?" John asked in disbelief.

"I could ask you the same thing," Dean said menacingly, not backing down and not fooled for a second. "Stay back."

Sam returned at that very moment—he'd been checking the protective salt lines he'd made in the abandoned old shack they'd holed up in. Sam's face was bruised and bloody, one eye was swollen up from the fight he'd had with a demon earlier that day. He saw his father and brother and stopped short, frozen. "Dean! What the hell's going on?!!"

Behind Sam, Alex emerged from further back in the house, and her expression dropped, matching Sam's almost instantaneously. She looked similar to Sam—the same demon who had beat Sam to a pulp had flung her into the side of a car and the entire left side of her face was a mess, her lip was cracked and bloody, her dark green jacket was ripped. Her silver whistle glinted up from where it laid against her shirt. At the sight of her in the same room with Dad who wasn't Dad, Dean edged closer to his siblings, keeping the gun trained steadily on their father.

"Your brother's lost his mind," John told Sam darkly.

Dean immediately shook his head. "He's not Dad," he insisted, fighting fear and panic.

"What?" Sam asked, as if his brother had suggested the unthinkable.

"I think he's possessed," Dean said, his voice beginning to waver in distress and disbelief and how could he have been so stupid? "I think he's been possessed since we rescued him."

"Don't listen to him, Sammy," John said, relatively calm and commanding despite the tense situation.

Sam hesitated, unsure now, suspicious. "Dean, how do you know?" he asked his older brother. Almost hiding behind her twin's larger form, Alex was looking at their father in disbelief and mistrust, trying to see what Dean saw too.

"He's... he's different," Dean managed, barely able to think straight.

"We don't have time for this," John said urgently, sounding every bit like their father, making it hard to figure out if Dean was telling the truth or not. "Sam, Alex, you wanna kill this demon, you've gotta trust me."
Sam looked at Dean, then their dad, and there was a long moment of silence. Alex's fingers tightened on Sam's arm, she moved toward Dean just slightly—her way of siding with her brother—and John saw it. "Sam," John appealed in a soft and pleading tone of voice none of them had ever heard him use.

Sam looked again at Dean, who was fighting to keep his composure, fighting not to break down. And that seemed to convince him. "No," he told his dad, or whoever it was. "No."

"Fine," John said, barely whispering, looking defeated and disappointed in his children, who were all standing in a huddle near each other. "The three of you are so sure, go ahead." He almost looked as if he were fighting tears now. "Kill me." He looked between the three of them for a moment longer, then bowed his head, waited as Dean held the gun steady…but Dean didn't pull the trigger—the colt would kill the demon and Dad, too—and frozen, he just stood there, the gun trained on Dad uselessly. Alex looked at Dean in abject horror and confusion and Sam stood stock still, holding his breath. They were all hoping Dean was wrong. Hoping it was Dad in front of them, not a demon.

But Dean was right.

"I thought so," John said, but his voice had gotten ominously deeper, there was a little smile on his lips—and he looked back up and his eyes were yellow. Their worst fears were realized—it was the yellow-eyed demon. And before any of them could react, they went flying separate ways, thrown up against three different walls to remain pinned there helplessly. The colt clattered to the floor out of Dean's grip, and John—the demon—bent and casually picked it up. "What a pain in the ass this thing's been," he muttered.

Struggling against the demonic hold that pinned him to the wall, Sam stared at the yellow-eyed demon hatefully, recognizing the demon as the one who had killed their mother and ruined all of their lives. "It's you, isn't it?" Sam's expression was quiet, deadly. The demon just smiled. "We've been looking for you for a long time," Sam said through clenched teeth.

"Well, you found me," the demon said, almost amused.

"But the holy water…" Sam said, confused and thinking back to when they'd tested him just to be safe.

"You think something like that works on something like me?" the demon asked with a coy smile.

Growing angrier, Sam tried to fight the invisible hold, tried to break free, only to be pushed harder into the wall. A frustrated sound escaped from his throat and he leveled the demon with a death glare. "I am gonna kill you!" he roared.

The demon didn't bat an eye. "Oh—that'd be a neat trick. In fact—" he put the colt down on the old wooden table in the middle of the room, baiting Sam. "Here. Make the gun float to you there, psychic boy."

Sam looked at the gun but nothing happened and the demon chuckled lowly, turning his sights onto Alex, who was pinned at the furthest end of the room. She saw him looking at her and went still from her attempts to break lose, watching his approach with a razor-like expression as her breathing increased rapidly. He only smiled, an eyebrow lifting almost imperceptibly. "What, don't you have some angry things to say to me, too?" he asked, then paused. "Oh—" he pretended to think of something, then that sly, triumphant smile returned. "That's right. Can't talk, can you?" He stepped closer to her, took a dark lock of hair off her shoulder, looked at it with some kind of fascination there in between his fingers. He made a thoughtful hmm sound and Alex struggled, her
breathing grew frantic and strained as she fought harder, trying to get free.

"Leave her alone," Dean said, voice wavering helplessly. He was ignored.

"Daddy's darkest secret." The demon said, looking Alex in the eyes. "He doesn't like to tell anyone about you. His freak, mute kid." He touched the side of her hair, petted her almost, trailed his hand to her neck, ran his thumb across the delicate skin there. She tried to shrink away, face twisted in revulsion. "But I don't think you're that bad," he said, smirking almost. She looked like she'd never heard anything more despicable.

"Hey get the hell away from her!" Dean barked, loudly this time and the demon turned, looked at him over his shoulder.

"Or what? You gonna kill me, too?" the demon mocked, looking over at Sam challengingly. Straining against the hold even more than before, Sam looked murderous. The demon let go of Alex.

"Well, this is fun," the demon said, walking over to the window beside Dean. "I could've killed you a hundred times today, but this..." he sighed and chuckled a bit, pleased with himself. "This is worth the wait." Dean struggled, still pinned to the wall, and the demon looked over at him, smiling just slightly. "Your dad—he's in here with me. Trapped inside his own meat suit. He says 'hi' by the way. He's gonna tear you apart. He's gonna taste the iron in your blood."

"Let him go, or I swear to God—" Dean managed in a trembling voice.

"What? What're you and God gonna do?" The demon asked darkly. "You see, as far as I'm concerned, this is justice." He came over to stand in front of Dean, close now. "You know that little exorcism of yours? That was my daughter Meg." He paused. "The one you killed today in the alley? That was my boy Tom. You understand."

"You gotta be kidding me." Dean shook his head, struggling to maintain his composure, trying to think of a way to break free and save his siblings, and save his dad.

"What? You're the only one that can have a family?" The demon asked cynically. "You destroyed my children. How would you feel if I killed your family?" He paused and slowly, so slowly, a dark smile spread across John's lips. "Oh... that's right. I forgot. I did." The smile was gone. "And you know, maybe I'm not done yet either." He looked in Alex's direction, then Sam's, who was glaring at him viciously.

"You tell me why," Sam demanded acidly. "Why you did it."

"You mean why did I kill Mommy and pretty, little Jess?" The demon almost smirked at that question, turning and facing Dean again. "You know, he never told you this, but Sam was going to ask Jess to marry him. Been shopping for rings and everything. Well, I couldn't have that."

"In the way of what?" Sam asked suspiciously.

The demon backed up a little, almost swaggering. "My plans for you, Sammy. You..." his eyes slid over to Alex, "and all the children like you."

Sam looked over at his twin in dismay, breathless, then looked back at the demon in confusion and horror, disbelief. "She's not part of this," Sam said emphatically, shaking his head.
"Oh, but she is, Sammy," the demon smiled darkly. "And somehow, I think you already knew that." Sam's face fell, scrunching with even more confusion—or was that dread?

"The hell you talking about?" Dean demanded angrily.

"It's really none of your concern, Dean," the demon said, sounding short on patience.

"Like hell it isn't, asshole."

Rounding on Dean and coming closer again, the demon leaned closer intimidatingly. "You know, you fight and you fight for this family, but the truth is they don't need you. Not like you need them. Sam—he's clearly John's favorite. Even when they fight, it's more concern than he's ever shown you."

Dean's jaw clenched tight even as the demon turned and looked at Alex. "Wait." the demon was whispering, feigning thoughtful surprise. "Wait." His chilling smile was back. "How could I forget?" he pretended to be apologetic. "I take it back Dean. She needs you, in fact, sometimes you think it's too much. Sometimes the burden of caring for her threatens to send you over the edge. Mostly because you know you can't keep her safe. Not forever." He was going to Alex again, his voice was dropping lower into more ominous tones. "Not from things like me."

"You did that to her, didn't you, you sadistic son of a bitch?" Dean demanded, trying to get the demon to come back to him and engage with him instead. Anything to get the yellow-eyed demon away from his sister. "You made her mute that night in the nursery."

The demon just chuckled, ignored Dean, addressed Alex. "Do you ever get tired of Dean being your mouthpiece? Cuz he doesn't always get it right, does he, Alexandra?" He touched her lips thoughtfully with his fingers and she stared defiantly into his eyes, with fear and hatred and rage alike. The demon was smiling mockingly even as Alex internally gathering the courage to do what she did next—which was viciously shoot her head forward as she opened her mouth wide, biting down as hard as she physically could onto his two fingers touching her lips. He screamed in pain and surprise as blood burst out—she let go and the demon recoiled briefly even as Alex spat into his face forcefully, blood and saliva alike.

The demon's face was utterly terrifying as he grabbed her roughly by the chin and made her look at him. She glared daggers, breathing hard as residual blood from biting him ran down her chin. "You little fucking bitch," the demon growled acidly, almost snarling he back-handed her across the face.

"Hey!" Dean thundered, enraged and desperate to break free—Sam was straining even harder, turning red with, bellowing with effort.

Wincing, Alex's head was turned to the side as her vision doubled and flickered. The demon smirked, looking at the brother's reactions, apparently pleased. "This is going to be so much better than I thought," he commented, and looked at Dean, his smile deepening. "Watch this trick."

What the hell? Dean wondered, but then Alex's head went back, her mouth open in a silent scream—she began to bleed heavily from her chest.

"Alex! No!" Sam shouted.

"Stop!" Dean pleaded, desperate and fighting the hold over him in complete vain.

"Oh, I'm just getting started," the demon said lowly and left Alex to writhe in pain as he walked over to Dean, who suddenly shouted in agony, eyes screwed shut against the sudden violent onset
of pain everywhere.

"Dean!" Sam shouted, even as Dean continued to spasm. He felt warm, wet stuff pouring out of his chest—blood. The pain was so intense, so unbearable—and Alex was still bleeding, still convulsing and he couldn't get to her, couldn't do a damn thing—God no, this couldn't be how it ended...

"Dad!" Dean whimpered, panting, "Dad, don't you let it kill us!"

Sam was shouting, trying as hard as he could to get free. Dean felt himself going weak, woozy, the world was becoming dark, there was blood in his mouth, the taste of it revolting—Alex was looking at him through her pain, silently begging him to help her, or maybe that was her wishing she could get free and help him. Dean could barely move now, it took everything he had to function at all, but with his last strength he looked up at his father and begged, prayed, hoped against hope that somewhere deep down his dad would hear him.

"Dad, please," Dean whispered… and then the world went completely dark and silent as he passed out completely.

The Impala sped down the road in the dead of night, three badly wounded passengers inside as Sam pushed the pedal down all the way, trying to coax as much speed as possible out of the car. He glanced back in the rearview mirror, seeing Dean and Alex slumped against each other, covered in their own blood—his brother was barely there, Alex had passed out completely. Even at the edge of consciousness, Dean was attempting to hold his little sister up.

"She's not part of this!" Sam had protested.

"Oh, but she is, Sammy," the demon had replied softly, shaking Sam down to his core. "And somehow, I think you already knew that."

Sam's eyes flickered over his twin and he was filled with sickened worry. Dean had asked him what the demon meant as they had gotten into the car—asked why the demon said that about Sam 'knowing' Alex was part of the special children—Sam had lied to Dean's face, said he had no idea… when really, he did. He did think he knew what the demon was talking about—and it was something terrible, dark, something that Sam never wanted to think about or confront. Something he would take with him to his grave. Beside him in the front seat, Dad groaned in pain. Anxiety jumping up about ten points, Sam glanced at him guiltily.

Right after Dean had passed out, Dad had snapped out of it somehow, regained control over the demon's possession—Sam had gotten the colt, Dad had begged him, commanded him to shoot him through the heart to kill the demon once and for all. But Sam hadn't been able, he'd frozen—Alex had stumbled over, barely conscious, and Sam thought for a second she was going to try and take the gun from him, shoot Dad and the demon herself—but then the black smoke had poured out of Dad's mouth and it had been too late. Now Sam could feel his father's anger, his disappointment, his judgement.

Beside Sam, Dad hissed in pain again. "Look, just hold on, alright," Sam said anxiously. "The hospital's only ten minutes away."

Instead of a nod and gratitude, Dad looked at him accusingly. "I'm surprised at you, Sammy. Why didn't you kill it? I thought we saw eye-to-eye on this? Killing this demon comes first—before me, before everything."
Sam's insides were sick. He glanced in the rearview again at his siblings, jaw tight, his entire body tense. "No, sir," he replied firmly despite his nerves. He shook his head. "Not before everything. Look, we've still got the Colt. We still have the one bullet left. We just have to start over, alright?" Sam was trying hard to backpedal, appease his father just a little bit. "I mean, we already found the demon—" Sam was cut off by what happened next.

In the span of two seconds, there was a bright flash of light, the sensation of brutal impact, the realization that they had been hit by something—and then, nothing.

It had been several days since the accident. Well. It hadn't even been an accident: a black-eyed demon had done it, possessed a semi-truck driver and then smashed the several-ton truck headlong into the side of the Impala, trying, and almost succeeding, to kill them all. It was really a miracle that they had survived, period. Times like this, John could have almost believed what Mary had: that angels were watching over them. Well, maybe not him specifically, but his children? Maybe. If angels were real, they would want no business with the likes of him. A man who had ended up here, who had done this to his children, who had focused on one thing—and that one thing hadn't been them.

John was in the basement of the hospital, crouched down and tracing out a devil's trap—the white chalk line stood out starkly against the dark gray concrete floor. He had drawn so many of these that he did it automatically, unthinkingly, even with one of his arms in a sling and useless.

He thought he'd been doing the right thing by raising his kids to know how to kill, how to fight, how to hunt. He thought it would keep them safe, but now he saw that everything he'd ever done had quite possibly pushed them into danger and trapped them there forever. There was no way out of the life of a hunter except to die. It was with the grandest sense of irony that he realized in his attempts to avenge his wife's murder he'd instead sentenced his children to death. But the alternative would have been running forever. And who could do that?

Grimly John reflected that he felt to blame for all of this and helpless to stop anything at the same time. His oldest son was in a coma upstairs and it didn't look like he would pull through. His daughter was laid up with a broken arm, head trauma and internal bruising among other things. She was refusing to communicate with Sam, upset about Dean—upset about everything. John hadn't gone to see her in her hospital room, not when she was awake, anyway. He couldn't face her right now.

He looked down at his two now-bandaged up fingers that had been bitten. He remembered hitting Alex across the face when he was possessed and screaming internally stop that, don't touch her!—but then the demon had slyly replied what? You've done this before. Why can't I? And John had struggled to regain control, because such righteous self hatred and anger had coursed through his veins—the demon was right. There had been times, too many times, when he had flown off the handle and hurt his daughter. He had hit her a few times during his life and shoved her many more, called her things he shouldn't have—it had been because of the stress, the alcohol, the fatigue—he blamed these things for the times he had smacked his kids around, but deep down below the surface excuses he knew he had done those things. Not the substances, not the circumstances.

But John had changed, or he thought he had—he'd been careful, he'd tried damn hard to control himself—he hadn't laid a hand on Alex in nearly two years now. And that was a shit thing to be proud of. Possessed or not, it was so awful that he'd done it again. The look on her face when his hand had struck her. He had forgotten how much that looked wrecked him, how utterly wretched it rendered him. Every time he looked at her, he felt his every failure deep down in his bones.

At least one of his children was unharmed for the most part. Sam was fine, or at least of the four of
them, the least damaged. But even if he was *physically* okay, John knew that Sam despised him for everything, hated him for what had happened, blamed him for this whole mess. And Sam's hatred for John could only be topped by his own self loathing, his own self hatred. He deserved Sam's scorn. Every bit of it. Completely sober for the first time in a long time, John realized as he finished the chalk outline of the devil's trap that he didn't understand why Dean was so loyal to him.

He finished the devil's trap and took out his knife, began to mutter the incantation, preparing himself mentally for what he was about to do. This was risky and maybe stupid, but he saw no other options. He sliced his palm open until blood flowed—lit a match, finished the incantation, dropped the match into the bowl where the flames leapt high, burned bright, then died out. He stood up, looked around, waiting—then a hand grasped his shoulder, turned him roughly. "You conjuring me, John," the man said—and his eyes flashed yellow—John leveled the colt at him. "I'm surprised." A smile came over the demon's face, and two black-eyed demons, a nurse and an orderly, appeared behind him. "I took you for a lot of things," the demon said, almost intrigued and a little amused. "But suicidally reckless... wasn't one of them."

"I could always shoot you," John pointed out. And damn, did he want to. It took everything he had not to pull the trigger and end this abomination right now, finish the job once and for all. But Dean's life hung in the balance.

"You could always miss," the demon replied, and he chuckled darkly. "And you've only got one try, don't cha?" His eyebrows furrowed just slightly. "Did you really think you could trap me?"

There was a long pause. "I don't want to trap you," John said, and he lowered the colt, lowered his defenses, revealed his game plan. "I want to make a deal."

The demon seemed genuinely surprised. "A deal, John? With me?" His eyes narrowed just slightly. He began to slowly pace the circle of chalk where John stood. "It's very unseemly, making deals with devils. How do I know this isn't just another trick?"

"It's no trick," John said evenly, truthfully. "I will give you the colt and the bullet, but you've got to help Dean. You've got to bring him back." He watched the demon closely. His voice softened, giving away his emotions. "And... my daughter. Give her back what I know you took from her. You do that for me, the gun and the bullet are yours."

"Why, John, you're a sentimentalist," the demon said, smiling widely, mockingly. "If only your kids knew how much their daddy loved them."

"It's a good trade," John said, keeping his voice low and calm, keeping his emotions out of it. "You care a hell of a lot more about this gun than you do Dean or Alex."

The demon smiled at that, stopped walking, looked at John pointedly. "Funny, I might have said the same to you just a few days ago." His smile faded. "And don't be so sure about that. Dean killed some people who were very special to me. But still, you're right, he isn't much of a threat," the demon conceded, arrogant. "And neither is your other son. Or your very quiet daughter."

"You son of a bitch," John muttered, barely restraining his anger that boiled beneath the surface.

"Guilty as charged," the demon said, smiling wickedly. He stepped a little closer, looked at John thoroughly. "You know the truth, right? About Sammy, the other children?"

"Yeah," John admitted balefully, his stomach turning because he wished he didn't know. He felt sick. "I've known for a while."
"Then you know that little Alex was supposed to be one of my special children, too," the demon said, made a regretful little sighing sound as he backed up, turned away a little. John felt every muscle in his body tense as the demon shook his head slightly. "Shame. We had plans for her. I had plans for her." He looked back at John in a way that chilled him to his bones. "Who knows. Maybe they'll still work out, I don't know…" John wanted to lunge at the demon, tear him apart with his bare hands.

The demon smirked slightly, turning back to face John fully. "But neither of them know, John, do they? That you know more, much more than you let on. That you've been playing dumb… avoiding facing the facts. Stringing them along all these years, hoping you can change fate…"

John was losing patience and fast. He needed answers or he would lose his temper and use the damn gun. "Can you fix Dean? Can you give Alex her voice back? Yes or no."

There was a cocky little smile. "You need to sweeten the pot a little if you want me to help you out, John."

"What more could you want from me?" John demanded angrily. "I don't have anything else."

"Of course you do," the demon replied, and the look on his face filled John with uneasy dread. He suddenly flashed a grin. "I'll take the girl."

"What?"

The demon looked at John darkly, his former good humor gone in the place of deadly seriousness. "Dean lives. Alex gets her voice back… but she comes with me, no questions asked on your part." The smile was back, the lightness too. "It's just you and your boys like you always wanted."

"The hell would you want with her?" John asked in horror at the suggestion. The demon didn't say, just fixed John with a blood-curdling little smile. John shook his head in abject denial, in barely contained rage. "No—there has to be something else you want."

The demon's eyebrows raised slightly and he paused. "All right. Your life for Dean's. He lives. You die. Alex gets nothing." There was a smug smile on the demon's face, as if he thought he knew which one John would choose.

John didn't even have to consider. He stepped a little closer to the demon assertively. "I want to see Dean fixed before you take me. That's the deal."

The demon was silent, blank, surprised. John grew intense. "Don't look so surprised," John said bluntly. "You really think I would let you have my daughter?" He stepped even closer, threateningly, his words blazing with anger. He may have been a terrible father in many ways, but he'd be damned before he sold out his own flesh and blood to these creatures from hell. "Never. You will never have her in any way, you sick son of a bitch—not you, not any other hell reject, not even the goddamn devil himself. Not if I have anything to do with it." He stared at the demon unflinchingly, resolute. "Now are we gonna do this deal or not?"

"I can't explain it," John could hear the doctor say to Dean on the other side of the wall. "The edema's vanished. The internal contusions are healed. Your vitals are good. You must have some kind of angel watching over you."

"Thanks, doc," he heard Dean reply, and the doctor left, walked past John, who stood outside against the wall, out of their line of sight. It was early morning. The demon had come through on the end of his deal—Dean was alive and well. John heard his boys talking in hushed tones, as he
blankly watched the doctor walk down the hall. The single thought echoed in his mind: today he died.

He thought about telling them, he wanted to tell them, but he just couldn't. Not outright. Swept up in end-of-the-line emotions, regrets, longings, John almost thought of just going now without a word to any of them, surrendering to the demon what he'd promised, just letting it end like this. He wasn't sure how he could bear to look at his children and know it was for the last time.

He turned to walk away, but hesitated, listening to Dean's deep rumbling voice and Sam's soothing tenor tones and changed his mind, unable to walk away—but not just for sentimental reasons. Dean had to know.

John took a deep breath and made himself known, stepped into the doorway, knocked on the doorframe, looking at his sons and feeling so much all at once. Dean and Sam looked up at him, vaguely surprised. "How you feeling, dude?" John asked Dean, smiling at him softly.

"Fine, I guess," Dean said, a small smile there at the sight of his dad. "I'm alive, at least."

"That's what matters," John said, returning the smile, the sight of Dean alive and well touching the deepest part of him, overwhelming him with so many thoughts and feelings. He was looking at his son and seeing him when he had been small, bright-eyed, eager, happy and not yet scarred by the world. John cleared his throat, looked around the room glancingly. "Where's—where's your sister?"

Sam, still upset after the argument they'd had yesterday about the demon, was looking at John without a smile. "Asleep in her room. She still isn't feeling too good." Sam replied, sounding distinctly blaming toward John. He paused and looked at his father suspiciously. "Where were you last night?"

John looked at his youngest son silently. If only he knew. "I had some things to take care of," John told him ambiguously, wishing that this once they wouldn't argue and fight.

Sam's eyes narrowed. "Well, that's specific," he said, tone bordering on sarcastic.

"Come on, Sam," Dean said, sounding fed up.

Sam didn't even look at Dean, just kept his eyes on John. "Did you go after the demon?"

John looked down briefly, shook his head. "No."

"You know, why don't I believe you right now?" Sam asked accusingly, and John finally came fully into the room, looking at his two sons, wishing he could tell them. He was remembering when Sam was young and happy, had trusted him, had run into his arms laughing when he'd gotten home—those days were so long gone that John could barely remember them, almost wondered if he were imagining them completely.

"Can we not fight?" he asked Sam softly. Sam looked utterly bewildered and stunned at the quiet question—John shook his head sadly, almost unable to keep his emotions at bay. "You know, half the time we're fighting, I don't know what we're fighting about. We're just butting heads." John swallowed, tried to keep that faltering smile on his face because if he didn't keep smiling, he'd fall apart. "Sammy, I, I've made some mistakes." God, he had made millions. "But I've always done the best I could," John said. The statement felt like a complete lie—he almost took it back. Almost. "I know my best was terrible. But it was all I had to give. I just don't want to fight anymore, okay?"

Sam looked beside himself, peering into his father's face with quickly-increasing worry. "Dad... are
you all right?" he asked apprehensively.

John just kept smiling, kept lying. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm just a little tired." He paused, suppressing his pain, holding himself together just a little longer, trying not to think about what he knew about Sam, the dark secrets he held inside. "Hey, son, would you, uh, would you mind getting me a cup of caffeine?"

Sam hesitated. "Yeah. Yeah, sure..." he looked at John several more times but left, still frowning in confusion. John watched him go sadly, eyes lingering on Sam's retreating lanky form.

Dean's voice brought him back to the hospital room. "What is it?" he asked softly, and John tore his gaze away from his younger son to look at his older one. Dean looked so worried and burdened as he stared up at him from where he was propped in the hospital bed.

John was overcome with regret and he shook his head, still seeing Dean when he was younger, only a little boy. "You know, when you were a kid... I'd come home from a hunt, and after what I'd seen, I'd be... I'd be wrecked. And you, you'd come up to me and you—you'd put your hand on my shoulder and you'd look me in the eye and you'd..." John struggled against tears as he remembered, "you'd say 'It's okay, Dad.'" He paused, and couldn't stop himself. He was losing control of his emotions, and his tears were audible in his shaking voice. "Dean, I'm sorry."

Dean stared at his dad in quiet shock. "What?"

John tried to smile through the tears, but the smile was faltering. This apology was years and years overdue. "You shouldn't have had to say that to me, I should have been saying that to you. You know, I put—I put too much on your shoulders, I made you grow up too fast. You took care of Sammy, you took care of Alex, you took care of me. I should've been the one who took care of everyone. I wasn't." John paused somberly, almost talking out loud now, not even to Dean. "I messed you kids up good. I wish..." he trailed off, shook his head. The things he wished... they outnumbered the stars in the sky right now and naming any of them was pointless. Wishing didn't change anything, and maybe his life was a joke but at least he was leaving behind three young people who might do it better than he had.

He looked at Dean, welling up with the sudden onset of pride, because he realized so fully and completely right now that his son was a man worth being proud of. John didn't think he had much to do with the man Dean had grown into, but he was still proud and he had to let him know all the same. "Dean... you were all the man I never was. I just want you to know that I am so proud of you."

Dean, who had been taking it all in silently, looked at John incredulously. "This really you talking?"

"Yeah, it's really me," John confirmed, and came closer to his son, who looked almost fearful at this point.

Dean seemed totally taken aback, even cautious. "W-why you saying this stuff, Dad?"

John looked at Dean through blurry, tear-filled eyes. "I want you to watch out for your brother and sister, okay?"

"Yeah, Dad, you know I will," Dean said, voice shaking. "You're scaring me."

"Don't be scared, Dean. Just listen." John leaned closer, growing serious, quiet, his voice low whisper. "You have to save Sammy. From himself, from what that demon did to him. And if you
can't save him—Dean, you'll have to kill him." Dean drew back, eyes wide in shock. John wasn't done. He grew even more sickened than before. "And Dean, your sister… keep her safe. From Sam."

"From Sam?" Dean protested, more and more disturbed and terrified by the second.

John looked at Dean sadly, wishing he had more time. Because yet again, he was leaving too much on Dean's shoulders. "Just trust me, son."

Dean stared, aghast. "Dad—I don't—" he almost pleaded, eyes wide, begging John for a reason, an explanation. "What are you talking about? What did the demon say to you?"

John looked at his oldest, knowing he couldn't explain it, not in the time he had left. So he lied again, put on a reassuring smile. "We'll talk about this later, son. Get your rest. I'll see you in a little while." And John retreated, not giving his son a chance to reply.

Dean watched his dad leave in shellshocked silence and John smiled through the pain at his boy one last time, then turned and walked away, closing his eyes and standing in the middle of the hospital hallway. Momentarily, he opened his eyes and they immediately went to his left, where Alex's door was open. He hesitated, his chest clenching. And slowly, he approached.

John lingered in the open doorway, looking at his daughter. She was on her side and sleeping deeply, her dark and messy hair a cloud around her head, her knees pulled up toward her chest, her hands underneath the side of her face. She'd always slept like that, difference was until she'd been six, she'd been snuggled up like that into Dean's side—Dean slept on his back, an arm under his head—and Sam would always be on the other side of Alex, his back to her back, his arms crossed and mouth open widely. They'd slept like that until John insisted they stop the 'little kid shit' and start sleeping separate. He'd still caught them like that a few times afterward, and it had infuriated him. Why? Why had that stuff left him so enraged? Maybe because his kids were better parents and family to each other than he ever was. Maybe it's because he was worried that depending on each other would make them weak. Maybe it's because for years everything had made him angry and crazy. Everything.

John came into the room slowly, hesitantly, looking down at his daughter, the little girl he'd spent a lifetime trying to convince himself that he was protecting. But seeing her laying there, bruised and battered and messed up as hell he couldn't help but think he should have let her go awhile ago. Not only to keep her safe from this life of demons and hell creatures… but to keep her safe from himself.

Their relationship had been so strained and nonexistent these last few years—maybe always, actually. Over the years Alex had become an expert at avoiding John and he'd been okay with that, because he knew in his heart of hearts that he wasn't good for her, that he had no clue how to parent her. So he hadn't really tried at all. After all, it had been too late. But now, in the sunset of his life, he wished he'd tried. Just a little.

He should have done so much more for her, but he'd always left her as an afterthought, uncertain how to relate to her, uncertain how to approach her at all. He'd been angry at her for being different and abnormal. But now he was just angry with himself for the selfish, cowardly shit he'd subjected her to. He thought of when she'd been younger, a little stick of a girl with eyes too big for her head. The taller she'd gotten and the older she'd grown, the more distance had been between himself and his daughter. Now, oceans might as well have separated them. And this was entirely his doing.
He was at her bedside now and didn't know what to do. He thought of waking her up to say goodbye—but he didn't. He just watched her for a minute, then carefully, gently smoothed the hair on her head and felt the heavy sadness settle over his heart. "Baby I'm so sorry," he whispered brokenly, and just looked at her, looked at his hand on her head. He realized he hadn't touched her affectionately like this in—well—he couldn't remember. He withdrew his hand from her. Here at the end of his life, he felt his failures so much more clearly than before.

John felt a deep sense of anguish overwhelm him inside and he turned, sat there gingerly beside her, just barely resting his weight on the hospital bed. He leaned over his knees, clasping his hands together, silent and looking down for a long moment. He looked upwards, searching the ceiling and despairing, his voice just a whisper. "I… I haven't asked you for anything in a long time. But just… can you make sure she's safe?" John hesitated. "Please. I know I don't deserve anything good from you. But… she does." His voice cracked. "Please." Silence, nothing. He wasn't sure if he'd expected a reply or not, but he felt disillusioned and for a long moment, silence rang in his ears. Was this really it? At the end of your life, maybe you always expect it will be different. More grand, more like the closing of a chapter, like a grand finale—not a question mark, not a comma.

John took in a deep breath and stood slowly to his full height, knowing what came next. He walked slowly to the door and turned back around, looked at his daughter, his little girl, one last time. And awash in regrets he could do nothing about, John Winchester steeled himself, drew a deep breath, and walked down the hall, a soldier until the end, accepting his fate with a raised chin, a steady gaze, and the knowledge that he had made the right choice. He had saved his son's life. He had kept his daughter safe from the clutches of the yellow-eyed demon.

Not even five minutes later, Dean would yank Alex out of bed and rush her into Dad's room where he was crashing, unresponsive. John Winchester would be pronounced dead at 10:41am.

__Present Day__

Alex spit and rinsed, the zing of minty toothpaste much better than the previous taste of vomit. _Never again_ she told herself miserably. She'd been saying this to herself a lot lately. Her head was pounding, her ears felt muffled, her stomach was a frigging nightmare, her head felt garbled and woozy, her entire body hurt. Much to Sam's frustration, she and Dean had gotten wasted last night, again. But she'd drank so much more than usual, trying to keep up with her oldest brother—and she was now realizing exactly how _stupid_ she'd been to think she could out-drink Dean like that. God—this was the hangover from hell.

Alex rubbed her face with the palm of her hand. Tired. Hurting. Heartbroken.

The past month was a blur to her. They'd spent about a week at Bobby's detoxing Sam and avoiding each other—then they'd left for Minneapolis to take care of a vengeful spirit and it had been a cut and dry job, nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing except the mood in their family. There had been a lot of silence between all three siblings, a lot more tension than in awhile, a lot of unspoken frustrations and suspicions. But they'd done what they did best… ignored it, said nothing about it. Carried on like life were normal, like the apocalypse wasn't hanging over their heads, like the devil wasn't hounding Sam, like heaven wasn't after Dean.

After wrapping up on that job last week, they'd caught wind of weird stuff happening back in Sioux Falls and returned to find that the dead were rising—including Bobby's late wife Karen. At first the people who had come back to life had seemed okay, or at least not violent, not inhuman—but then one by one they began to turn, to kill, to dissolve into monsters. Alex stared at herself in the mirror, grieved. Bobby had wanted his wife to be okay and stay alive _so badly_. He didn't deserve to be
alone and unhappy like that. He didn't deserve for one second to have to see his wife again and then kill her again. Maybe all hunters were cursed to be alone, to see the ones they loved die, leave, fade out.

Going still, Alex felt herself rapidly becoming emotional as she began to think about him. She clenched the edges of the sink now, hard. Castiel was pretty much the biggest reason she'd been drinking so damn much the past month. She'd been trying to sidestep her confused and hurt feelings, trying to drown them out in a steady tide of beer and whiskey—but her thoughts were proving impossible to escape or forget, and the more she tried to run away from them, the more it hurt, the more the feelings burrowed into her, refusing to be moved.

Cas wouldn't answer her anymore, not at all. Alex had called to him almost every day of that first week but he'd been silent, hadn't appeared at all, not even for a second. She hadn't even tried calling him at all this entire week, bitter, finally accepting that he wouldn't come. The last time any of them had seen or heard from him was at Bobby's, the night that… that they had come so close to killing each other or screwing each other, she wasn't sure which. The night that he'd confessed things to her and she to him, and for a moment she'd thought even though he had told her they couldn't, that they would anyway. Because even though he'd said that, even though he'd told her in so many words that being together couldn't happen—he'd gone against his words, kissing her so tenderly and soulfully, leaving Alex absolutely convicted that there was no walking away, not from this… but then he had done just that, without any warning, and she'd been devastated, stunned. To have been warm in his arms one moment, then alone and cold the next.

At first, she'd called to him frantically, worried… but as the days passed the worry had turned to anger, disillusionment—now she was left feeling heartsick and alone, abandoned, with the reminders of him remaining on her body. She looked at the back side of her arm in the mirror, at the soft pink raised line where Dean had stitched her closed. A souvenir of the night when Castiel had cut her deep, in more ways than one. The bruises he'd left all over her body had faded, but the wounds he'd left on her heart remained, raw and open, painful.

Alex's eyes flickered over herself in the mirror and she could so clearly see the deep sadness that she felt inside. It was etched all over her face, hidden in the slump of her shoulders and in the edges of her mouth which hadn't turned up in a smile in days and days. She wondered in a saddened daze how this had happened, how she had let herself fall so completely, how she had become so weak and helpless. She realized had no control left, no say in the matter, no way out of being what she was: in love with Castiel. She wanted to physically break something out of anguished frustration. Maybe Alex would have in the past, but this version of herself had no fire left. And instead, she just hung her head and leaned onto the sink, squeezed her eyes shut, focused on breathing in and out. Shaky, agonized breaths.

She had never wanted something like this, ever. She'd always been focused on surviving and living up to expectations, fighting and following after Dean and Dad… it had been her only choice and she'd accepted it. But now she found herself desperately longing for something for the first time in her life—him. It seemed stupid but all she wanted was Castiel beside her and with her, because with him she felt safe and right, part of something and those were two things she wasn't used to feeling. Maybe he was trying to protect her by putting distance between them… but she couldn't bear it—not after she knew what it was like to be in his arms and held like she was treasured. Not after she'd looked at him and seen her own feelings reflected back in his eyes.

And when she wondered if she would ever even see him again, her heart physically ached.

Get—yourself—together. She forced herself to look in the mirror again, forced herself to stop, now. She straightened up, looked herself over tersely but then grew listless, lost her determination in
favor of faltering self-doubt. She barely recognized herself. She used to be different than this, more unaffected and less distracted. In the mirror, she saw a crumbling version of herself staring back. She felt inches away from a breakdown, from utterly shattering and she looked away, tried to ignore reality. She readjusted the unfamiliar weight of the new pistol that was in the holster at her hip. It was a semi-automatic nickel-plated Colt 1911, one like Dean carried—he'd went out and bought her one without warning last week and shoved it at her, told her that carrying the hunting knife wasn't enough. She smiled softly, cynically, because when she thought about the things they'd been up against lately—what good would a gun do? The friggin' horsemen of the apocalypse and Lucifer in the flesh were after them. Her little smile fell. Maybe it was just a matter of time for all of them.

She could now hear low male voices vaguely in the other room through her messed up ears—the TV. Sam must be up she guessed. There was a flash of humiliation when she thought of her twin who had seen her in such an intimate and awkward position with Cas… as if that hadn't been bad enough, Sam had insisted on taking her aside and asking about it a bunch of times, acting concerned and worried—but Alex, mortified as hell that he'd seen that, had dodged him every time. Sam didn't know how deep the wound was he was poking at, he was just worried about her, but Alex refused, further frustrating Sam. It was just that every time she looked at him, she saw his shocked and horrified expression when he'd found herself and Cas under Famine's spell. And then in quick succession, she'd remember more—Cas's mouth on hers, his warm bare skin under her hands, them breathing each other in frantically, her body rendered useless and in the throes of utter bliss underneath the weight of his body against hers… they’d been in a place together that was warm and alive and real. And so being ripped from it and left in this cold, blank state of nothing, of alone—it wasn't fair, she didn't understand, and it was not even frustrating anymore, it was infuriating.

Alex heard the familiar sound of a shotgun cocking out in the main room and looked toward the closed bathroom door now, annoyed. Sam must be cleaning out his shotgun again—why did he have to clean it so obsessively, anyway? He was always getting the burnt-smelling shell dust all over her stuff. Alex wanted to punch something because everything, everything was making her mad right now. The sound of the men talking heatedly on TV grew louder and Alex suddenly stopped, her anger fading away as she realized that wait. That wasn't the TV. That was someone in their room!

She realized too late that what she'd been hearing wasn't what she thought at all. Not a TV. Not Sam cleaning a gun. The unmistakable sound of two shotgun blasts punched through the silence and Dean was shouting, someone was barking "stay down!" and something was very wrong. Alex wasn't thinking, just reacting, and fast, adrenaline rocketing through her veins at breakneck speeds as she snatched her pistol out of the holster, charged out of the bathroom, gun held high in both hands—two men in dark clothing with masks shoved up over their heads stood over Dean, their shotguns aimed at him—Sam laid motionless and bloody on one of the beds—the men noticed Alex the second she came out and the one closer to her was whirling, his gun swinging around toward her and Dean was jumping off the other bed, lunging toward the guys shouting something and Alex was firing at the guy in front of her before she could even fully register anything, before she could even fully take everything in.

The room exploded into a chaos of gunshots and shotgun rounds and Alex felt something hit her in the stomach hard enough to make her stumble backwards—she watched the guy closer to her fall over dead, his shotgun that had been aimed straight at her clattering to the floor—she looked down at herself, mystified… her stomach was warm and sticky? And suddenly pain, unbelievable pain hit her and she stumbled backwards, the air gone from her lungs, her pistol falling out of her grip. She hit the wall behind her and slid down, legs going out from under her brokenly. The world seemed to tilt and shift around her oddly and she looked up—remembering Dean had been there.
and where was he now?

She looked to her side with great effort, hearing the sound of her own labored breathing loudly in her own ears. Shock hit her like lightning when she saw that Dean was draped across the bed, staring up at the ceiling lifelessly, covered in blood.

"D-Dean!" she choked out, but he didn't move, didn't respond. On the other bed, she could see Sam's massive feet hanging off the end, not moving. "Sam?" she begged. No response and the thought they're dead shook her to the core and made the world close in on her, like her entire body was going to be sick, like everything was spinning out of control, like she couldn't move at all—and then the sound of booted feet in front of her. Alex looked up, panting painfully. She stared into the barrel of a shotgun—holding the weapon was a grim man. Behind him, the other guy she'd shot and killed was laying there.

Alex squinted up at her attacker, recognizing him. "W-Walt?"

He just stared down at her murderously. "You shouldn't have shot Roy, Alex," he told her lowly, lip curling upwards in a snarl. She heard the cocking of a shotgun and flinched. Click-click.

His finger slid toward the trigger. Alex closed her eyes, making a pathetic crying sound. And she didn't even think it would work but out of desperation and in pain and not knowing what else to do, she begged softly, brokenly. "Please, Cas…"

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Five Minutes Ago
Glendalough, Ireland

The Irish people called this glacial valley a 'thin place,' believing it to be a holy ground, a spiritual refuge where pilgrims could seek to be closer to God. They said that here the veil was less, the divide was smaller—that one could reach out and touch God, be still and listen and hear his voice. Pilgrims came from all over the world to this place. One such pilgrim stood at the shores of the upper lake, looking over the tranquil waters silently.

Castiel observed the great verdant mountains surrounding the rippling lake, the billowing gray clouds above in the sky. He felt the cool dampness of the air, heard the lush rustling of the trees moving in the breeze. It was beautiful, it was serene, it was holy—but he didn't feel God here. He'd been looking for so long. There was almost nowhere left to look. A great, unexpected gale of wind came across the lake, whipped Cas's trench coat around him.

He wondered where God could be. Perhaps he was hiding, walking among humanity in a disguise. Maybe he was that child laughing and throwing pieces of bread into the water for the ducks. Perhaps he was the grizzled old man sitting on the bench leaning on his cane. But the biggest and most disturbing question was why would God hide? Why should God be so impossible to find? Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. The word of the Lord. Castiel was beginning to feel as though he had been led astray… because how could a person find God if an angel couldn't?

Cas's mind turned to Alex as it usually did, and he wondered where she was. She hadn't called to him in days. He felt guilty, because she'd called to him multiple times after what happened with Famine—and he'd gone to her immediately each time. But he'd remained invisible, not allowing her to see him. She had never known he was there at all. And each time she called to him, he'd arrived silently and he'd seen her face crumble when she believed he hadn't come—he saw her grow sadder and angrier each time. But he would rather her be sad and angry than dead at his hands. So he remained silent, made sure she was safe.
It was difficult to keep himself away from her like this, but he knew it was the right thing. He'd decided it now and he wasn't going to fail again. He'd had a moment of utter weakness when she had told him that she didn't want to walk away and did he? He just hadn't been able to bring himself to lie or sidestep. He'd only been able to tell her no, then close the distance between them with a kiss. A kiss that haunted his mind still. All of his moments spent with her haunted him, but that kiss—being so close to her, feeling as though she trusted him with everything that she had—it stayed with him and he felt certain that he would carry it with him forever.

A small bird flew overhead and Cas looked up and watched it: the powerful beating of the wings and graceful dip and swoop of the bird's body in midair. Truly a testament to God's artistry and power, something as seemingly simple as a bird. God was there, somewhere, and Castiel knew with perseverance and faithfulness, he would find him and discover—Castiel stilled suddenly, hearing Alex calling to him—but this time was different—something was wrong, and he knew it right away.

He went to where she was immediately, and even before the scenery of Ireland faded completely, he smelled the unmistakable acidic tang of human blood. And he was in a dim motel room, mid-morning. In the space of a fraction of a second, Castiel took the sight before him in with a quickly rising sense of absolute horror—Alex was crumpled and slack against a motel wall in front of him, her legs were bent under her strangely, she was covered in blood, her eyes were closed tightly, her face was a mask of pain—and a man Castiel didn't recognize stood over her, wielding a shotgun, the end of it just inches from her face.

Startled by Castiel's sudden appearance, the man with the gun reacted fast and whirled, the shotgun arcing up through the air to aim at Cas—but realizing what was happening and fueled by a typhoon of soul-scorching fury, Castiel was erupting into a blazing assault—he stopped the barrel of the shotgun midair with both hands, tearing the barrel in half ruthlessly even as the guy pulled the trigger—buckshot fired out in a violent explosion, ripping through the air uselessly. Cas grabbed the man ferociously and whirled him around, brutally slamming him into the dresser that was against the wall. Wood splintered and the dresser broke in half completely from the force with which Cas had smashed the man into it—Cas ripped his blade from where it was hidden inside his trench coat, not even hesitating for a second, he brought the flashing blade down on the man who had dared to hurt Alex, ending him.

The man's eyes went wide as the blade plunged through his chest, and under Castiel's murderous gaze, the man gasped out a last breath and died with no grand fanfare. He slumped over and fell to the ground, where Cas stared down at him, breathing hard, his heart hammering faster than normal, his entire vessel feeling shaky and uneven. The room was silent once more. Cas looked to his side, where he saw Sam and Dean each laying on a bed—both shot dead.

In alarm Cas turned, laying eyes on Alex again, fearing what he would see—she was looking up at him and she looked terrified, her face twisted up in pain—she was struggling to breathe and Cas rushed over, dropped to his knees in front of her, shaking physically, horrified, his hands hovering over her arms as he looked at her and saw how bad it was. "No," he managed just barely, seeing that she'd been shot in the stomach, that she'd lost so much blood. It was pooling around her and the wall behind her was splattered with it, too. She grabbed onto the sleeve of his trench coat weakly and their eyes met and he saw how afraid she was and it was just like the scene he'd witnessed in their future.

Panic swept over Cas as he realized that she was dying and quickly, too—and he was powerless to do anything—he couldn't heal anymore—but Cas laid his hand over her stomach anyway, dizzyingly sickened when his palm became wet with her warm blood, when she made a pained, sobbing sound—a sound that wrecked Castiel completely. He began silently pleading with God,
promised he would do anything in return, anything, if his father would allow him this one miracle, 
please! Cas stared at his hand in increasing dismay when nothing happened, and every desperate 
hope he'd held onto was dashed on the rocks, every bit of faith he'd placed in his father fell away 
from him like leaves fall from a tree in autumn.

Alex trembled violently underneath his hand, weakly putting her hand over his, her fingers shakily 
curling around his—Castiel stared at their bloody hands, shocked and dazed—at the sight of her 
smaller hand clinging to his larger one his chest spasmed painfully. He tightened his hand around 
hers, looked up at her, despairing. "It's too late," she choked out and he looked at her in abject 
denial, shook his head, gripped the side of her head not even knowing why, his fingers tangling in 
hair.

"No it can't be," he protested, almost unable to speak, his despair was so great.

Her warm hazel eyes were afraid, were searching his even as her chest rose and fell raggedly. "Cas, I—" she faltered weakly, then trailed off, blinked twice as if her lids were heavy, and her breathing 
hitched, she seemed to lose her focus completely—and Cas gripped her tighter, as if he could hold 
her back, keep her there with him—but she went still, her eyes sliding closed, her head lolling to 
the side, the breath gone from her lungs, the life gone from her body. And Cas was shellshocked, 
not breathing, staring at her, unable to even process what had just happened in the span of perhaps 
two minutes.

"No," he protested out loud, feeling as if everything inside of him were shattered and destroyed. 
His hand moved down from the side of her head to cradle her face—his thumb brushed against the 
still-warm skin of her cheek and he felt so much sorrow well up inside of him that he felt he might 
break. This wasn't happening—she wasn't supposed to die like this! Beside himself in grief and 
shock and anger and helpless dismay, Castiel looked upwards, not knowing what else to do, his 
voice barely a whisper. "Take—take me instead," he said, then when nothing happened, his voice 
raised to an enraged shout. "Take me instead!"

The silence was deafening and his anger propelled him to his feet where he stumbled back a few 
steps, shaky. "Where are you?!" he shouted at the ceiling. Nothing happened and Cas lowered his 
gaze, breathless, confounded, not knowing what to do, not at all. He looked at Alex's body, curled 
against the wall brokenly and he looked upwards again, his chest tight in pain. "I—I need your 
help," he begged desolately. "Please."

Castiel waited, desperate for an answer, for anything. But nothing happened. God was silent.

Silence. There was utter silence. Then the sound of a heartbeat in her ears. Her own heartbeat?

She became aware that there was darkness all around her, the kind of darkness that no light can cut 
through—the kind of darkness that presses in on all sides, cloyingly. There was some kind of 
ground underneath her feet, but the air was dank and motionless, breathing was difficult—she 
realized there was an overwhelming sense of fright in the pit of her stomach, of no, please, no. 
Why was she scared? Where was she before this? Alex wondered am I dreaming?

She turned a little, trying to look around, but couldn't see anything past the pitch black depths 
around her. She turned again, growing more and more distressed—and then in the distance, just 
barely, her eyes perceived a faint light. She began to stutteringly edge closer to it through the 
darkness and almost wanted to drop to all fours and crawl because that seemed safer, but she stayed 
upright, kept moving closer slowly, muscles tensed and mind on overdrive.

She got closer and closer to the source of light, and could begin to make out a definite structure. It
was an old phone booth—she saw the top of a solid stripe of blue, the white word PHONE flickering a little. It looked old and weather-worn—the soft fluorescent light from the booth dissipated out into the dark, softly lighting just a little bit of ground—pavement—but on all the other sides of the booth, the light didn't hit anything—it was just solid darkness in every direction. She stood there in front of the phone booth, staring up at it oddly, unsure what was happening or where she was.

Without warning the shrill sound of the phone ringing cut through the utter silence, the black receiver rattled loudly on the hook, and Alex flinched backwards, startled. She looked around, maybe halfway expecting someone to appear and answer the call. Nothing happened. No one appeared. The phone continued to ring and Alex hesitantly inched closer, hand outstretched. She waited a few seconds, unsure. Then grasped the receiver and held it to her ear. She heard crackling on the other end and frowned. Then nearly dropped the phone when she heard a voice behind her.

"Alex," the deep voice said and she turned around, heart in her throat because she knew that voice only... it couldn't be, could it? But he stood there not four feet away, looking just like she remembered. She stared at him, the phone clutched in her hand so hard that her knuckles turned white.

She searched his face and remained frozen in complete disbelief.

"...Dad?"
"The stars, the moon... they have all been blown out."
- Florence and the Machine

Mama, put my guns in the ground I can't shoot them anymore...

The sound of thunder rumbling woke Dean up and he was immediately confused. It was night outside and he was sitting in the Impala—alone. Good ole Bob Dylan played on the radio.

That long black cloud is comin' down; I feel like I'm knockin' on heaven's door...

He glanced around and saw no sign of anyone—where was he? Dean switched off the radio, totally disconcerted—he couldn't remember why he was there or where there even was or where he'd been before he came to. He got out of the car and realized what the hell? He'd parked in the middle of the damn road! Okay, this was officially starting to weird him the fuck out...

The trunk of the Impala closed suddenly and Dean jumped and turned at the sound, frowning in slight alarm as his heart rate jumped up a few notches. The frown faded into a surprised expression when he saw Sam standing there holding a huge crate of fireworks. Only, it wasn't not Sam now; it was Sam when he was twelve or thirteen. He had the shaggy sandy hair—the small face that hadn't filed out yet—and the lanky awkwardness that comes with the early teenage years. "...Sammy?" Dean asked in slow confusion. And yet, there was a strange familiarity about this that Dean couldn't figure out or place.

"Come on, let's go!" Sam called, oblivious to Dean's puzzled confusion. His little brother was excited, grinning widely and already taking off into the field that was beside the road the car was parked in. Dean stared after him for a fraction of a second before he felt something grab him. He looked down into the young, freckly face of Alex. She was the same age as Sam—hair in two messy ponytails on either side of her head. She was wearing that old green bomber jacket of Sam's—wow, he'd almost forgotten about that thing. It was oversized on her. She used to wear it all the time.

She was holding his arm with both her hands while grinning up at him—the kind of grin she saved for when the three of them were up to mischief, to no good, to adventure. Her teeth were still too big for her face, and her freckles really stood out on her nose and cheeks. She pulled on him excitedly, tugging him after Sam—apparently she couldn't wait to get to where they were headed. "Weird dream," Dean commented to himself, but he went along with it, letting Alex drag him to where Sam waited. Dean smiled a little to himself as he let himself relax into this memory and/or dream. His brother and sister seemed happy. And that was kind of nice.

Sam plopped the crate on the ground in the middle of an empty field. He pulled out a couple of fireworks—Alex was grabbing two herself. "Got your lighter?" Sam asked Dean, and Dean hesitated—he had that odd sense of déjà vu again. What the hell else was there to do though? He decided to go along with Sam's question and he checked his pockets. In the deep front pocket, a familiar shape he'd all but forgotten. He pulled out his old Zippo lighter. "Whoa, I haven't seen this in years—" he said, surprised, turning it over fondly in the palm of his hand. It was even more beautiful than he remembered. An iconic piece of his history he hadn't thought of in forever.
Alex swooped in and snatched it, leaving Dean to chuckle. "Whoa, little pyromaniac," he said even as Sam was grinning and holding out a fistful of fireworks toward his twin, telling her "fire 'em up!"

The twins looked so excited as they lit the fireworks—they were the kind you held while sparks shot out the top. Dean smiled softly, watched his siblings grin in unison, their eyes going wide in sheer zealous delight when the firework fuses caught fire. Sam and Alex ran over to Dean with the lit fireworks, Sam gave him one—they held them up high, at arms length, watching the fuses burn up, anticipating the moment when the fireworks would shoot off, when the magic would happen. All of their fireworks went off in almost-perfect unison, firing brilliant red streaks of light up into the sky, showering the dark expanse in flecks of sparks—the trees nearby glowed faint red and pink against the light—an ordinary landscape made surreal. Dean glanced down at his siblings—Sam and Alex's eyes reflected the light, their smiles were wide and carefree, and that didn't happen very often and Dean felt himself smiling, too, suddenly realizing why the scene felt so familiar to him. "Hey… I remember this!" he said, smile getting broader as he looked up into the fountain of fireworks again. "It's Fourth of July, nineteen ninety-six!"

The fireworks died out, leaving the night dark once more and Dean looked down at Sam, who was looking up at Dean so happily. "Dad would never let us do anything like this," Sam said. "Thanks, Dean. This is great." He hugged Dean tightly around the waist—and Dean was kind of startled at the sudden burst of affection but he hugged Sam back after a second. His heart was really full, and he hoped Sam wouldn't look at him, wouldn't see how affected he was. Alex didn't notice either of her brothers. She was busy lighting all of the rest of fireworks a few feet off, and Sam saw her momentarily, let out an excited whoop, pulled away from Dean—"fire in the hole!" he exclaimed in terrified delight, running to his twin and screaming in delight. He took her by the arm and pulled her away to a safe distance there with Dean. You could tell Alex would have been laughing loudly if she had the ability.

The fireworks begin to explode all at once and the night was no longer dark. There was a beautiful chorus of wild sparks and rainbow colors and zinging explosions against the dark velvet sky above their heads and Dean and Sam were suddenly laughing out loud and Alex—well—her head was throw back, mouth open in a huge silent laugh as her eyes crinkled up. Sam ran out and whirled around under the sparks while whooping, overjoyed at something as simple and carefree as this moment.

Alex hugged Dean around the waist, grinning toothily up at him, then she looked back up at the sky, her small head resting there against his chest trustingly. The fireworks continued to snap and pop, ribbons of light raining down over the three of them. Dean slowly put his arm around his sister, his hand squeezing her kid-sized shoulder—she was there and was safe with him, and he was comforted by knowing that. Sam caught Dean's eye from where sparks fell around him like confetti and he was smiling so big—the brothers nodded at each other after a second, and Dean's heart swelled too big for his chest. Because these two—this boy, this girl—they were and always would be his absolute world when all is said and done. This is everything. This is it. Seeing those smiles stretched across their faces, seeing unrestrained joy dance in their eyes, seeing them doing something normal and wild and childlike… it was everything he ever wanted for them, it was too much for him to take, he felt his eyes filling up. He suddenly remembered what he thought in this exact moment, Fourth of July, 1996, fourteen years ago: This is what happiness is.

There was an especially loud explosion, then another—and it was suddenly not a pleasant sound anymore, it had a different quality to it. Was that gunfire? And Dean was suddenly ripped from the good feelings and was brutally assaulted by a stark series of flashing memories: the motel room, Roy and Walt and their shotguns, Sam shot in the chest laying lifeless on the bed, Alex rushing
into the room and Roy turning to shoot her, Dean frantically lunging for Roy, trying to save her, a huge punch of pain exploding in his own chest, then... nothing. Dean was startled at the barrage of recollections. Just as quick as it happened he was back in the field but it was pitch black now—Sam, Alex, the fireworks were gone and it was silent, still. It was also raining now lightly and felt colder than it did before—there was something distinctly ominous about it. The rain didn't get him wet—he couldn't feel it at all. Where there had been absolute joy and happiness a handful of seconds ago, there was horror, anxiety, and dread.

Dean was breathing a little harder, freaked out. "Sam?" He asked softly. He paused, hearing no reply. "Al?"

\textit{Nothing}. Dean saw that the Impala was still there, and he went back to it. He looked inside, then all around, trying to lay eyes on his siblings. This was a really weird, really vivid dream. It \textit{was} a dream, right? Just then inside the car, the radio came on, very scratchy and filled with static.

"Dean!" Said a low, familiar voice. Dean frowned, leaned into the driver's side window.

"...Cas?" he asked incredulously. The radio crackled again, and that time there was no mistaking whose voice that was, even though it sounded weird, like the voice was being filtered through a tin can.

"Yes, it's me," Cas replied, and he sounded distinctly urgent.

Dean got back into the car, sat in the driver's side seat. Suddenly this all seemed to make sense. "You gotta stop poking around in my dreams," he told the angel, then almost laughed, a little relieved that this \textit{was} a dream after all. "I need some me time, man."

"Listen to me very closely," Cas's voice said intensely. "This \textit{isn't} a dream that you're in."

Dean's smile faded and he got a little worried by the angel's tone. "Then... what is it?" Then he thought of those memories of the motel room, Sam covered in blood, Alex about to be shot... and his heart hitched slightly. He looked around the dark, nondescript landscape surrounding the Impala and it was with a sudden, huge amount of dread that he asked his next question. "Where... where exactly am I?"

"Heaven," Cas replied immediately, shortly, like he wanted to discuss something else.

Dean however was blinking in surprise. "You're joking!" he said, but then he quickly followed it up with, "you \textit{are} joking, right?"

"No Dean, I'm not joking," Cas's perturbed voice crackled through the radio.

"\textit{Heaven}?" Dean asked, looking around at his surroundings again, definitely \textit{not} getting pearly gates from what he was seeing. Plus, what the hell would \textit{he} be doing in Heaven? This had to be a mistake. He was stumped. "Okay, well if that's true... how did I get here? And wait, \textit{wait}—" he was frowning intensely, realizing something. "Does this mean I'm \textit{dead}?"

"Yes you are and please, just \textit{listen}," Cas said, impatiently, his voice hard and urgent. The radio static buzzed and then cracked. "This spell, this connection, it's difficult to maintain."

Dean thought about Sam, dead and full of buckshot and laying on the bed next to him in the motel room. His stomach seized up in fear because that could only mean one thing... "Where's Sam, Cas?"

"He's there in Heaven too, ahead of you on the—"
Another terrible thought occurred to Dean, and he was suddenly leaning forward, cutting the angel off completely. "Cas—Alex! Is she—? Did she—" he couldn't bring himself to ask the question, he only remembered his sister whipping around the corner out of the bathroom, being stupid and heroic and thoughtless and Roy whirling, his shotgun raised high... but there was a chance that maybe she shot him first, right? There was a chance that she got the jump on both those assholes and survived, she was a good shot, hung over or not, right?

There was a very long pause and for a second, Dean worried that the call or whatever had been cut off and he banged on the dash a couple times with his fist, thinking the radio was broken. "Cas, you there?"

"Yes, I'm here," Cas says, and he sounded less focused than he did before. The radio crackled, almost making Cas's next words sound shaky or wavering. "She's—she's dead too, Dean."

Dean sat back in his seat, aghast, not able to speak for a few seconds, too stunned at the idea to even comprehend it. "I-isn't she supposed to have some angel protection deal?" There was long pause, no reply at all and Dean was getting mad now because he realized Cas was purposefully not answering. "Cas!"

"I'm here, Dean," Cas replied in a low, even tone.

Dean pursed his lips in irritation, let out an irritated breath through his nose. "Okay, right, Alex is dead too, good job Cas—so where the hell is she? I see a whole lotta nothing and no one out here."

The radio crackled loudly. "I... I can't locate her," Cas said, and the way the angel sounded worried and uncertain set Dean at even greater unease. "She's drifting, Dean, I've—I've never seen anything like it."

"What the hell do you mean, she's drifting?" Dean asked, his stomach tightening in alarm.

"The souls and your bodies... they leave a connection here on earth to where they are in Heaven, and with this spell I can see where you are, where Sam is but—I can't pin her down and it's—I'm not—she's in Heaven, I think but..." he sounded really unsure now, almost like he was talking to himself. "She shouldn't be drifting, no one does that—"

"Well what the hell does it mean, Cas?" Dean demanded, getting more and more anxious and worked up by the second.

"I'm not sure, just..." Cas paused, then sounded really urgent again, hurried. "I'm running out of time, Dean. What do you see?"

"What do you mean 'what do I see'?" Dean asked, getting more agitated, more alarmed. He didn't like to be rushed. Thunder rumbled again, distantly.

"Some people see a tunnel or a river," Cas stated, then asked again: "What do you see?"

"N-nothing!" Dean said, freaked out, not seeing a tunnel, or a river—nothing besides his damn car and the road outside. "My dash," he told Cas. "I'm in my car. I'm on... I dunno, some road."

There was a second of silence, and Cas's voice was weaker, sounding farther away than before and distorted oddly. "Follow the road, Dean—you'll find Sam and—" the radio died out completely and Dean waited a second.

"I'll find Sam and what? Cas?" he fiddled with the radio controls but all that did was turn music back on. "Dammit." Dean muttered—it wasn't Cas he heard coming through the speakers anymore,
it was Guns N' Roses.

*Take me down to the paradise city where the grass is green and the girls are pretty... oh won't you please take me home?*

The song felt foreboding to him somehow. Dean looked around again and didn't see much else to do but what Cas said. "Okay," he said to himself reluctantly, thinking about Sam and Alex and oh yeah the fact that *they were both dead*. He let out a shaky breath and nodded a little, wishing he had more to go on than what Cas told him, wishing he knew how the hell he was gonna get himself and his siblings out of this mess. "Follow the road..." he muttered, then shrugged to himself, shook his head. First step: find Sam and Alex. After that he'd figure the rest out. Dean cranked the Impala and started down the dark highway. The moon was huge, glowing strangely, and the sky was purple-toned, odd. The stars seemed unsteady, spinning in slow, concentric circles overhead.

Maybe it was all supposed to be beautiful, but to Dean, it felt threatening.

There was no way for him to know what was happening back on earth right now, but as he sped down Heaven's highway, Castiel was back on earth picking up Alex's body, laying her down so gently on the third bed in the room—moving her hair away from her face, looking down at her in turmoil, his hand lingering there at the side of her face. "Where are you?" he asked her softly, so puzzled and anxious. He looked at her a moment longer and sadness like never before pressed down over him like absolute gravity. "Where did you go?"

"Alex," he said, and she turned around and nearly had a stroke right then and there because it was her *dad* standing there!

Alex looked at him in stunned-to-stillness disbelief because she hadn't seen his face in four years but it was *him* and he was *exactly* how she remembered—tall, solidly built; he had a scruffy beard touched with the beginnings of gray. Same messy dark head of hair. Same tired eyes. She blinked a few times, shellshocked. "...Dad?"

He smiled kind of hesitantly at her with his mouth, but his *eyes*... they were really emotional, really *full*, not holding back like his lips were. She'd never seen him look at her like that before and she felt a deep suspicious fear immediately. "Hi baby," he said softly, like speaking was difficult for him, like he was fighting back tears. What the hell was this? Some kind of sick joke?

Alex looked at the phone in her hand—realized she was wearing that old green jacket of Sam's that used to be too big for her—what the hell, she lost this thing years ago, didn't she? She looked around into the gaping, swallowing darkness everywhere, then back at Dad, totally dazed and confused. She noticed now that he looked sort of wrong in his coloring, kind of pale or desaturated slightly. He was emanating an unnatural soft light, too—underneath his feet she could see pavement in a faint circle where light hit it. "Am I dreaming?" she asked, trying to think hard about where she was before this, but she couldn't remember a thing. "What is this?"

He didn't seem to hear her question, he was just looking at her with this slightly awed, taken aback expression. He took a minute to answer, clearly processing something. "Your... your voice," he said, sounding stunned. "It's... really beautiful." Alex felt slapped by the words and recoiled physically, wanting to slam the phone on the hook and flee the area—who was this impostor standing in front of her? "I heard you got your voice back, but—" he began, and she moved to leave because this couldn't be right and she couldn't do this—but he stepped forward then stopped short like he was held back by something invisible, like he couldn't come any closer. He held up a 'stop' hand, panicking suddenly. "Don't—don't hang up the phone! I can't call back."
"...Can't call back?" she asked, getting more and more freaked by the second. She pressed herself back up against the phone booth, keeping her distance and leveling him with suspicious, pained eyes. "You're dead!"

He went still, looked at her and grew completely solemn, like he was about to break bad news to her. "Yes. I am dead. So are you."

Alex made a face at that suggestion. "Uh... what?" She could have almost laughed at the suggestion. "No... I'm dreaming."

"You're not dreaming, baby." He looked incredibly sad. "You know how I know? I made a deal to be able to talk to you whenever you... whenever you died."

What? In front of her, Dad literally flickered, like a dying light, and Alex went slack jawed. Wait. Wait.

She suddenly saw the motel room and she was remembering the sound of Sam being shot, getting shot herself, praying to Cas—and literally as soon as the words were out of her mouth, his arrival. He'd brutally decimated her murderer and he'd come to her, dropped to his knees and held her and oh god, Cas, the look on his face, his hand against the shotgun wound, the helplessness and terror written onto the features of his face. And she'd struggled to tell him because she'd felt her life fading out completely, she'd known she was dying—she had been trying to tell him because he should know, even if he couldn't feel the same way, that someone, somewhere loved him, and that someone was her—but then she had faded out, she'd slipped away. She'd died. Alex looked at Dad, eyes wide—he was waiting for her to reply and she clenched her jaw, shook her head 'no,' upset and reeling, trembling suddenly, close to tears and feeling physically ill. "All right, look, I don't know who you are or what you want—but I'm outta here."

"Alex—please—don't—" Dad begged, and the way he said it froze her on the spot. "It's me," he said earnestly, urgently. "I can prove it."

She didn't like this at all, but for some crazy reason, she decided not to walk away... not yet. But every muscle was prepared to bolt if he came any closer. She fixed him with a terse expression and she steeled herself. "Prove it how?"

Dad looked uncharacteristically uncomfortable, almost like the John Winchester she'd met in 1978—a little unsure, a little nervous. It was so strange and disconcerting. "It was uh, nineteen ninety-two..." he started, frowning in thought, thinking hard. "You'd just turned nine and I'd... forgotten your and Sam's birthday." He paused. "Again." Alex was stunned at his use of the word 'again' and how he said it, because Dad never admitted or acknowledged his mistakes or shortcomings at all, at least not to her. But maybe she always wished he had and hearing him admit that, even in a roundabout way, set her chest clenching and pulse pounding wildly. "We went to that state fair, remember?" he asked, his dark eyes searching hers for a sign of recognition. Alex did remember but she didn't confirm or deny, just stayed stony and silent, deeply upset but refusing to show it. "And I was on my phone pretty much the whole time, I kind of let you kids do your own thing..." he sounded unhappy, but continued. "Sam and Dean went on some ride that you weren't tall enough for... you were always kinda small for your age..."

Alex remembered the night he was talking about as he spoke, remembered watching those two tall brothers of hers going onto the Tilt-A-Whirl. She'd been one inch too short to ride and Dad had been on his phone, not really present—talking to some hunter friend about some job. She'd watched Sam and Dean jealously for a second, then she'd spied the bottle toss and realized that she had a moment alone with Dad. She'd gotten the idea that maybe she could impress him and had suddenly been desperate to do just that.
Dad was continuing. "So you and me, we went to the bottle toss—well, you kind of dragged me. I wasn't really paying attention, remember?" He looked at her appealingly. "But then you got your turn and..." he his eyes fell low, remembering. There was a soft little smile. A proud little smile. "The guy manning the booth said he'd never seen a kid destroy the shelf like that—you hit every single bottle, went down the line like you were a damn soldier at a shooting range and... I watched that, I saw it and... you looked up at me when you finished and I told you good job and I was proud of you, remember?" He looked like he felt bittersweet. "I don't know if I've ever seen you so happy. Just cuz I told you I was proud." Alex was failing to hold herself together, her mouth wouldn't hold still, her throat seized up in pain, her eyes stung. And Dad's smile was cracking, falling, into something more like shame. "It was one of the only times I told you that," he said.

She swallowed painfully, and her eyes glittered with tears when she looked to the side, avoiding his gaze. "It's the only time I remember," she said, feeling wounded all over again. She'd always remembered that fondly... tagging along after her two brothers, riding ride after ride after ride, getting sticky fingers from cotton candy. It had been one of those days where she'd felt real, like a kid or a person, not just a shadow. Mostly it was because she'd had that moment with Dad when he had looked down at her and she'd felt like he saw her, really saw her. His mouth had curved to the side in a smile, all for her.

"Wow kiddo, look at you—I'm impressed!" he'd said, and those words might as well have been fairy dust like in Peter Pan—she'd felt like she could fly into the next galaxy, and then, and then... he'd ruffled her hair and put his hand on her shoulder, he'd looked at her fondly, the usual wall that was between them hadn't been there. "That was a damn good job. I'm proud of you, Alex." Her little heart had wanted to burst in happiness when he told her that, and she knew he didn't like hugs but she'd hugged him anyway tight around the waist, her eyes closed, grinning widely. He'd hesitated, then put his arms around her awkwardly. And that was Alex Winchester's best memory of her dad. And now, to her, it seemed pathetic that she would cling to it all these years... but she had.

She tried to get a hold over herself and leveled him with a mistrustful glare because him knowing that memory didn't mean much, and she wasn't born yesterday, and she still didn't really believe that was Dad. "Any half-cocked demon could know that about him, about me," she said frigidly. "It doesn't prove anything." She thought a second, then got an idea. She narrowed her eyes at him calculatingly, wondering if he'd pass the test. "What date did Mom die?"

Dad answered immediately, not even having to think about it. "November second, nineteen eighty-three." That wasn't the real question, that wasn't the real test—this next question was. Alex raised her chin just a fraction, challengingly. "And what date was Dean born?"

Dad's certainty flickered. He didn't look so sure. "Uh... January. Fourth."

Alex smiled cynically. He didn't look so sure. "Uh... January. Fourth."

"Never was good with dates," he said lamely, and he looked stricken, completely guilty. Then a little cynical as he smiled wanly. "It really is me." He didn't sound like he was begging her to believe him anymore. Now he sounded like he was disappointed in himself, but he shook it off, turned his attention back to her.

"I was trying to process all of this. She was dead, talking to Dad, and she just didn't know what to think or feel, and she just really wished Cas or Dean or Sam were here because she was scared as hell and the darkness felt like it was drowning her. Dad was looking at her thoroughly, concerned.
Not angry, not disappointed, not annoyed, not bitter. And it was all she had ever hoped for but it felt wrong and unfamiliar and she couldn't take it. She pushed her feelings about him down. "Where—where are you, Dad?" she asked, trying to regain control over the moment, trying to put together the pieces of this puzzle, figure out what's going on. "Where are you... calling... me from?" He flickered again.

"I'm okay," he said in that firm, don't-ask-me-more way he had. His smile was back and tinged with sadness. "That's all you need to know."

Alex wanted a straight answer but let it go—that was Dad after all, and she knew when to back off—she glanced around herself, into the pitch black expanse around them. She felt small, lost, bordering on hopeless and she was scared. She tried not to sound that way. "Okay... where am I?"

John shook his head slowly, glanced around, seeming to see things, his dark eyes darting back and forth. "I'm not sure. All I see is a run down parking lot."

"What?" Alex asked, and she looked around again—but she couldn't see anything except the phone booth and her dad—she could barely even see her own feet, they were almost lost in the darkness. Confused, Alex looked at her dad and she was getting more and more alarmed at the weird situation. If she was dead... this couldn't be Heaven, could it? Cas told her that souls generated their own heavens, and this was definitely not heavenly to her. Which only left one other option, didn't it? Funny, she always thought Hell would be a lot hotter and oranger. Like in the movies. Like the inside of a volcano times a thousand. But this darkness actually did seem worse than any fiery inferno could ever be—it seemed to seep into her soul itself. She was quiet now, looking at Dad falteringly. "Am I... am I in Hell?"

"No, no, I don't think so." Dad said, shaking her head and looking at her with his eyebrows knit together—Alex looked at him suspiciously now... because he had only looked at her like that—worried to his core—a couple times in her life, one of them when she accidentally got shot when they'd been hunting. Even though she was pretty sure that was Dad in front of her, seeing him like that was so unfamiliar and upsetting. She wished for Dean so badly right then, because he would know what to do—he always did.

Dad took in a long, slow breath, hesitating and she waited, entire body tense—she wasn't sure why, but she dreaded what he was going to say because of that indescribable look on his face. So when he finally said, "Alex... I'm so sorry," and the words were so heavy with a heartbroken earnestness. In response, she felt even more afraid. Cautious, she looked at him while filled with hope and dread all at the same time. "For—for what?"

"Everything," he said, and his eyes faltered, he looked down, seeming pained. Alex couldn't believe her ears. "For ignoring you. For hurting you." His jaw was tight, working oddly. "I failed you completely and I know that now. I, I knew it then, too." He shook his head morosely, looked off to the side, emotional. He sounded so, so tired. "I should have asked you how school was going and helped you with homework and spent time with you that wasn't... I don't know, gun drills. I should have been involved in your life. In all you kid's lives."

Alex felt like everything he just said was true and what she'd always wanted to hear but at the same time it was too little and hit her like an insult, like too small of an apology for too big a wound. It made her cynical and angry. "Sounds nice, but isn't it a little too late for all that?" she asked bitterly.
Dad's expression wavered. "It is. I know that." His dark eyes held a faint hope, a deep pain. "But I hope... someday... you can forgive me."

"Forgive you?" she repeated, and shook her head, looking away, struggling to control all this sudden anger. How dare he. Every time he overlooked her, shoved her, made her feel small and stupid rang through her memories and she let the phone go and it swung down, clanging against the post of the phone booth loudly as her pointer finger jabbed at him with accusation. "You would walk into the room and, and most little kids see their dad and get excited and happy, but you would come in and there I was on red alert every time, making sure I didn't mess up and make you mad, trying to figure out if Dad was trashed or not, if I needed to avoid you that day, if you were in a shitty mood or not...!" Alex glared at him and felt none of the mind-numbing fear that she used to as a kid. Instead she only felt disgust and anger and sadness underneath it all. "You know, I lived in fear of you for so many years. It shouldn't have been like that."

He looked utterly ashamed but Alex wasn't done, in fact, she was beginning to feel adrenaline surge as she stood up to her father for what was really the first time in her life. "You think you should have helped me with homework? How about making sure I could survive in the real world? How about making sure your kids had options other than the hellhole life you picked for yourself? Do you even know what Dean has been through since you've been gone? What Sam's had to deal with?"

"I wish I could take it back," he said and she scoffed at his hypocrisy.

"'Wishing never got anyone anything,'" she said, and she knew he'd recognize that phrase. Dad looked up at her sadly. She was quoting himself back to him and he realized it. He still didn't get angry though. He just looked devastated and Alex softened a little. Just a little. "You spent my whole life chasing after ghosts. After someone who was gone. But us? We were there. We needed you."

"I know," he said faintly. "I know."

"No you don't know!" Alex almost shouted, blinking rapidly through tear-filled eyes. She felt herself shaking—these are things she had imagined saying to her dad for years. "If you knew, you would have changed it! You wouldn't have done what you did! You—you were a terrible father!" Alex said, and her voice was breaking with tears, her voice was raising a little in desperation. "So why the hell do I still love you?" she asked in a wretched voice, "When you hated me so much?"

He looked horrified. "I didn't hate you—Alex no, I hated myself," John said brokenly, and now he had the audacity to look tearful and he tried to move forward to her, but he couldn't seem to, and he shut his eyes regretfully, his head bowing down.

Alex looked at her dad. Those words she'd just said should have felt good, should have made her feel retribution and victory, but instead she felt even worse than before. She tried to cover it up with cynicism. "Guess this isn't what you had in mind when you arranged for that last phone call to good old Alex, huh?" she asked, a bitter smile on her lips. Her smile faltered, she looked at him sadly. "What'd it cost you, anyway?"

"It's not important," John replied, and he sounded resigned, sad, heavy. He sniffed gruffly, cleared his throat. "Your brothers taking good care of you? Keeping you safe?"

"I'm dead," Alex said somewhat spitefully, avoiding looking at him so she doesn't have to feel guilty about how sad he looked. "So... you figure that one out."

He didn't give up. He sounded gentle, appealing. "You, you got a boyfriend back home? A
husband?"

Alex's mouth dropped open slightly and she stared at him in flustered surprise, because the second he asked that, she was picturing Cas, suddenly wondering where he was, if she would see him again, if he was all right. Missing him intensely, wishing he were there with her. Dad saw her expression, nodded slightly, and took it as a yes.

"He better be one hell of a guy," he said softly.

Alex opened her mouth to deny it, to tell him she had no boyfriend, husband, partner, lover, whatever—but instead, she paused, kind of surprised herself when she nodded and said softly, "Yeah. He is."

Dad looked somewhere between happy and sad to hear this, like he couldn't believe she was old enough for him to ask her about these things. "He treats you right?" Dad asked falteringly. "Looks out for you?"

Alex thought of Castiel, the angel who watched humanity from afar for thousands of years, who restored her voice, who showed up and awakened something in her that she hadn't even known existed. She thought about the sound of his voice, the sight of his face, the feel of his touch, the things he'd done for her, what she knew he would do for her: anything. She thought of his gentle, kind, awkward nature that was so endearing, his surprising innocence and naivety, and then the starkly contrasting fierceness and warrior-like prowess that rested beneath that uncertain, out-of-place exterior.

Dad's question hung in the air. "Yeah," she said, thinking hard, staring into middle distance. "Yeah. He treats me right. He looks out for me. He..." she trailed off in surprise. The words she wanted to say: I love him. She was overwhelmed and near tears again, but for a different reason because she thought of the way their relationship had become something neither of them could walk away from, she thought about all he had done for her, about the way he looked at her, the way he kissed her. And in her mind the following things flashed before her: Cas entrusting his angel blade to her and leaving himself defenseless—giving her the memory of the panic room back when he could have left her never remembering it at all—how fiercely protective he was of her, even more than either of her brothers—all of it added up to one thing, and she couldn't disbelieve it anymore. She wouldn't. He loved her too. He had to.

Dad looked slightly puzzled at her long silence and Alex erased her expression. "It's... complicated," she told him, then managed to chuckle just barely as she looked down. "Really complicated." That wasn't even half of it. She grew somber. "And if I can't get undead... well... I guess it won't matter anyway."

Dad seemed to take her point. "How did you die, Alex?"

"Shot," she said wanly, not proud of it. "By Walt Fletcher. Friggin' idiot." Her mouth twisted in displeasure and even humiliation. He was a clown and he'd gotten one over on her—majorly. "Stupid way to die," she muttered, then grew more reflective and serious. "I always thought I'd die saving someone's life. Not... in a fucking motel room." She swallowed painfully, thinking how it was ironic—she watched Dad die, Sam die, Dean die. All of their deaths had obliterated her heart. But Dad... he'd left on purpose and without saying goodbye to her. That, and he'd stayed dead unlike her brothers.

When she had found out months after his passing that he'd known he was going to die, she'd been devastated. She still was. She wished it didn't hurt her so much, and she wanted to lash out, to insult him or cut him verbally, but when she opened her mouth, her voice cracked, caught, and she
was suddenly crying again, face crumpled, and she wasn't insulting him, she was appealing to him despairingly. "Dad I wish you'd said goodbye to me," she managed. "B-before you died."

He was clearly heartbroken. "We get to say goodbye now, baby." Even he knew that wasn't enough, it was clear from his voice.

"But why didn't you then?" she asked in anguish.

There were tears in his eyes now too and his mouth was pressed into a line. He shook his head blankly, looking like he wasn't too sure of the answer. "I felt like there was nothing I could have said… that anything I could have said would have just made it worse."

Alex's eyes were blurred with tears. She was mourning the relationship she never had with her father, because she could see now, briefly, what it might look like. What he might have been like, what she might have been like, if things were different. But things weren't different—the reality was that all that remained between them was wreckage. He looked at her regretfully. "I didn't know it would mean that much to you," he said. It was Alex's turn to shut her eyes in morose pain. Dad continued. "I thought it would be better for you if I just walked out… didn't try and fix something I couldn't fix." Alex's heart sank in absolute grief.

There was a pause, and when Dad spoke again, it was reminiscent, tempered with a deep fondness. "I… I remember the day you and Sammy were born…" he said softly. Alex opened her eyes, barely able to. He'd never talked about this before. "I held you for the first time, you were so tiny… and you looked right up at me. I know babies can't see at that age but—I swear—you looked right at me and… I felt like I never loved anyone as much as I loved you right then." His voice cracked, his smile was struggling through guilt and misery. "I just wish I could have held onto that, instead of letting your mom's death consume me like it did." He went silent, looked off into long distance. "Things would have been very different. For all of us." He looked back at her, miserable but resolute, his shining eyes capturing her gaze completely. "I know I've always had a hell of a way of showing it but… Alex, I love you. I do."

Alex's face crumpled, her heart and head were overwhelmed completely by what he just told her. "Dad," she sobbed out, and there were tears running down her cheeks, she wished he really were there with her, that he wasn't just a flickering representation of himself. She wasn't sure when she had wrapped her arms around herself, but there she was—standing there crying in front of her dad who looked so close but wasn't there at all.

He seemed to hear something beside him and suddenly seemed rushed, sidetracked. "I don't have much time left… Sam—is he... how is he?"

Alex was mystified, but heard the urgency in his voice. "Well, he's dead," Alex said, wiping her cheeks, swallowing her tears, trying to get herself together. "But—but before that, he was fine I guess."

Her dad looked at her significantly. "You and I both know that's not the truth."

Alex frowned just slightly. "You mean the demon blood?"

Dad shook his head. "There's more wrong with Sam than that, Alex."

She paused, her stomach twisting. "What, Sam being Lucifer's vessel? We already know about that."

He shook his head, growing more and more hurried. "No—that's part of it, but—" he looked up
suddenly and fear flashed across his face. "They found me—"

"Who?" she asked apprehensively, looking up where he was looking but not seeing anything. "Who found you?"

He looked back at her and some invisible, violent wind was rustling his hair and clothes. His voice grew urgent, he was shouting now, and Alex was afraid. "Tell Dean it's not over, the danger isn't gone, that Lucifer planned to use you and Sam t—"

Suddenly his image flickered out completely, leaving a huge black nothing in front of Alex. She didn't even have a chance to register that—the phone booth faded out too, and she was suddenly in total, complete darkness, left with the sound of her own panicking heartbeat, her own heavy breathing. She stumbled backward, fell over onto her back—the phone booth had been there, but now there was nothing at all.

And then there was a blinding flash of light from somewhere up above and Alex's eyes were unable to take it—she threw an arm over her eyes, the harsh light faded somewhat and she winced and squinted over to her side, propping herself up onto an elbow. Her eyes were completely overwhelmed. It was all too bright and blurry and out of focus like there was a film over her eyes—she could now make out an overcast and unnaturally green sky above an abandoned shopping center parking lot. There were a few dinged up old shopping carts scattering the cracked old pavement—she saw the Impala parked over at the edge of the concrete ocean, heard *Fortunate Son* playing faintly on the car speakers—there was a striking familiarity to all of this and wait, was this…? That time she Dean and Sam had ditched school and raced shopping carts around for hours when they were supposed to be on some dumbass field trip? But where were Dean and Sam? She felt like they should be there. And they weren't.

At that moment the parking lot kind of spun and wobbled dizzyingly, then she realized it looked *fake* on closer examination, like an unfinished painting. In fact, parts of the scene seemed to drift off into the air now—parts of the parking lot peeled up like old paint curling up in summer heat, one of the shopping carts drifted apart completely and turned to dust, the Impala was melting into the ground, turning into a strange black puddle, and the music slowed down, skipped, became low and unrecognizable, messed up and sinister—the pavement wasn't pavement anymore, it was some unrecognizable flat gray material—and it was still all blurry and hazy and hard to see and if she wasn't freaking out before, Alex definitely was now.

Alex heard the sound of clicking footfalls approaching and looked up, disoriented and confused, somewhat expecting to see her dad, but it wasn't John Winchester. Unlike everything else, she could see the newcomer perfectly as if in HD, and her eyes went wide. "Well, hello young lady!" Zachariah said, smiling down at her with creepy cheerfulness. "Fancy meeting you here!"

Panic rushed her and she shot to her feet in record time, turning to run the opposite direction, only to bump right into him—he moved through space, anticipating her move—he held her hard by both arms, his grip painful and vice-like. He was still smiling pleasantly. "Now, where the hell are those pain-in-the-ass brothers of yours?"

Castiel sat there in the utter silence next to her dead body. Her blood was on his trench coat. He'd faced himself away, sitting on the edge of the bed where he'd put her. Now he stared at the wall across from himself. He knew that if he looked away from the wall, he'd see her out of the corner of his eye, and at the sight of her the helpless panic and horror would return, the fear would take him over. So he stared and waited, every muscle tensed to the point of painfulness. He'd done what he could—he'd taken the bodies of the murderers away and left them somewhere in the middle of the smoky mountain wilderness. They would probably never be found, not by people anyway. The
animals and the elements would take them first, destroying what remained.

It had been an hour since it all happened—since he'd come here and seen her die in front of his eyes. He still couldn't really understand that she was really dead and gone. It felt unreal, too horrible to be the truth. He sat in the silence, wrestling with not knowing what had happened to her soul or where she was. Castiel had laid her down onto the third, empty bed after he'd realized God wasn't going to answer him. He'd looked around the room, seen his dead friends covered in their own blood, and subsequently felt overwhelmed by guilt. He could have prevented all of it. He felt like all the gravity in the universe was all in one place there above him, crushing him down completely as he stood back and stared at Alex's slight frame alone there, crumpled against the blood-spattered wall—he couldn't leave her there. It hadn't been right. So he'd picked her body up and the moment he'd done so, he'd seen himself in 2014 doing the same—but the difference was, what Anna had shown him had been all visual. When he'd picked her up today, he'd felt the complete lifelessness of her dead weight there in his arms and it had devastated him all over again. Now, he could barely look at her, because with each passing moment, he felt the absence of her more and more deeply. With each second that ticked by, Alex felt further and further away, more and more impossible to reach.

The spell he'd worked, he'd done it five times already, trying it again and again because he didn't understand—he could feel Dean and Sam's souls because of the ritual, he could tell where they were and could communicate with them through the veil passably; their souls were steady and slow, bright lights in the darkness, but hers—hers was like a distant dying light that his eye could never catch, and it alarmed him—he had never seen any soul do that. He couldn't pinpoint her, he couldn't reach her at all. Why was she drifting? Why was she lost? And most importantly, could she be brought back at all?

Castiel knew that Sam and Dean were important to Heaven, that when angels found them, they would be sent back to their bodies without hesitation or question—but Alex—his chest twisted up in pain.

He never told her this, perhaps because of pride. But when Heaven cast him out, he had been cut off from things other than his angelic abilities. He was no longer Alex's Heaven-elect guardian. However—no other new guardian had appeared. Castiel would have known if another angel watched over her... and there had been none. Perhaps that was his fault as well, because he'd put the angel wards on her ribs—perhaps she received no guardian because Heaven couldn't find her. For some time he'd had the audacity to believe that his father was still entrusting him to protect Alex even though the order of angels had turned him away. Now he faced the reality of the fact: either Heaven was purposefully ignoring the order to protect her... or the order had been abolished completely. He didn't know which it was, only that he had been here, walking the same earth as her—and he had failed to keep her alive. And now she didn't matter to Heaven and if Castiel couldn't reach her and bring her back, who could? Beside him, within arms reach, she laid growing stiff and cold. He knew that with every passing minute, the chance that Sam and Dean would be found increased. He shut his eyes now, listening to himself breathing. How alone he felt—how completely and utterly alone.

He wanted desperately to return to Heaven, to find her himself, and to bring her back—but he was literally locked out with no way in. He could hear the celestial whispers, he could see into Heaven with various rituals and spells, but he couldn't actually go there and it was maddening. How strange, how lonely, to be a being who walked the earth between the realms, not quite human enough to be a man, not quite Heavenly enough to be an angel. He belonged to nothing and to no one but this family of broken people. To nothing and no one but her. He looked at her now and his stomach clenched, his body trembled. How could she be so close and at the same time so impossible to reach? He smoothed her hair again, searching her face while sickened inside, lost.
The television made a strange garbled sound, startling him in the piercing silence. "Cas!" came a familiar voice.

Castiel rose and went to the set quickly, sudden hope surging in him. "I can hear you," Cas said, and peered hard into the television. He could faintly see Dean and then Sam too in a distorted, static-filled picture and he looked harder, hoping to see Alex too, but he saw no one else, only an empty living room and the two Winchester boys.

Dean seemed agitated, his face filling the screen as he leaned close. "Cas! I found Sam but, but I can't find Alex—you gotta tell me where she is, man!"

Castiel felt himself tense in anxiety, and the sick feeling increased, the hopefulness dissipated when he realized she wasn't there, that they hadn't found her. His emotions translated themselves into anger, and he scowled at the screen, powerless and wishing Dean understood that. "I can't tell you where she is, Dean—I can't see her like I can see you—"

"Well find her!" Dean cut him off urgently, and in the background, Sam looked troubled.

"I'm trying," Cas told them, attempting to hold back on his anger and frustration. He didn't want them to know how worried he was, because if they panicked, they might not be able to find her in time.

Sam came a little closer, leaned down, his face closer to the screen. Several bars of static ran down across the image. "Hey Cas, there was this weird beam of light just now and—"

"Stay away from it," Cas told him immediately, urgently, leaning closer to the screen, speaking fast, because he wasn't sure how long this connection would remain. "That was Zachariah. He's searching for you—you can't say yes to Michael and Lucifer if you're dead, so Zachariah needs to return you to your bodies."

Sam frowned, glanced at Dean, puzzled. "What's so bad about that?"

Castiel's jaw clenched tightly at Sam's thoughtless question, and he wasn't able to remain as calm as he'd meant to. He spoke louder than he meant to, harsher too. "What's so bad if Zachariah finds you before you locate your sister—" he looked away from the screen, mouth in a hard line as he paused, "is that she stays dead."

Shock filtered across the brothers' faces. "Explain." Dean commanded with a deadly glare.

Cas didn't want to—he considered lying, but realized it was too late, that he'd let it all slip out already, and perhaps the truth would motivate them better than anything else, anyway. Still, speaking it out loud was difficult for him. It meant he had to confront it. "There's... there's no reason for Zachariah to send Alex back. None."

"What? Why?" Dean asked, looking stunned completely, all of his anger washed away momentarily, and in its place, fear.

Castiel couldn't look at the screen when he explained. "She's not important to Heaven, Dean—she's not a vessel or a—"

"But you said she had a guardian angel thing!" Sam protested, and Cas looked up at the screen again to see Alex's twin looking so disillusioned and let down that Castiel had to look away again, stricken with a guilt he could not even begin to fathom.

He explained in a dazed kind of tone. "Yes, I thought so—but Heaven assigned no new protector, I
would have known... I don't know why, but either Heaven is ignoring the guardianship order or... or it no longer stands at all." Sam and Dean looked entirely shocked, as if their worst fears had been realized. Castiel's gaze faltered once again. "And as we all know... I... I failed to keep her safe."

"Yeah no *shit*, Cas," Dean snapped, and he yanked himself back from the screen, scrubbed his face with the palm of his hand as if he were trying to gather himself. He walked completely out of frame and then there was a loud crashing sound, like Dean had thrown something. Sam glanced at his brother in awkward embarrassment.

Cas struggled to remain calm himself and addressed Sam, who so far was keeping his wits about him. "In fact, Sam—if Zachariah finds you, finds Alex, he may use her as leverage. To motivate Dean into saying yes to Michael."

Offscreen, he heard Dean curse loudly. Sam shut his eyes for a brief second, a muscle jerking in his cheek and he pinched the bridge of his nose, then seemed to make a visible effort to remain calm, focused, looking back at the screen tersely. "Okay Cas, just—how do we get her back to the land of the living?" His question was a good one, but Cas was silent, wordless. He didn't *know*.

*Wait.* Castiel grew urgent, realizing he had an idea, and this was probably the very best chance they had. "You need to find an angel. His name is Joshua."

"Who the hell is Joshua?" Dean asked, his angry face once again taking up half the screen.

"He can help us, I think," Castiel told him urgently. The screen jerked, fizzled. "The rumor is he talks to God."

"And what does *that* have to do with anything?" Dean demanded, his tone accusing as if Cas was foolish to suggest they do such a thing.

Castiel grew even more frustrated, barely able to contain his helpless anger—this was their *only option*, their *only chance*, and Dean wanted to question him about it, as usual, wanted to do things his way, wanted to waste precious time arguing when they needed to be trying to get Alex out of Heaven while they could, *save* her while they could! Cas glared at the man's image on the screen and spoke brusquely, not bothering to conceal his anger. "You think maybe—just *maybe*—we should find out what the hell God has been saying? That maybe someone who talks to God might know more than we do? Maybe an angel *that close* to God could *help us*?"

Dean looked inconvenienced, or maybe put-out. "Geez. Touchy."

Taking a deep breath, Cas searched for resolve and patience, but found very little. "Please," he said tensely. "I just need you to follow the road, to find your sister, and then take her and yourselves to Joshua. *Quickly.*"

"But how do we *find* her, Cas?" Sam asked intently. "Can't you come help us?"

"I would already be there if I could be," Castiel told him, feeling defeated. "I'm unable to return... they've cast me out." Castiel glanced to his side, where Alex's body was, and with growing urgency, he looked back at Sam. "Just keep looking, and *hurry*. She's there, somewhere in Heaven." He again felt her soul flickering, half there. Castiel truthfully couldn't be certain she was there in Heaven at all. And he told them as such ruefully. "I think."

"...You *think*?" Dean repeated, his voice rising rapidly. "Heaven seems kinda big, Cas! How the *fuck* are we supposed to find her with Zach on our asses and all of Heaven looking for us?!!"
"Dean," Sam said, and his brother let out a heavy, deeply frustrated breath through his nose, glanced at Sam, then back at the screen, waiting for Cas to reply.

Castiel could see how alarmed Dean was, and identified with him—looked at him intensely. "Follow the road. I think she's near it, somewhere."

"What road?" Sam asked, leaning in closer. Another burst of static distorted the picture for a couple seconds.

"The Axis Mundi," Cas said, speaking swiftly. "It's a path that runs through Heaven—different people see it as different things. For you, it's two lane asphalt. The road will lead you to the Garden, which is where you'll find Joshua. And Joshua—he can take us to God or tell us where to find him, he can send Alex back." The television began to fade out, Cas felt the connection weakening, breaking. Becoming urgent with alarm, Cas gripped it tightly on either side. "Hurry, Dean!"

The television set died out completely.

Cas drew back just slightly to look at the silent TV, the sudden absence of any sound shocking to his senses. Would Sam and Dean be able to find her? Would Joshua be able to help at all? Were the rumors that he spoke to God even true? What if Zachariah found the brothers before they found Alex? Castiel stood up, his heart hammering unpleasantly, his limbs feeling light and unsteady. He felt such a strong need to be be there, in Heaven, tearing it apart to find her and rescue her, bring her back to where she belonged. But he was cursed to stay here, doing nothing, completely ineffective.

He looked at Alex and his feelings of helplessness bubbled up into sheer, unadulterated anger, into panicked and blind rage. He could have prevented this. He shouldn't have left her, even for a second. He'd been so selfish to avoid her because of his feelings, his inability to manage them. And now look what had happened—he'd been so intent on changing the future he'd seen in 2014 that he had left her unguarded and she'd died anyway, and sooner.

This was his fault!

Momentarily out of control, he turned and angrily grabbed the wooden chair sitting right there and sent it flying into the partition beside Sam's bed. The chair and partition were both destroyed and Cas stared at the damage done, breathing heavily for no reason, remembering when he'd seen himself wreck the cabin in 2014. The cabin he and Alex had shared. He'd seen that version of himself do that and hadn't recognized himself, but now—now he was stilled, knowing why that version of Castiel had done that. Understanding completely, and wondering how the horrors of that future could even happen if she stayed dead now. What was this? Some curse that hounded Castiel and Alex? That any version of the future would end with Alex dying while he either caused it or stood by and let it happen? He looked down at himself and saw her bloodstains on his trench coat. His throat seized up.

And at that very moment, he thought he could hear her, feel her, like she was calling to him. He looked around, alarmed—but then there was nothing. Had he imagined it? He waited, stock still, listening hard and frozen. But there was still nothing. His mind was overcome with despair. And too lost, too confused, too lonely to bear any of it, Castiel sank again down to sit beside Alex. There he buried his face in his hands, feeling to much for anyone to bear.

Cas? Are you there? Where are you? I need you...
Alex was in the darkness again. Complete, utter darkness—right where Zachariah had left her hours ago. Or at least it felt like hours. She was on the ground, not sure if she was dead or alive. She could feel what felt like dew-wet grass underneath her hands, brushing up against her clothes. It was soaking her knees. But that was about the only sensation she could cling onto. The darkness swallowed her. There was so much nothing in this place, and she felt like she couldn't breathe, like if she wasn't careful, her mind would slip out, float away, leave her blank and empty and hollow. Was her body still even in existence? Only her wet knees and shaky breath rattling inside of her convinced her that she was. She wondered why Cas hadn't come for her. Maybe he couldn't. Hopelessness, loneliness, and despair overcame her again, wave after wave crashing over her, each one beating her down more and more.

After Zachariah caught her, he'd demanded to know where Sam and Dean were—she'd insisted she didn't know (and then told him to kiss her ass, she wouldn't tell him where they were even if she did know). Zachariah had looked at her in thorough annoyance then told her it didn't matter if she wouldn't tell him, he was going to find them, it was just a matter of time. He dragged her along with him through a couple of heavens—the first one was Sam's: she watched Sam get his acceptance letter to Stanford and punch the air in excitement, grin at the letter, re-read it a bunch of times, do a dorky little dance. Then Zachariah had pulled her out of there into another heaven, one of Dean's: where a twelve-year-old Dean had attempted to bake the twins a birthday cake at Bobby's and it had been half burnt and lopsided—a somewhat pitiful little cake with melting icing and a barely legible "Happy Birthday Twins" on it—Dean had run out of room to write with the icing and the word Birthday was split into two lines, the word twins started off huge, but the 's' on the end was small, going off the edge of the cake completely. Zachariah had taken her out of there before she could see Dean present his little creation to herself and Sam. She remembered loving that clumsy, heartfelt cake.

He'd spirited her to another heaven, still holding onto her with his iron grip—he'd taken her to a memory she had from her twenty-first birthday—and Alex had realized this must be one of her heavens, because she remembered it well and it was one of her favorite memories. Dean had insisted on taking her to a bar because she was finally the age to drink legally, but she hadn't wanted to go—it's not like they had ever honored that law about drinking, anyway. She'd been drinking since she was thirteen or fourteen—that and with Sam not there, away at Stanford and not even having called them that day… birthdays were painful, a reminder of what was missing, what was broken. And Dad, of course, was nowhere to be found, off on some job. So Dean had gone and bought a bunch of liquor then driven the two of them to a park in the middle of the night and cranked up the music really loud.

This was the heaven Zachariah took her to, and it was strange because she couldn't actually see herself in the memory, only Dean—coaxing an invisible her out of the Impala, insisting she get drunk with him, telling her 'just because your big sister Samantha is all kinds of douche doesn't mean you should pout around,' and he then dragged the invisible her out onto the grass when 38 Special came on… I'm so caught up in you! Little girl! Dean lip-synced along ridiculously, whirling an invisible dancing partner around as he made dramatic faces and danced embarrassingly bad on purpose, pivoting his hips around like a girl would, pursing his lips in goofy concentration. And I never did suspect a thing! So caught up in you, little girl, that I never wanna get myself free! Dean stood back and did air-guitar solos, clearly aware of how stupid and funny he was being, looking pleased with himself, then grinning at the space in front of him widely, genuinely. That space was where she'd been standing and laughing at him. Off to the side and watching the scene play out, Alex remembered how happy she had felt at that moment, because she'd very aware of how lucky she was to have someone like Dean who cared, who loved her like that. Who went out of his way to pull her out of the dumps. Who had stayed with her when everyone else had gone away. Dean then hugged the air in front of him and Alex looked at Zachariah accusingly. That was
a private moment and him seeing it hadn't felt right.

Zachariah had stood back, looking at the scene with condescension, like it left a bad taste in his mouth. "Don't look at me in that tone of voice," he'd told her sassily. She looked at the angel who had given her throat cancer, had taken Sam's lungs, had given Dean stomach cancer. She would have given anything to have access to a murder weapon at that second.

"You're not funny, asshole," she'd told him flatly, and he had looked at her squarely, narrowing his eyes in distaste, looking like someone who was ready to give a lecture.

"You know, that mentally incapacitated idiot in the trench coat should never have given you your voice back." Alex looked at Zachariah in shock at the unexpected insult. He shrugged, facetious and wincing sympathetically. "You're very unappealing to begin with, add in the bad attitude and all the stupid comments… not doing it for me, Alex." He chuckled. She opened her mouth to speak... and nothing came out. Zachariah grinned at her. "Lucky for me, I'm like a remote control... and you always have a mute button, Pipsqueak." He laughed and sighed gustily, enjoying the panic in her eyes. "What does he see in you? The things he gave up to do that for you. Heaven knows why. Well. Heaven doesn't know why, but, it's just a saying, you see." He suddenly looked to his left like he could hear something. "Ah ha. Gotcha." And without another word, he'd disappeared, and then so had everything in front of her.

It was like if an angel weren't with her, she couldn't see or hear Heaven at all. The second Zachariah disappeared she was plunged into sudden total silence and total darkness that pressed in like dirt in a grave. She stayed face-first on the ground, breathing hard, trying not to panic, clinging onto the sensation of wet grass, worried about Sam and Dean, not sure how much time has passed or if she could stay sane much longer. She tried to stay calm, focused on not trying to make a sound, because if she was reminded that she couldn't, she might break down completely. She belly-crawled forward a little more, feeling with her hands for something besides grass. The darkness was so pervasive. Fear made her veins cold. Pretend you're asleep. Your eyes are closed. That's all. She thought of Cas, remembering when he hugged her in Gabriel's hell world. She tried to remember how that felt, to focus on remembering how it felt to be held so safely and securely. She tried to call up fond memories of Sam, Dean. Sunlight, breeze, 80s rock on the radio. She crawled forward more.

And suddenly without warning, she was yanked from that place nauseatingly, abruptly standing beside Zachariah and blinking against the brightness while almost falling over from the unexpected change. Sam and Dean were in front of her, being held back by two guys in suits. Their faces registered total shock at her appearance, and she was sure hers looked the same. Alex saw a third angel, a woman, who hung further back. They were in a house that was lit by an unpleasant, unnatural green light. There were brick walls where windows should have been. What the...?— Alex was totally disoriented and confused, everything was too bright and close and Zachariah clapped her on the back roughly, startling her further. "Ah look! The youngest, least attractive Winchester!" Alex looked at him in a daze, feeling stuck in place. "We were just visiting with Mommy," Zachariah told her in a highly patronizing tone.

"Alex!" Sam said.

Dean was struggling against the guy holding him. "You all right? What'd this asshole do to you?"

"Oh, she's fine..." Zachariah answered for her. "A little mute at the moment but... hey, we all have our off days, right?"

Dean looked shocked, then entirely enraged. "You son of a bitch!" he roared, and Zachariah chuckled mildly. "You fix her right now!"
"Or what, Dean?" Zachariah asked, amused. Dean breathlessly, angrily stared him down as Sam gazed in shocked horror at his silent, stone faced twin.

Zachariah feigned intensely thoughtful concern. "Ya know boys, funny story. Alex here? Seems she has no heaven." He paused, clearly enjoying the brothers' dismay and confusion. "I mean, I saw one of them and it was melting, coming apart… and the other ones, they just disappear completely if she's alone... now what do you suppose that means? Huh!" He smiled, like he knew exactly what it meant, and Alex looked at him in terror. Why wouldn't she have a heaven? Is that why Heaven went dark when an angel wasn't around?

"What the hell you mean, she's got no heaven?" Dean demanded all while looking as terrified as Alex felt.

"Just what I said, numbnuts. Little sister here is defective, Dean." He grabbed Alex roughly, who had a surge of fire burst up. She kicked him in the leg… then made a face of pain. She'd forgotten for a minute. Friggin' angels! It was like kicking a solid metal structure. "Am I supposed to say ouch?" Zachariah asked mockingly then chuckled, pulling Alex to him and stroking a hand down her bare arm, his touch distinctly sensual. She struggled a little, turning her face away, revolted and also jarred—when had her jacket disappeared? How had Zachariah done that?

"Didn't like it when I did this to Mom, did you?" Zach asked Dean, smiling a wicked little smile. "How about to little sister?"

Alex gritted her teeth together, realizing what he was trying to do—Zachariah was such a stupid douchebag but he was smart and it was working by making her brothers angry—Sam looked away with clenched fists unable to watch while Dean struggled madly, looking like a caged bull, looking ready to murder Zachariah—but Alex was just royally pissed off. She imagined the various ways she would stab Zachariah if she had an angel blade.

"Leave her alone," Dean threatened in a deadly tone.

"Make me!" Zachariah said, grinning idiotically, and he waved over the female angel. Her brown hair was clipped up neatly behind her head. She was pretty and looked early forties, wearing a business suit like all the other angels. She took a hold of Alex—she was strong as hell—Alex gave her a death glare, unable to break away, but trying anyway.

"You're going to do what I say, boys." Zachariah said and went over to Dean, casually…and then slammed his fist in Dean's stomach. Dean folded over with a pained groan. In unison, Sam and Alex fought desperately against the angels holding them, trying uselessly to help their brother. "I've cleared my schedule, Dean. I have all eternity, and, oh yeah, I have the power to say if Alex here lives or stays dead." Zachariah looked at the angel holding Dean. "Get him up."

The angel lifted Dean up again and Zachariah punched Dean again. Sam struggled with renewed efforts against the angel holding him, and Zachariah's front of indifferent amusement began to fade into something bordering on anger. He held up an accusing finger up at Dean, whose face was twisted in pain. "Let me tell you something. I was on the fast track once. Employee of the month, every month, forever. I would walk these halls and people would avert their eyes!" The house rumbled and shook, affected by his rage. "I HAD RESPECT!" Zachariah raged, then paused, smiling facetiously. "And then they assigned me you. Now look at me." He chuckled, his air of amusement back again. "I can't close the deal on a couple of flannel-wearing maggots and their useless sister? Everybody's laughing at me… and they're right to do it. So! Say yes, don't say yes; I'm still going to take it out of your asses. It's personal now, boys, and the last person in the history of creation you want as your enemy is me. And I'll tell you why. Lucifer may be strong, but I'm… petty. I'm going to be the angel on your shoulder for the rest of eternity. I'm gonna make you
"howl." Zachariah was suddenly pleasant again, turning to the angel holding Alex. "Naomi, if you please."

The woman angel grabbed Alex's wrist and twisted it, bending her arm back at an odd angle, and Alex winced in pain as the pressure mounted—she'd be groaning, no, wait, ah, screaming now if she were able, but no sound came out. Zachariah held up a hand, as if to say 'wait' and the angel Naomi stopped, holding Alex there to reel in absurd pain as Dean and Sam watched helplessly. Zachariah walked over to Dean, looking down his nose at him. "Dean, we may be in Heaven, but I can put that kid sister of yours through Hell, got it? I say the word, her arm is broken. It'll hurt, bad. But it'll be nothing, it'll be a blessed relief compared to all the other things I'll break in her."

Dean's expression was murderous, and he opened his mouth to reply but didn't get to. Zachariah socked him in the gut again, harder than before, and Dean made a horrible sound and doubled over.

"Excuse me. Sir?"

Everyone turned at the sound of a new voice—a slight, older black man stood there, clasping his hands in front of himself plaintively. Zachariah seemed surprised, then annoyed. "Joshua?" he asked in disbelief, then became irritated. "I'm in a meeting." He gestured toward where Dean was leaned forward in pain, held by an angel, where Alex was still just inches from having her arm broken.

"I'm sorry," the newcomer said politely. He had a pleasant, rasping voice. "I need to speak to those two boys."

"Excuse me?" Zachariah asked in total shock, and took a couple steps closer.

Joshua remained where he was, unruffled. "It's a bad time, I know, but I'm afraid I have to insist."

Zachariah hesitated then chuckled darkly. "You don't get to insist jack-squat."

A gentle smile from the newcomer. "No, you're right. But... the boss does." Joshua stared at Zachariah unnervingly. "His orders."

The Winchesters all looked at each other now—was he talking about God?

"You're lying..." Zachariah said, but sounded uncertain.

A humble shrug. "I wouldn't lie about this. Look, fire me if you want. Sooner or later, he's going to come back home and you know how he is with that whole... wrath thing."

Zachariah was silent, then reluctant, a little embarrassed sounding. "Fine, but you don't need this one, do you?" He gestured to Alex placatingly. "I mean, come on—she's not a piece in the game."

"Sorry. You aren't to touch a hair on her head." Joshua seemed to grow a little taller, his expression grew less pleasant. "Now... restore what you've taken from her. And leave."

Zachariah looked at Dean and Sam, then Alex—his expression extremely foul. He finally looked back at Joshua, who stood his ground, his expression almost threatening now. And then with the fluttering sound of wings, Zachariah and his three angel goons disappeared. There was a second of surprise when this happened, and then Dean was moving across the distance between himself and Alex, grabbing her up into a huge, almost painful hug, and she could feel him shaking. She shut her eyes, holding on tightly, and for the first time since being there in Heaven, she felt okay. And suddenly she was gasping little relieved sounds—her voice wasn't gone anymore—and the relieved sounds started to sound more tearful. "Hey, hey!" Dean said, his arms tightening, a hand on the
back of her head protectively. "I gotcha, you're okay." He let out a long, relieved sounding breath, and he suddenly sounded emotional, softer. His voice broke a little. "You're okay." Alex's eyes were shut tightly, she had her face buried in the front of his jacket shoulder.

Sam was there too now, he had a hand on Alex's back, he was looking at her in concern—last time she saw him, he was laying dead and bloody in a motel room and Alex abruptly withdrew from Dean and crashed into her twin, hugging him hard, so, so relieved. He returned the hug gently. "You okay?" he asked her quietly, drawing back, searching for her gaze.

She nodded and wiped off her cheeks, focusing on calming down. "Y-yeah," she faltered, trying to calm herself down. "Yeah, I am now."

The three of them all looked at each other, then they remembered the other person in the room. Joshua watched with a soft smile patiently, and when they finally looked at him, he turned his eyes to Alex. He approached her slowly, his clasped hands separating, one of them coming toward her. "It's time for you to go back, dear."

She looked at her brothers questioningly. "But..." she protested. However, she never got to finish the sentence. Suddenly she felt herself rushing through time and space, torpedoing back toward the surface, back to life.

Castiel sat on the bed looking at Alex's body with grieving eyes. He had lost track of how long it had been now. Hours at the least. He hadn't heard from Dean or Sam. No one. He was losing hope—whatever little amount of it had remained.

At this point he was beginning to wonder if it were over—if Alex Winchester would stay gone forever. It was a terrible thought, and as he gazed at her face, he thought that she was so beautiful to him, even in death. It hurt to lay eyes on her somehow. He looked down to where her hand rested beside herself so close to his. That hand had punched him, had pushed him away from her, had taken his mistrustfully right before he had defied Heaven for her—that hand had taught him pinky promises, that hand had touched his face and pulled him close. That hand was now lifeless and alone. Mourningly, Cas covered that hand in his own. The skin was cold. He shut his eyes in anguish, his fingers curling around her hand, the tips of his fingers reaching the inside of her wrist. And then he stopped, frowned, opened his eyes. Was that... was that a faint pulse?

Daring to hope, he looked at her face, confused—and then her eyes suddenly snapped open, she gasped loudly, she rocketed upwards—she was frantic, shaken, eyes darting all over the place, like she couldn't see or couldn't focus. Even though he was totally shocked, Castiel managed to anchor and stop her, holding her arms firmly and then she seemed to see him and then her expression broke completely. "Cas!"

She fell into him, embracing him tightly, burying her face in his neck, her arms around his shoulders, she was crying and shaking, and Castiel was shaking too, his arms already around her. He closed his eyes, holding her there in his arms tightly—he was finding it hard to breathe, so overcome with this monsoon of relief and complete surprise—he bowed his head down, burying his nose and mouth in her hair. He held a hand against the back of her head, not daring to let go, and without knowing exactly why, he achingly pressed a kiss there against her hair, and then another. He felt jarred and anchored all at the same time; all he knew was that his Alex was alive, precious, and here with him. He felt one of her hands gripping the back of his neck tightly, he heard her taking trembling, calming breaths, he felt her shifting, looking up at him and he drew back just slightly—looked into her warm hazel eyes once again—and part of him that had been ripped away was restored.
And then her eyes slid away from his, over his shoulder—and her expression went cold when she saw where Sam and Dead laid still and dead. She was trembling again, and looked down at herself, saw the blood, the holes in her tank top where the shotgun's buckshot had ripped through. The blood, mostly dried, all over her. She was shaking again, looking alarmed. "W-why aren't they alive, Cas?" she looked at her hands in slowly-dawning horror, one of which was covered in dried rust-red blood. "Why d-did Joshua send me back and not them?"

"I'm not sure—" he replied, finding his voice.

She didn't seem to hear him, she seemed to be going into shock, looking down at her stomach, at the blood stains. She stood up shakily and Castiel stood with her immediately, but she was already walking off toward the bathroom, stumbling oddly, not seeming to have total grasp over herself. "I can't—it needs to get off of me—"

Cas, following closely, alarmed and concerned as she blundered into the bathroom—he wasn't sure what she was doing. There was a large shower there, the walk-in kind with a sliding glass door. It was already open and she careened into the shower fully dressed, fumbling with the shower dials in a state of extreme duress. She held her hands under the stream of water, seemingly unable to wait for the blood to wash off. The blood gave way to bright pink skin underneath as the water pelted her. Castiel hovered right outside of the shower door uncertainly as clothes and all, Alex turned away from him, leaning against the shower wall with her palms pressed flat against it—she was completely soaked now and her hands came to either side of her head. "This can't be happening."

Castiel felt as though he should go to her, but he remained outside the shower. "Alex—they'll be sent back. They're vessels."

She shook her head, finally looking back at him. "But what if…" she seemed to lose some physical strength and she suddenly pitched to the side, stumbling—and Cas darted forward, catching her before she could fall forward. Her hands grabbed his forearms tightly. The warm water streamed over him now, too, soaking his trench coat, his head, his hair. He needed to know what had happened to her to shake her up so badly—instinctively, he felt like there was something more to why she was so frightened and rattled... he knew that she'd been drifting, and there was a sudden, awful suspicion that something had happened to her up there.

Filled with unmeasurable concern, he looked into her eyes pleadingly. "What happened to you?" he asked, rife with worry.

She squeezed her eyes closed and put her face there into the front of his shoulder. "I don't... everything, Cas! Why can't I..." she drew a trembling breath. "Why can't I just hold it together anymore?" She pulled back, looking at nothing in particular with an ill and dazed over expression. "I-I used to be stronger than this, goddamit!" Her expression crumpled into misery, she shook her head. "I can't do this anymore!" she managed raggedly. He believed her—and it killed him somehow. Water pooled at their feet in the bottom of the shower, faint red from the blood washing off of her.

"Do what?" he asked, his anxiety paining him at this point.

"Anything, everything," she sputtered. "I've tried," she choked out, "I've tried, but I can't."

He took her face in both his hands, demanding her gaze and she stopped, met his gaze, out of breath, despairing. "You can," he said, and her expression softened, she stared at him, then her hands came and grasped his wrists, she looked down, focusing on breathing.

And even though Castiel felt so much horror, had so many questions, he remained still, composed,
trying not to think of how desperate he was to comfort her—or maybe it was himself—with a kiss. He wasn't strong enough to move away, wasn't weak enough to drift closer. Not until she leaned in and rested her forehead to his wearily and sniffed softly. His hands still held her face, and one of his thumbs brushed across her cheek whisper-soft. Her eyelashes dripped—were those tears, or was it water? And she trembled, her thumbs touching the bare skin of his hands, stroking downwards once, a touch that seemed tender and intimate to Castiel. And his breath was caught in his throat, he was thinking of how he could never, ever see her like that again—dead and gone and lost forever—that he felt he would do anything, anything to keep her alive. And not because of a decree of Heaven, not because of an order. This need to keep her safe was no longer anything except his own conviction. A conviction that ran deeper than any ocean on earth, reached higher than the sky itself.

He looked at her then, slowly, hesitating. Realizing. Realizing how ever since he saw her first, everything had been building toward this moment. The moment when he came to truly understand how much she meant to him and how much that scared him. He realized she had wedged herself deep in his—heart? No. He had no soul or heart, did he? All he knew was that she had imprinted herself upon his mind and spirit, she had ruined him for anyone or anything else, she had changed his mind about everything. There was truly no going back. She had become what was most important to him—this beautiful human mystery of half-smiles and dark, haunting eyes—she was what was most important. Maybe he'd believed it was wrong, once, but now? Today? He knew this connection between them was real and lasting, undeniable and strong, wasn't wrong, couldn't be wrong. It was solid ground under his feet.

And right now she was so close and he felt so much for her and she was afraid, wrecked, sad, and he needed her, needed to know she was really back, really alive, really there with him. This urgent feeling transcended all that he understood. And he had the distinct impression that she, too, needed him in the same way, that she was waiting for him. And he felt like he couldn't hold back any longer, couldn't keep her waiting a second longer. He hesitated, inched closer, and then pushing the small, ever-weakening inner protests aside, pressing his lips to Alex's urgently, lingeringly. Relief and warmth flooded him, he felt her hands mirror his—one on each side of his face as she returned the kiss. She relaxed against him, and he against her, a million worries and fears banished at the touch of their lips to each other's. Achingly, they parted just slightly, just for a second, then came together again in unison, Castiel's hands sliding down, his arms now circling her, his hands pressed into her back and pulling her to him securely as he left another tender, slow, simple kiss against her lips. The warm water showered over them, steam curled and rose around them. They drew back just slightly and for a moment everything felt right, for a moment, they just were… and then Alex's expression changed she suddenly looked frightened again. "I'm, I'm sorry," she said, sounding like she was beginning to panic again. Her hands now gripped his shoulders tightly. "I'm sorry," she said again, and he didn't understand, he frowned. She swallowed hard. "I just don't want you to leave."

He felt he could literally break from her desperate tone, from what she implied, because he realized what she meant. Every time they had been close like this… he'd left her right after. But how could he, especially right now? "I won't," he told her with no shortage of grief at himself. He held the side of her face now, his thumb against her cheek again. "I won't," he repeated. Compelled and saddened alike, he pressed a kiss to her forehead. Their eyes closed at the same time, Alex's expression becoming deeply affected, as if she might cry—Cas's eyes closed tightly, brows knit close together in earnestness as he held the kiss there to the wet skin of her forehead. Her arms were now lightly resting on either side of his waist, her hands clinging to his soaked trench coat. Castiel held her tightly, breathing her in almost, the reality of having lost her sweeping over him all over again, causing his chest to spasm in pain. "I won't leave you again," he promised her, his mouth still there, close to her forehead. "Not without saying goodbye."
He looked down at her then, and she was looking up at him in torn hope, slight disbelief. And as he looked at her, he felt keen awareness that whatever their connection, their bond had been before... it had just become even deeper with the promise he'd made. Should that have panicked him? Perhaps he had lost his mind, but right now, it didn't. He just was so thankful that she was alive that other thoughts and worries paled in comparison to his relief. And then the euphoria faded—she seemed to falter in his arms, her expression grew strange. "I don't feel..." she said, and her legs went out from under her—Cas's arms, already around her, easily held her up and kept her from falling.

She appeared to be dazed again and Cas looked at her anxiously. "Are you all right?"

She clung to him weakly, eyes darting back and forth, looking down and nowhere in particular. She shook her head, grimacing. "No I—I think I need help," she said, and sounded sullen, unhappy about it. Hearing her ask for help set Castiel at unease—he could tell her body was giving out and it terrified him. What was wrong with her? What had happened?

He pushed the emotions and fears away, focusing instead on doing what he could. He didn't know what had befallen her in Heaven and might not for awhile, not until she was calm and okay. He picked her slight frame up easily and saw that she was a little embarrassed—this was the same girl who always insisted on doing things on her own, who was insulted when her brothers treated her like she was weaker. So now, having to depend on him, that would bother her. He said nothing and just carried her back into the main room—her eyes remained downcast, except to flicker up to his face a couple times. Her arms loosely circled his shoulders, he could feel her breathing in and out steadily. He'd picked her up like this earlier, but she'd been dead—the thought disturbed him all over again.

Carefully, he set her down on the vacant bed—she was dripping wet—they both were—and Cas stood back, narrowed his eyes in thought. "Towels," he said, then turned around, went back into the bathroom and found some—but before he picked them up, he looked down at himself. Without moving or even blinking, he manipulated the atoms surrounding him, banishing the water molecules that had settled into the fabric of his clothing, darkened the strands of his hair, beaded on the surface of his skin. He was dry instantly. He had considered doing the same for Alex, but instinctively, he felt that she wouldn't want that. Any reminders of Heaven or angels might be detrimental to her right now. He wondered again what had happened to her there. He needed to know. He was worried, and deeply. Heaven wasn't the same place it had always been.

He returned to her with towels and she looked at him with distracted and upset eyes. She'd been staring over at Sam and Dean's bodies, her expression tense and afraid, sad. Castiel set the towels in a stack beside her and took one from the top. She reached for the towel but Cas wrapped it around her shoulders for her. She blinked rapidly, seeming taken aback, like she hadn't expected that. Castiel brought the far ends of the towel together in front of her, circling it around her like a cloak. Inside this circle, she took hold of the towel, her hands just opposite of his. Their eyes met briefly. Her hair was dark and dripping, he could see the soaked strap of her tank top where the towel hadn't quite covered.

He thought hard, thinking through the sequence of events he associated with human cleansing rituals, recalling what came next. "You need dry clothes," Cas said.

"My bag is—" she started, but he had already seen it, recognized it, and took it up from where it sat on the floor a couple feet, she looked at him in surprise.

He set it beside her on the bed and unzipped it slowly, began looking for a suitable article of clothing, then stopped. "Is this... inappropriate?" he asked, suddenly realizing he wasn't sure if
going through her clothing was acceptable or not.

She was hiding a smile at him and looking at him with soft, open eyes. "So inappropriate," she said quietly, but that little smile and the amusement twinkling in her eyes told him she was joking. He felt himself smiling back at her softly, relieved that she was beginning to calm down. She was beginning to look like herself again.

He found a tank top—she wore those all the time. He found a pair of jeans. He pulled both items out slowly, examined each article thoughtfully, then laid it out. Alex watched him with interest, first looking at his face watching his eyes and subtle eyebrow movements, then looking at the way his hands held her clothing. She grimaced slightly then, looking up at him in faint disorientation, seeming to become aware of pain. "Cas… my whole body feels like… like it's weighed down, like my muscles don't work anymore." She sounded tired. "Is this…. I dunno, normal?"

Pausing, troubled, Cas looked at her. "I'm not sure," he told her honestly, thinking about it. "I don't know many people who've returned from death." He found a pale blue button up shirt with long sleeves and laid it on top of the jeans and the tank top he had selected.

Alex looked down, letting out a soft little huff of air. "Yeah, guess dying and coming back isn't normal to begin with, is it. But... Sam and Dean have both done it before." She drew in a deep breath, let it out, sounding strained and apprehensive even though she was now attempting to be more conversational. "Maybe it was just my turn."

She looked toward her brothers again, then Cas stepped sideways into her line of sight, gently demanding her gaze. "You're going to be fine, Alex. I promise."

She looked like she wasn't sure about that. "I can barely even lift my arms right now. It's getting worse. I feel so tired." Her eyes went to the clothes he'd laid out beside her, then down at herself. She looked exhausted, like the idea of changing her clothes seemed impossible. But she let the towel go and grabbed the bottom of her tank top, pulling at it weakly for a couple seconds before giving up, her expression twisting into a grimace. She looked upset. "Cas, I literally can't." She looked at him pathetically. "My arms are Jello."

Cas narrowed his eyes, scanning the reserves of his mind and memories. But he found no knowledge of this 'Jello' she mentioned. He narrowed his eyes even more. "What's... Jello?"

Her troubled expression softened. "It's wiggly stuff that you eat." Cas tilted his head to the side slightly. That sounded unappealing. Alex shrugged, not looking at him anymore. "I can barely even make a fist." She was moving her fingers in and out, watching them with a deepening frown. "How long was I... uh, dead?"

"Hours," Cas answered. Although somehow it had felt like eons to him.

Alex seemed surprised. "It felt so much longer... like a day. Maybe two." She sounded so deeply disturbed and once again, Castiel felt concern ripple through him.

She sighed heavily, not noticing his distress. She was looking at the clean, dry clothes beside herself longingly, and Cas hesitated, then offered. "I can help you." Her eyes flicked up to him and he suddenly felt shy almost. "Get changed," he added for clarification. She looked down at the soaked buckshot riddled, bloodstained tank top she was wearing and she was quiet for a long minute, her eyes sliding over toward where Sam and Dean's bodies laid.

She looked back at Cas finally and he could tell she was apprehensive. "Okay."
His tongue darted out to wet his lips—a physical reaction he had never had before. He was a little surprised at himself, then he refocused. He grasped the bottom edge of her tank top with both hands then looked at her in the eye, waiting for her to change her mind—but she just waited and returned his gaze. Castiel swallowed, then began to take her shirt off. His fingers grazed the bare skin of her waist, then her side where her ribcage was as he carefully peeled the shirt off of her. He kept his gaze respectfully averted when she raised her arms weakly and he pulled the shirt over her head, leaving her completely bare from the waist up. He noticed how she breathed a little harder than necessary. He was very methodical and careful, dropping the destroyed tank top onto the floor, then taking the clean, dry one and holding it out in front of himself, his gaze downward and avoiding inappropriateness.

Alex watched Cas, not really sure how this was happening or what was wrong with her, just sort of going with it—she weakly put her hands through the arm holes, feeling totally exposed and vulnerable. But Cas wasn't looking at her, he was staring hard at the floor, somewhere near her left foot. She was more than a little in awe of his calm, his poise, his complete helpfulness. The shirt was on now, Cas was tugging it down over her still-damp torso, and then she was modest again. There was a lump in Alex's throat, and she wasn't sure why it was there. But looking at him right now, she loved him so much.

He was looking down at her wet jeans, frowning slightly. She followed his gaze, and realized what he was thinking. How was this going to work? She imagined it for a moment, Cas helping her out of the jeans, his fingers brushing against her bare thighs as he tugged them off, maybe his eyes flickering up to hers intensely... *Jesus Christ Alex!* She looked away, awkward, embarrassed at herself. "Can you just… angel magic me?" she asked, and he glanced up at her. His bright blue eyes froze her. For a second, they were both silent, maybe having forgotten everything completely. His eyebrows were raised, his forehead wrinkled up, his expression somewhere between concern, care, and studiousness.

"Yes, of course," he replied, his voice softer than before. He hesitated, then touched her lightly on the top of her thigh and Alex almost melted—he probably didn't know what kind of things a touch right there would do to her—it wasn't even scandalous, it was just knowing that was *him*, touching her... but then the sensation of her jeans suddenly being completely dry distracted her and surprised, she looked down at them.

"Wow." She smiled softly. "You're kind of handy to have around." Understatement. But he was smiling back, a little crookedly, a little sadly. Again she was given to pause when she looked into his eyes. And then he picked up the button up shirt and helped her into that, guiding her arms through. She noticed he was putting it on her inside out but said nothing, just glanced at his backwards tie, smiling faintly to herself with a heart that felt full and safe.

He finished, drew back, nodding slightly, and Alex was physically weak, tired, exhausted but feeling overcome by her emotions and feelings for this angel of hers—what if he hadn't been here when she'd come back? Her voice cracked a little. "Thanks, Cas." Without even meaning to, she turned her head again, looked at where Sam and Dean laid. The fear that they would never return struck her again like lightning. Where *were* they?

"We can go somewhere else—" Cas suggested, looking at her uneasily. He had backed up a little and was looking at her with intent uncertainly.

Alex shook her head and raised her chin. "No," she said, resolving herself. "I need to be here when… when they come back."

*Which they will,* she reminded herself, choosing to believe that Castiel was right. But she couldn't
just keep looking over and seeing that—her big brothers dead, Dean staring up into nothing, Sam riddled in bullets. Both of them soaked in their own blood. It was one of the most horrible sights she'd ever seen, and every time she looked over and saw it again, she wanted to be physically ill.

With what little strength her muscles possessed, she she slid down into a sitting position onto the floor beside the bed, where she couldn't see the bodies of her brothers. Castiel sat down beside her without any hesitation at all, and she glanced at him sidelong, mildly surprised again. He sat with his feet flat on the floor, knees bent up—just like she'd taught him in what seemed a lifetime ago. God, he's changed so much since then. Or maybe I have. Or maybe both of us have. The space between their shoulders was too much, but Alex remained still, thinking hard. She wanted so badly to tell him everything about what happened in Heaven, to ask why it had been like that, to just be held by him forever. The shower… the kisses… maybe those should have confused her. But she understood now, and it was startling but also so entirely obvious and unavoidable. He loved her, she loved him. The end. All these things stood in the way, all these dark things hung over their heads, all these unknowns hung in the balance, but none of it could change what they felt. So, where did they go from here? Question of the century.

She glanced at him again, remembering how much she had missed his these past couple weeks, how angry and confused and hurt she'd been when he hadn't come when she called. It seemed so out of character of him to just ignore her calls and she felt like there had to be more to it. "I... I called you a bunch of times, the past couple of weeks," she ventured, and he was immediately clearly uncomfortable. Alex pressed her lips together, looking at him for a long minute, not understanding. "Why didn't you come?"

Cas's expression flickered in pain. "I thought... I thought I could protect you. I thought I could change things."

He sounded so guilty, so burdened and weary. "Cas..." she said softly, not sure how to reassure him.

The angel in the trenchcoat shook his head slightly, looking ahead of himself with a hard expression. "I could have saved you from what happened here today if I hadn't been trying so hard to stay away..." he looked at her now, and his expression almost scared her, it was so intense, so emotional. "I almost lost you."

She faltered under his gaze and shook her head, remembering Heaven, and there was a deeply unpleasant and frightened feeling in the pit of her stomach. "I was lost," she said softly, almost to herself. "It was all dark, and empty, up there... falling apart." It was too frightening to think about even if it were apparently over... for now. "Cas, I didn't have a Heaven," she told him in barely a whisper. "The only time I could see anything was if I was with someone else." Cas was clearly blindsided by this information. Alex felt small and scared. "Does that... does that mean I'm supposed to end up in Hell? Or when I die... I'm just alone in the dark forever?"

Cas's frown was stern and hard. "All souls have heavens, even the ones that go below. It has to be a mistake."

Alex shook her head. It wasn't a mistake. It had happened, it had been real and so, so unnerving, so terrifying. "Zachariah said I was 'defective'," Alex said, her voice waveriing now as she
remembered what he had done to her, what he'd taken, how scared shitless it had left her.

"Zachariah found you?" Cas asked, looking deeply alarmed.

Alex shut her eyes for a minute, memories of that turning her stomach again. "Yeah. What did he mean, Cas?"

The angel was just staring ahead of himself in blank horror, shaking his head. "You're not defective. You… can't be." He sounded at a loss. Alex realized he had no idea why it would have been like that up there for her, and it left her even more frightened. Castiel always knew this kind of stuff. If he didn't know—who would?

Alex thought of her brothers—the one who had been to Hell had a heaven! And Sam, too—the boy with the demon blood, the one who was the devil's own vessel. So why did that leave her with a heaven that had been coming apart at the seams… and disappeared entirely if she wasn't in the presence of an angel? Did it have something to do with what Crowley had been telling her? Maybe if she was the one who killed or destroyed Lucifer, it meant her soul just was destroyed and voided completely. Was that really where she would end up, forever? For eternity? Alone, in the dark, listening to the sound of her own heartbeat all while losing her mind? She felt panic rising inside, she felt herself getting freaked out.

Cas was looking at her again, saw it. And she felt his hand on her shoulder, the shoulder closer to him. He seemed to be frightened too but was pushing it aside, trying to comfort her, trying to steady her, and Alex needed him so badly. She held back her frightened tears. "Cas, I know that… I know that we can't," she managed, barely able to keep her voice even. "But right now I just need… need you… to help me."

He looked positively brokenhearted, convicted. "How?" he asked, simply waiting for her to tell him, but Alex shook her head, not able to put it into words. She weakly curled herself into his side and he seemed to realize—he moved himself closer and put an arm around her, a little awkwardly at first. Her cheek pressed up against the front of his shoulder and she held onto the lapel of his coat. She felt his face turn toward her, his chin just brushing her forehead. Her eyes fell closed and she just breathed. He was warm and solid, comforting. She could feel him breathing, too. She felt his chin lower, and she knew he was looking down at her now. She could picture the worried expression on his face. Her eyes opened, but she didn't move. Not yet.

"I saw my dad. In Heaven."

He went completely still at her sudden confession. "What?" His deep voice reverberated through her, they were so close.

Alex shook her head just slightly, and the fabric of the trench coat rubbed her cheek. "I don't know how, Cas, but it was him."

There was a long pause. "You're sure?"

She almost smiled now, suddenly feeling reminiscent. "Do you remember that time you came into my dream? The one at the amusement park? When you told me that… that you were the one who gave me my voice?"

"Of course." His voice was softer. Was that her imagination, or did he sound reminiscent, too?

She thought about that time when Castiel had barged into her memory dream. "You told me you wondered what it might be like to have dreams," she said, her words full of quiet fondness. His
chin moved against her forehead again, and she knew, instinctively, that he was surprised that she remembered that. "Anyway," she said, "That… that dream was the one really good memory I have with my dad. That's how he proved it to me. Well. That and he didn't know Dean's birthday."

A short silence. "What did your father want?" Cas asked.

Alex could hear the concern and worry in his voice. He didn't, after all, have the best impression of Dad. "To say goodbye," Alex said softly, growing reflective, deep things welling up in her heart. She breathed in deeply and shut her eyes for a minute. She felt Cas's arm around her tighten a little.

"You didn't tell me that before," Castiel said quietly after a moment, sounding reflective himself. "About what that dream was."

She felt him looking at her and she was quiet for a long minute, then she drew back and her eyes lifted up to his. "I didn't trust you then," she said softly.

He looked back at her, seeming to be deeply affected by her words, and Alex was utterly wrecked by his closeness, his deep, soulful gaze. Even though she felt so weak, she reached up, her finger tips brushing against the collar of the trench coat, then the side of his neck. Her thumb rested against the scruffy edge of his jaw. I didn't love you then. His eyes searched hers, and he gently reached up, fingers curling around her hand in a way that could only be described as tender. His thumb swept across her knuckles, his other arm tightened around her, holding her there securely. "Tell me what happened," he said.

And safe there beside him, in his arms where she felt like she could belong forever, Alex nodded. She was ready to now. She took a deep breath, started at the beginning, remembering.

"So. I died." she paused. How often did people get to say that? "And when I came to… on the other side, I was in complete darkness, couldn't remember anything about where I'd been before that. Then I could see this faint light in the distance…"

Chapter End Notes

Classic rock songs were peppered throughout this chapter and maybe you're wondering what they were or wanting to listen to them… they are listed below in order of appearance! And they are all pretty excellent if I say so myself.

Knockin' On Heaven's Door by Bob Dylan

Paradise City by Guns N' Roses

Fortunate Son by Creedence Clearwater Revival

Caught up in You by 38 Special
"The children of Cain are gathered, to plunder and burn and slay: God was with man in Eden, but where is God today?"
- Charles Hamilton Musgrove

Heaven

One second Alex was there, the next she was gone—and Dean looked at Joshua in worried, suspicious confusion... then the house in which they'd been standing was suddenly gone too. Replacing it was a verdant garden—a conservatory of some kind. Overhead a tall glass ceiling dome let in sunlight that softly lit exotic plants, trees, and flowers crowding a small stone pathway. The air was warm and humid, smelling of earth and ozone. Joshua stood at the bottom of some stone steps in front of the brothers, and the Winchesters glanced at each other cautiously. Dean felt especially rattled because a few seconds ago he was holding the sister he feared he'd lost... and now she was gone again.

"This... is Heaven's Garden?" Sam asked, sounding a little underwhelmed as he went down the stairs slowly, looking around in what might have been disappointment. Dean followed him warily.

Joshua had some pruning shears and was offhandedly clipping the gardenia bush he stood next to. "You see what you want to here," the angel explained mildly, interested in his work. "For some it's God's throne room; for others it's Eden. You two, I believe it's the Cleveland Botanical Gardens. You came here on a field trip."

Sam's expression lifted. "Yeah... I remember," he said, tone becoming more fond and reminiscent.

Dean however was of a one-track mind and found his voice again. "Yeah, good times," he interjected sarcastically while looking at Joshua mistrustfully. "Where'd you send our sister?"

"Back to her body, of course," Joshua said in his soft, rasping voice. He fixed Dean with a knowing gaze, pausing his task for a moment to smile faintly. "Don't worry Dean. She's alive and well."

"And probably freaked out as hell," Dean muttered. Alex had never died before unlike himself and Sam—she who would be sitting in the motel room with his and Sam's bodies at this moment right? Jesus Christ, he hoped she was okay... it was bad enough with everything else that had happened to her that day but Zach taking her voice—that was over the line, that was too much, and Dean was worried as hell about her at that moment. He could just picture her not knowing why she had been sent back alone, maybe not knowing where he and Sam were at all or if they'd ever be back. God, what if she has no memory of Heaven? What if—

"I wouldn't worry," Joshua said, interrupting Dean's concerned thoughts. He returned to pruning the bush in a slow, steady manner. "She's not alone."

Dean frowned, his thoughts halted and he didn't understand, but Sam looked like he thought he knew what Joshua meant. "Cas?" Alex's twin asked.

Joshua smiled as he trimmed a couple dead leaves away from the gardenia. "Who else? He is her guardian angel."

Dean made a face, disgusted. Suddenly all these flowers and trees and sounds of birds were pissing him off. "Yeah he's real great at keeping her safe, isn't he?"
"You sound unhappy about something," Joshua said, and the glib commentary was just about enough for Dean's temper. He chuckled dryly to keep from punching something.

"Pal, unhappy is putting it *lightly*. And y'know, while we're talking about things that piss me off… you got any idea why the *hell* Alex doesn't have a heaven?"

Joshua looked up from pruning, his eyebrows rose just slightly, he looked faintly sympathetic. "Yes, actually. I know exactly why. But unfortunately... it's not information I'm privy to say."

There was a rush of righteous, indignant anger at that comment and Dean's blood pressure hit the roof, his protective hackles raised. "You friggin' *kidding* me? You better tell me right now or I am gonna take your little gardening scissors and stick them right up—"

"Dean." Sam interjected loudly, giving his brother a look that asked 'are you nuts?' Unwillingly Dean clamped his mouth shut. Sam was right. Probably shouldn't piss off the angel who could send them back to earth.

Joshua's expression was still calm and he turned, giving the boys his full attention, setting his pruning shears down. He clasped his hands in front of him thoughtfully. "Have faith, Dean. God makes all things work together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes."

"Well that *ain't* me!" Dean retorted angrily.

Sam grabbed Dean's shoulder hard, looking at his brother sharply. "Dean—can you just *shut up* for two seconds?" And shaking his head, exasperated and barely hiding the fact, Sam attempted civility while Dean stewed. "Joshua—you talk to God, right?" he asked.

"Well mostly he talks to *me*," Joshua corrected pleasantly.

The Winchesters shared a significant look. "Well, we need to speak to him," Sam told him. "It's important."

"Where is he?" Dean asked.

Joshua answered in an oddly elusive tone. "On earth."

That was quite the bombshell. "Doing *what*?" Dean asked—that didn't sound so good.

Joshua's indifferent answer further frustrated and confused Dean: "I don't know."

Dean shook his head. This was rich, this was *great*. Ever the patient one, Sam was staying cool and prompting Joshua again. "Okay, well, do you know *where* on earth?"

"No, sorry. We don't exactly speak face-to-face."

Dean looked at his brother, wondering if this seemed as fishy to Sam as it did to him. Not even the *angels* knew where this God dude was? This couldn't be right. Something wasn't adding up. "I... I don't get it," Dean said, thinking out loud. "God's not talking to nobody so..."

"So why is he talking to me." Joshua finished his sentence for him and Dean waited expectantly. This better be good. "Well. I sometimes think it's because I can sympathize—gardener to gardener—and, between us, I think he gets lonely."

*Lonely? The hell kind of answer was that? "Well, my heart's just breaking for him," Dean said*
sarcastically, his barely contained anger boiling beneath the surface again.

"Well, uh, can you just get him a message for us?" Sam asked, glancing at Dean disapprovingly.

"Actually, he has a message for you," Joshua said, and the brothers were both surprised, listening, waiting. Then were mutually shocked by what Joshua said next. "Back off."

"What?" Dean asked.

"He knows already," Joshua said simply. "Everything you want to tell him."

"But…" Dean started.

"He knows what the angels are doing," Joshua said, cutting him off. "He knows that the apocalypse has begun. He just… doesn't think it's his problem."

Words that left both boys ears ringing. "...Not his problem?" Dean repeated. This had to be some kind of joke.

But Joshua was continuing and his tone was growing more intense and assertive than he had been so far. "God saved you already. He put you on that plane. He brought back Castiel. He saved your sister from the future that was supposed to befall her." Dean went still, not sure what Joshua was talking about with that one, but the angel didn't pause. "He granted you salvation in Heaven…" he turned to face Sam directly, "and after everything you've done, too. It's more than he's intervened in a long time. He's finished. Magic amulet or not… you won't be able to find him."

"But he can stop it," Dean protested, not understanding, not getting this. What was wrong with these people? "He can stop all of it!" He was at a loss, shaking his head. "So he sends Cas to rescue me from Hell because 'God has work for me' and now it's… what, too bad, catchya later, good luck with the apocalypse?"

Joshua didn't blink. "Pretty much."

Every swear world in the book went through Dean's mind. "No. No fucking way." Dean protested vehemently, feeling tricked, feeling betrayed, because this was his last option, this was supposed to be the answer to all the problems he'd been facing. "You can't be serious…!"

"I am," Joshua stated, blunt and blasé.

Dean's teeth ground together in frustrated, incredulous anger as his fists clenched up. "Unbelievable. So he's just gonna let whatever happen and do jack squat about it? The hell kind of God is he, anyway?"

Joshua shrugged almost imperceptibly. "Why does he allow evil in the first place? You could drive yourself nuts asking questions like that."

This was an absurd waste of time. "Fucking coward," Dean muttered, shaking his head in repugnance while staring at the ground, his nostrils flared and jaw clamped tight. "Can't even tell me in person that all the crap he's put me through was for nothing, that I'm on my own, that it was all some huge lie? Some game for him?"

"I know how important this was to you, Dean," Joshua said, and he looked truly empathetic, shaking his head shallowly. "I'm sorry."

"What, saving the world? Stopping the apocalypse? You're damn right it was important to me!
Why isn't it important to him?!" Dean raged, but Joshua said nothing. Sam hung back silently and Dean scoffed. "You're sorry. Yeah, thanks, that helps so much," he snapped cynically, then his mouth bore down into a thin, hard line. Suddenly he felt hopeless and emotional, beaten down and weary—all the things he'd been trying to avoid feeling. "Forget it," he said, and attempted to save face, attempted to appear at ease and uncaring. "Just another deadbeat dad with a bunch of excuses, right? I'm used to that. I'll muddle through."

"Except… you don't know if you can, this time." Joshua said, and Dean faltered, his defenses rising up. "You can't kill the devil... you're losing faith, in yourself, your brother... you feel your sister slipping out of your grasp… and now this?" Sam looked at Dean, surprised, maybe realizing just how desperate and depressed Dean really was—everything Dean had been trying to keep a secret. Dean avoided looking at Sam. "God was your last hope," Joshua stated, and paused, grew deeply sympathetic. "I just… I wish I could tell you something different."

"Yeah I bet you do," Dean muttered, but he was too burdened and worn out to put any fire into the words. "Just stay the hell outta my head, man. It's all the same damn story with all you winged freaks. Well lemme tell you, wishing never got anyone anything. So unless you got something helpful to tell me… we're done here."

Sam glanced at Dean but didn't reprimand him this time, instead refocused on Joshua. "H-how do we know you're telling the truth about all this?" he asked.

Joshua seemed mildly affronted. "You think that I would lie?"

"It's just that… you're not exactly the first angel we've met," Sam said, cringing apologetically. "And… sorry, I just always thought God would care about the world he created, the people he made. It... it doesn't add up."

"I'm sorry you feel that way… but I'm not lying. In fact, I'm rooting for you boys! I wish I could do more to help you, I do. But..." Joshua indicated the gardens surrounding them. "I just trim the hedges."

Sam was growing exasperated and his eyebrows knit together, he wetted his lips. "Come on man, if not for us, then for our sister—help us," he implored earnestly, grasping at straws now. "She's not even part of this."

Joshua looked at Sam directly, eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly. "I wouldn't be so sure about that if I were you." The Winchesters were both stunned into silence at the vague comment and Joshua shook his head slightly. "I'm sorry. I'm really quite incapable of helping you any further. And it's time for you to go home again. I'm afraid this time, won't be like the last. This time, God wants you…" he lifted a hand up... "to remember."

There was a whooshing sound and a bright light blinded them. Dean felt himself throttling forward, he felt like he was underwater and his lungs were bursting, and then he was shooting upwards, gasping for air, alive again.

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Earth

Alex was where she'd been for the past thirty or so minutes—curled into Castiel's side as they sat on the floor at the end of the bed. Her head rested in the space between his shoulder and neck, and the side of his head tilted down toward hers, seemingly of its own accord—he didn't remember doing it consciously. Alex had told him everything—seeing her father and the phone booth, the darkness of Heaven when she was left alone, Zachariah's appearance and what he'd done, said—the
heavens he'd taken her to—being left in the dark for what felt to her like a day—Zachariah's confrontation with Dean and Sam—his attempt to use Alex against her brothers. And then Joshua's appearance. Cas was struggling to process all of it—but one part especially.

"And then," Alex continued, as Castiel stared at the area in front of himself with a deep frown, "Joshua sent me back. You know the rest from there."

She became quiet and Cas mulled it all over. She'd told him everything calmly, factually, if a little distracted sounding. He knew she was wondering what he was, and that she was much more afraid than she sounded. "I don't understand..." Cas said slowly. "Why you wouldn't have a heaven." It was one of the more terrifying and disturbing things he had ever been told and he was completely baffled—however, the way her soul had been drifting and impossible to track down... now it made sense, but it was the kind of sense that only sent more terror racing through his mind.

Beside Cas, he felt Alex breathing in and out and for a moment, he shut his eyes, just focusing on that. In the darkness caused by his closed eyes, memories came to mind; he remembered seeing her as she lay dying in the future, memories came to mind; he remembered seeing her as she lay dying in the future, remembered her asking if there were a Heaven at all. Cas... do you... do you think there's still a Heaven up there? she'd looked at him with tearful eyes that could break a heart into pieces. He'd seen himself tell her that yes, of course there was. And then later he'd grabbed Chuck in a rage, shouting at him that there was no Heaven anymore, that Alex was gone forever. Distress coursed through Castiel's veins. What was he supposed to do? What was he supposed to do? Cas's eyes opened.

The only hope that remained was that Dean and Sam would return after speaking with Joshua and have some answer, have some word from God. Perhaps the reason God hadn't answered Castiel personally was because he'd done the wrong thing to defy Heaven. Perhaps God would speak to Dean, who was, after all, the righteous man. Cas clung to this final thread of hope despairingly and had to forcefully quiet his mind.

Alex shifted slightly against him and Castiel looked down towards her, feeling a fierce determination overtake him. "I'm going to find out why," he told her grimly. And he was. If it was the last thing he did, he would find out why she had no heaven awaiting her when she died.

"How can you find that out?" Alex asked. She sounded kind of hopeful and apprehensive at the same time, and she felt tense beside him.

She was scared, he realized... he felt his protective instincts surge forth. He didn't want her to be afraid. "I'm not sure," he answered honestly. "But I will." The arm that he had around her tightened, his other arm came across their bodies so that he now held her securely in the circle of his arms.

He'd learned some time ago that it made her feel better when he put his arms around her... and reflected briefly that it made him feel a little better, too. After a couple seconds she relaxed into him, burrowing into his side a little more—and knowing she wanted to be close to him sent indescribable feelings rushing through him. Her hand and arm had been resting across his stomach, but now slid around him, pulling him closer than before. He felt her smallish hand against his side, underneath where his arm rested, and he breathed out slowly. Memorizing the way all of this felt. This moment was stolen and fleeting... and the future it would lead to was dark. But perhaps, he reflected, it was too late altogether. He couldn't seem to tear himself away from her, in any circumstance. He needed to be close to her as much as he needed to be far away—but he was losing the fight. It wasn't a battle he wanted to win, after all. Being here with her felt righter than anything else.

Neither of them said anything for a long moment. He could feel how very small and fragile she was in the grand scheme of the planet, the universe, the galaxy. How breakable, how mortal. And
he began to think of the stark reality, the truth of the matter: Dean would die someday. Sam would die someday. Alex would die someday. But Castiel? Castiel would stretch into eternity endlessly. Alone as he always had been. That thought made him feel very terrible indeed. He couldn't imagine going back to that existence again. Not after all of this.

But he would have to, wouldn't he? The fact remained: this was the way things were. She was human. He was not. And she would end, like all humans did. He thought, for the first time, that even if he succeeded in seeing her through this lifetime, she would die anyway. Of cancer? Of a heart attack? Of old age? Such deep sadness overcame him at this thought. And if she wasn't in a heaven, if she was drifting and in the dark and if he could never find or see her again... his chest tightened. He didn't want that. Ever. It was unthinkable and perverse. He imagined the universe missing one bright spot of light. This human. Why did she matter like this to him? He had seen billions of humans but none of them had ever mattered like she did... why did the thought of her no longer existing leave him feeling empty, panicked, and afraid? He wanted to live in a way where he would never be parted from her. And this thought, this realization, stilled him. It seemed that fate was determined to push himself and Alex together, only to rip them apart brutally again, only to use their union as the cause of her demise. **What was he supposed to do?**

His strained, stressed mind turned to another unsolved mystery. What had John Winchester been trying to tell Alex about Azazel? *The danger isn't past.* What did it mean? Castiel knew nothing about this, had no idea what John could have meant—he could only conclude that John was either mistaken or that Azazel had concealed part of his plan much better than Heaven and Hell had guessed. Castiel's thoughts bothered him, deeply. All he could think, over and over, was **what am I supposed to do?**

No answer came. No revelation. He was completely confounded. Turning his head toward Alex, Cas did the only thing he really could in the moment, which was to assess her wellbeing. She seemed more relaxed than she had been when she first came back, she was calm now. This was one small mercy in the face of a monsoon, but it soothed him. She had barely been able to move her arms thirty minutes ago, but now she held onto him tightly—he thought she was definitely recovering from her temporary state of weakness and was successfully regaining her strength. But he asked, anyway, to be sure. "Do you feel any better than before?"

"Well, I couldn't run a marathon, but yeah," she said. "I think standing up might be in the cards again." Her humorous tone became softer. "But... I don't want to. Not yet."

He felt another rush of something strong in his veins when she told him that. He understood the sentiment. Her hand moved to his chest, palm flat there—he remembered when she'd done something similar... they'd been in the freezer... but this time she wasn't being sensual, she was pressing herself up, pulling back enough to look him in the eye. But he couldn't help but recall, through that touch, what had happened between them before... he swallowed, suddenly a little disconcerted, wondering how she kept doing that to him... affecting him so completely, mind and body alike. As she drew back enough for him to see her face again, he was struck again by how beautiful she was. She was looking at him intently, questioningly. "What did Zachariah mean, Cas? When he said you gave up things to... to give me my voice?"

Cas looked at her hesitatingly. He'd assumed she would ask this when she told him what Zachariah had said, a few minutes ago... and he thought about the answer. He wasn't sure that telling her would be beneficial... in fact, he wasn't sure if she could take the truth of what he'd surrendered to restore her voice. If he told her what had happened, she would be horrified, she wouldn't understand. Her features showed concerned disquiet when he said nothing. "Why don't you want to tell me, Cas?" she asked slowly, and now she looked almost afraid. "What did you do?"
Cas looked down. Her hand that had been wrapped around him was now resting loosely on his knee and he was oddly compelled to cover that hand with his own. The skin was warm, he could feel her pulse underneath his fingertips. His eyes flicked to hers, and he held her gaze for a couple long beats. "Nothing I wouldn't do again," he answered her. Her face changed and the worry was replaced with some kind of caught off guard expression.

And then there was a loud gasp on the other side of the room—Sam shot up in bed, and then Dean, too. Alex jumped, looking at them in shock, and Cas froze, unsure what to do. Sam was panting loudly, regaining his breath, and Dean too—the difference was, Sam didn't seem to be seeing anything at all—he was flailing a little, off balance and reeling—but Dean was staring right at Alex and Cas, his expression rigid. His eyes met Cas's and his expression darkened… but he said nothing, tore his glare away, and focused on Sam. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, Dean grabbed Sam by both arms and steadied him, seeming to be much better off than his brother was.

Even as Dean steadied Sam, Cas and Alex separated—Cas stood, helping Alex stand too, gently holding her hand in one of his, her arm in the other. Dean glanced their way, saw it, and his grip tightened on Sam. Guilty, Cas looked down.

"Whoa," Sam commented breathlessly, oblivious, staring unseeingly into Dean's chest. "That was… intense." He looked up at his brother, expression becoming concerned. "You alright?"

Dean's jaw tightened and he let go of Sam, glancing their sister's way. "Define alright." He stood up, then seemed to realize he wasn't at full capacity—swaying just slightly he stopped and frowned—then took a halting step toward Alex and Cas. Dean stared at Alex hard, glanced at Cas, then looked at his sister again. "You okay?" He asked her gruffly.

She seemed a little reluctant to speak with her brother, who was now looking at her thoroughly, taking in her damp hair, the way she was holding onto Castiel's arm for support. Alex met her brother's gaze falteringly. She sounded different than a minute ago when it had just been herself and Cas. "I'm fine, Dean."

Her brother's eyes narrowed. He didn't seem to accept her answer. "She seems to have had a rougher time than the two of you," Castiel observed.

Dean gave him a hard look. "Yeah, maybe that's because she didn't have a reservation upstairs—you wanna explain that Cas?"

Sam was silently watching this all unfold with an earnest, concerned expression. Cas looked over at Sam, and then Dean, frowning, knocked off balance. "Joshua didn't tell you why?" he asked, feeling strange, like his stomach was sinking in sick confirmation of what he'd already suspected…but hadn't wanted to believe.

"Oh he knew," Dean retorted angrily, "but he just wasn't saying." Dean finally looked at Alex again, whose scared expression seemed to settle him slightly and he relented, looking back at Cas a little less angrily now. A little more despairing instead. "So you don't know, either?"

Alex sat down on the edge of the bed at this point, frowning at the floor, seeming to feel disillusioned. Cas looked at her in concern, then saw that Dean was watching him watch her. Dean's eyes were intent and sharp. Accusing almost. Cas felt caught and attempted to wipe his face of any expression. He approached Dean, attempting to appear calm and neutral. "No, Dean, I don't know. If I knew, I would have told you a long time ago." For just a moment, Dean's expression turned to open and pleading. Like he had no other possible idea of what to do or say. And Castiel shook his head, feeling the same way. The men looked at each other silently, then Cas turned away, moving toward the smashed wall partition, trying to think, trying to reason.
Dean and Sam both noticed the smashed partition at the same time and looked at each other frowning, then in unison looked at their sister for an explanation. She was staring at her lap unseeingly. Didn't notice her brothers at all. "Everyone… has a heaven," Castiel said softly, still facing away. He sounded disturbed to his core.

At this point Sam stood up and crossed the room to go to his sister, putting a comforting arm around her as he sat down beside her. He watched her, his forehead wrinkled up in worry. She didn't look at him.

"Everyone has a heaven," Dean repeated. "So why the hell wouldn't Alex have one?" He was clearly trying to remain calm but just barely managing. "I mean, you gotta have some idea, right Cas?"

Castiel turned around, harrowed. He looked at Alex for a couple of long seconds, his expression tense. Then he met Dean's expectant stare sadly. "Dean—I don't."

The two men stared at each other again for another long moment, Cas's eyes sad and empty because he was out of answers. Dean looked the same but was angry about it. After realizing Cas wasn't going to say anything else, Dean made a sarcastic face. "Great. This is just the best day ever," he snapped, shaking his head and looking off to the side at nothing in particular. Castiel's expression screwed up in confusion. How could he say that, even in jest or cynicism? Dean was now pacing in agitation, rubbing his hand across the lower portion of his face, appearing to be sorting his thoughts. Sam and Alex were watching their brother with guarded expressions, and to Castiel, in that moment, the twins looked very alike. "Well, all of that great news aside—" Dean finally said, looking at Cas accusingly again. "Your friend God? He doesn't give a rat's ass."

"...What?" Cas asked, his face squinting oddly because he was unsure what Dean was saying to him. And what did a rodent's posterior have to do with it?

Dean threw his arms out angrily, at his wit's end. "You heard me, Cas! God doesn't care, doesn't wanna help, doesn't think this whole mess is his problem. So where do we go from here, huh?!" His anger wavered into desperation at the very last few words he spoke.

Alex was watching her brother shrewdly, just as upset at the news as he was, and then she looked at Cas—their eyes met for a brief moment and Cas shook his head, his frown deepening. He looked back at Dean, who was now watching him hawkishly. "Joshua told you this?" Cas asked slowly, trying to make sense of what he'd just been told. It couldn't be true. It couldn't.

"Yeah, Cas," Sam interjected softly. He seemed sympathetic. Maybe defeated. "He said God won't help us." He looked at Cas sadly, who turned to gaze at Dean blankly. Dean's grim stare silently confirmed Sam's statement, and Cas felt as if he'd been physically struck, as if the breath had been knocked out of his lungs.

Silently choking it down, Cas felt himself shaking his head—this certainly wasn't right. With his arms hanging limply at his sides, he stared down at Dean's shoes unseeingly. "That can't be true..." he managed to say, even as he was thinking of how God hadn't answered his begging pleas earlier that same day. How God had been impossible to find all this time. It could be true. In fact, somewhere deep down maybe he'd already known or believed this. But he didn't want it to be the truth. He turned around and put his back to them. "Maybe... maybe Joshua was lying," Castiel said, and he wished one of them would agree with him. Give him a small shred of hope to cling to.

But he heard Sam breathe out heavily. "I don't think he was, Cas. I'm sorry."

Cas turned slightly to see Sam, who looked deeply compassionate. "But that makes no sense,"
Alex protested, still there beside her twin and looking at him, completely shattered and baffled.

Sam just shook his head faintly, looking at his sister sadly. "I know. But that's what Joshua told us."

Alex met Cas's waiting gaze and he had to turn around, unable to bear the way she looked at him—not when paired with everything else on his shoulders right now. He had failed the Winchesters, for one, because he'd told them this was the answer, that this would save them all. And the father he had always believed in, served, existed for—didn't care. Wouldn't help them. Castiel felt defeated, crushed, and looked upwards, one final despairing thought left in him. "You son of a bitch," he said, and waited to be struck down. Nothing. His pained betrayal worsened. "I believed in…" he trailed off, not even sure why he was doing this. There was no sign, no reply, nothing at all. God had left a long time ago, hadn't he? You fool. And Castiel realized he was truly alone in this, truly on his own.

After trying to steel himself, Cas turned around again, ashamed to face all of them. Alex had stood up and was looking at him in deep concern that he didn't deserve, and he looked away, dug in his pocket, drawing out the amulet he'd borrowed from Dean. "I don't need this anymore," he said heavily, overwhelmed with sorrow and even anger. "It's worthless." He tossed the amulet and Dean caught it. Cas stared at the necklace in Dean's hand. "I'm finished. It's over."

Dean looked at Cas with genuine empathy, suddenly feeling a surprisingly kindred connection with the angel—absent father who you believed in with everything you had… only to be let down and disappointed time after time? Believing in something that turned out to be a lie, a trick? Yeah. He got that. Cas had put all his faith and effort into what turned out to be a dead end—and the depression, the broken sorrow Dean heard in the angel's voice echoed what Dean lived with every day of his damn life. Dean almost thought of saying something to Cas, of trying to lift his spirits somehow, of attempting to comfort him in some small way—but then Cas looked at Alex again and the suspicious hackles raised again as Dean watched—the angel was weary and sorrowful as he looked at Alex—he seeming to be waiting for her to do something. Dean watched in mounting confusion as he watched what looked like a freaking silent conversation take place between the two. Then Alex truly shocked Dean when she nodded just slightly, her eyes full of emotion and empathy. "It's okay, Cas." Wait. Was she giving him permission to leave? And just like that Cas turned, walking a few steps away. Dean's mouth was now hanging open slightly. What the actual hell?

"Cas. Wait," Sam implored, standing up too.

Cas turned slightly, speaking to no one in specific. Sounding depressed as hell. "I'm going to find out why Alex has no heaven."

And then without any further anything—Cas was gone.

Sam seemed frustrated: he threw his hands up slightly then ran a hand through his hair while huffing. Alex was the opposite. She stared at the space Cas had occupied, her expression strange. Dean stared down at the amulet in his hand, the reality of his life sinking in. God wasn't gonna help. So where the hell was there left to turn? Everything was going wrong for him right now, everything! Dean thought of when he'd first come back and seen Cas holding his sister like that—arms wrapped around her, not enough space between them, Alex's head nestled into his shoulder—and that jealous, protective, possessive, scared shitless feeling came over Dean again. What the hell was Alex thinking? Didn't she know she was playing with fire and would be consumed by it? Destroyed by it? And didn't she know that he couldn't let that happen? That he wouldn't stand by and let her sign her life away because she had some weird crush on her guardian angel? Dean's grip
tightly on the amulet in his hand, so tight that the little barbs on it dug into his skin.

This amulet had been given to him by Sam when they were kids. Dean had always worn it. It had been one of his most prized possessions. But now he felt like that was a trick, too. Why had all of Sam's heavens... his happy memories... been times spent away from family? Dean felt disillusioned, like maybe he was the only one who really loved his family—that Sam and Alex were just humoring him, pitying him. He thought of what fake-Mom had said in Heaven to him... it wasn't really her, he told himself. It was some trick Zachariah conjured up. He knew it then, and he knew it now. Still, her words cruelly replayed in his mind.

"Everybody leaves you, Dean. You noticed? Mommy. Daddy. Even Sam. Next is Alex.! Mark my words, sweetie. Everyone you ever thought you could count on... is going to go away. You ever ask yourself why? Maybe it's not them. Maybe it's you."

Maybe it was him. Next is Alex. And Dean knew exactly what—who—she'd leave him for. The angel in the trench coat. The barbs on the amulet dug in even more to his skin and Dean wanted to throw it at a wall. "We'll find another way," Sam said, approaching him and sounding determined but harrowed. "We can still stop all this, Dean."

Dean bit back a thousand sarcastic retorts and just focused on the amulet. "Yeah? How."

Sam stalled, then tried valiantly to instill hope. "I don't know, but we'll find it. You and me and Alex—we'll find it. We always do."

"Yeah, sure," Dean muttered and turned then threw his amulet into the trash can before looking at Sam pointedly. Sam was staring at the trash can, hurt by what his brother had just done. Dean ignored it. "Did you ever stop to think, Sam, that maybe, just maybe, we won't always be able to figure this shit out? That someday we're gonna meet our match?" Dean was hopeless. "Come on. This is pointless. We are in way over our heads. Today proved that."

"It's not pointless," Sam protested, and Dean just felt more and more anger churn in his stomach.

Dean turned from his brother, bitter. "And yeah, while we're on the subject of being in way over our heads..." he fixed Alex with a pointed look. "You wanna tell me what the hell is going on with you two?" it was a gruff and impatient question, Dean raised his eyebrows and gave her a look that said 'I'm waiting' while Alex looked at her brother in disbelief. Everyone in the room knew what Dean was asking about.

"Dean—" Sam protested, not giving Alex a chance to answer.

Dean rounded on his brother angrily. "No Sam! This has gone on long enough—and I need a damn explanation!"

Sam did that thing he did where he attempted to smile even though he was clearly mad as hell. "Come on man, she just died and came back to life—you think you can give her a minute?" Sam was no longer smiling. Instead he looked disgusted.

"Do I look like I got a friggin' minute, Sammy?" Dean demanded wrathfully, getting in Sam's face. "Do I look like I got all the time in the world? Don't you see how jacked up this is? Some thousands-of-years-old guy is taking advantage of your sister and you got no problem with it? I mean talk about pedophile!"

Sam's eyebrows shot up high. Alex looked disgusted. "Have you lost your mind?" she asked angrily.
Dean whirled and invaded her space brutishly. "Well you sure as hell have lost yours!" he snapped. The two of them glared at each other hard.

Sam grabbed Dean by the shoulder, forcefully turning him, kind of putting himself between his two siblings. "Dean, just lay off a little!" Sam said sharply, "I mean you're being absolutely—"

Dean yanked himself out of Sam's grasp. "Absolutely what, Sam? Responsible? Sane?" Dean was on a tirade at this point. "Why don't either of you see all the levels of wrong here? He's walking around in a borrowed meatsuit that's married by the way—and if he ditches out of it again, what then, huh?" Dean was shouting. "He's not even human!" Dean gestured wildly in his sister's direction. "Alex has a crush on this angel because he's the only guy who's ever shown her the time of day—but it's dangerous and gets her killed and I'm not letting it happen!"

Alex moved forward, grabbing Dean hard by the front of his jacket, startling both of the brothers. "You need to shut your damn mouth right now," she told him in a trembling, anger-filled voice. She shoved him away brutally and he looked surprised as she stared at him balefully, mistrustfully—clearly wounded. "I mean, what is this…? Be-a-heartless-asshole day?" she asked, trying to cover with sarcasm. Right behind her, Sam stayed put, looking at Dean with deep disappointment.

"You don't even know half of what happened to me today," Alex continued accusingly, "and then you come in here acting like you own me and my life and you're the only one who gets to be there for me?" She shook her head, rolled her eyes in clear irritation, seeming to realize something. "This is ridiculous. I don't owe you any fucking explanation," she said stonily. And Dean was shocked. Who was this girl? They had never had secrets the two of them. She'd always confided in him, and he in her. What was happening? But instead of appealing to her, he just reverted to his normal M.O.—which unfortunately was douche supreme.

"Like hell you don't," he retorted. "I keep you safe. Me. That's my job, that's the one thing I haven't screwed up yet." He relented, thought about it. "And I guess I fell down on that today, huh." He wasn't trying to throw a pity party, but he realized it sounded that way once he said it.

Annoyed with him, Alex seemed done with the exchange. "Forget it. We're all fine."

"Fine?" Dean asked peevishly, flying off the handle again, unable to deal with everything inside his mind. "Your two brothers are Heaven and Hell's most wanted and God won't help and that's fine?"

"Jesus Christ Dean!" She suddenly exploded. "Do you have to bring that up?!"

"Well excuse me for living in reality—" he started.

She held up a hand, calling for silence, looking tense and incapable. "No. I just—I can't. I can't think about that right now," she said harshly.

"Well too bad Princess, because looks like it's the main event and you got front row seats," Dean retorted angrily, and immediately got one of the most righteous bitchfaces from Sam, ever.

"Dean!" Sam exclaimed, and his voice was shaking now, too. "She's scared! Come on."

Dean blinked and stopped, realizing Sam was one hundred percent right, and felt regret and self-loathing wash over him. He realized his mistake. As usual, his temper had gotten the better of him and he let out a deeply ashamed breath, suddenly unable to look at his sister. "I'm sorry," he said, clenched his jaw tight, managed to look her in the eye, just for a second. "I'm sorry."

Alex wasn't appearing very receptive. "Sure you are," she said darkly.
Dean got mad again. "I am!" he insisted, frustrated to maximum capacity at himself, the world, his family—everything. "Geez. Guess I can't do anything right," he said sarcastically, "unlike Castiel." The way Alex rolled her eyes only inspired another outburst. Dean's expression soured. "Oh come on, Al. I'm not an idiot. I see the way you look at him," he accused. "The way he looks at you!"

"Just stop it, Dean!" she shouted and she glared at him angrily, so upset that her shoulders were heaving. "I am so tired of you treating me like this," Alex muttered, and in a show of aggression reminiscent of her younger years, she pushed him away with both hands—Dean felt almost murderous at this point.

"Treating you like what, like I care about whether you live or die?!” he shouted, bouncing back from where she'd shoved him, bearing down on her wrathfully—only to be stopped by Sam, who grabbed his shoulder, gave him a 'cool off, Dean' look. Dean again yanked himself out of his brother's grasp, then looked at both of his siblings in total disbelief, feeling completely alone and misunderstood and ganged up on. "All I've ever done is look out for this family…” he said, shaking his head hollowly. "And this is the thanks I get?" he scoffed and let out a disgusted breath. "Yeah cool. I'll catch you two later then." He grabbed a clean shirt and stalked out, slamming the motel room door behind him, fuming.

And then he heard footsteps behind him. "Dean!" He whirled, keeping his face hard. It was Alex. "Where are you going?" she demanded, and for a second, Dean thought about letting it go. The rage, the jealousy, all of it. Because he couldn't stand to fight with her.

But bitter, angry, hurt, he just kept his face hard and pushed her away with finality by turning around, continuing on his way. "To get a damn drink," he threw over his shoulder. "If you need a shoulder to cry on, why don't you call your little angel boyfriend instead?"

There was a long silence—Dean didn't look back. But he heard the tears in her voice. "You're such an asshole!" she shouted at his back. He set his mouth in a hard line, kept walking, didn't look back. If he did, she might see how much he hated himself, too.

Back in the hotel room, Sam was changing shirts quickly, tossing away the bloody bullet-riddled one and pulling on a black one, about to follow after Alex and Dean—and then she came back in and Sam froze, he looked at her in surprise, his features etched in earnestness and concern. Where had Dean gone? She was really upset, but trying not to show it—looking down and away, hardening her face. "Hey, are you—"

"Don't Sam," she interrupted tersely, shaking her head as she plopped down onto her bed, the only bed in the room that wasn't covered in blood. She faced away from him, her shoulders slouched in exhaustion. She sounded like she was barely keeping it together. "I can't. Please just… just leave me alone." She curled up on the bed on her side, looking very small and alone, and Sam decided not to do what she'd said. He went around to the other side of the bed where he could see her face, and crouched there beside the bed. His face was now level with hers, but she was staring at the sleeve of her shirt kind of blankly, not returning his gaze.

"Look," Sam appealed gently. "I know you need some space but… if you need me… I'll be here."

His twin's eyes—eyes that were the exact same color as his—flicked up to him. She looked kind of like she was despairing. "Why haven't you told Dean?" she asked him falteringly. "About… about what you saw?"

Sam's eyebrows went up a little. "Do you really have to ask?" They were talking about Dean, weren't they? The same guy who had just flipped his shit over seeing Cas hugging Alex. How would he have reacted if he'd seen them, Jesus, dry humping each other's brains out? Sam looked
at his conflicted sister, more serious than before. "I think we both know he can't hear about that," Sam said. "Ever."

Alex's features crumpled. "Why is he like that? Why does he have to... to be that way?"

She sounded about as lost and let down as Sam felt. Dean just wasn't himself lately, he was really losing it in some ways, wasn't he? Sam shrugged, trying not to give in to despair. "That's... just Dean," he said helplessly and looked at his little sister sadly. She looked really torn up, and he instinctually felt it was because she didn't know what was going on anymore. For the past few weeks she'd been withdrawn, tense. Maybe it was because of Cas. Sam wondered, and his eyes rested on hers again. He was worried about a lot of things right now, one of the biggest things being her wellbeing. "Look—I don't really know what's going with you two—" he began, "but it's obvious to me that Cas cares about you. A lot." He paused tensely. "Just... be careful, okay?"

She met his gaze hesitantly and he swore she looked like she wanted to tell him something, but she remained silent then looked away again. Sam frowned lightly, then made himself smile. "Your shirt's inside out, you know."

One corner of her mouth lifted up in a fond little smile. "Yeah," she said softly, her eyes flickering over the sleeve of her shirt where the inseam showed. "I know." Sam looked at the sleeve, trying to see what she was seeing. But it was just a shirt.

Alex's little smile faded and she became troubled again, drawing in a deep breath as her eyes went somewhere far away. Sam wished she wouldn't carry her burdens alone. He put one of his massive hands on the side of her head comfortingly. Her hair was damp—had she been in the shower? Sam wanted to ask her, pretty intensely, about Cas, and exactly how close he was to her, what their relationship was—but he didn't think this was the right time. And it wasn't his business. He just knew that his sister looked depressed and grief stricken.

He didn't feel very sure of himself at all anymore, but for her sake he tried to sound like he was confident. "We're gonna get through this," Sam told her. "All of it. We'll figure it out."

She looked at him once again, but this time, she looked like she was filled with the same dread he was feeling, the same hopelessness he couldn't shake off. "We might not this time, Sammy," she said quietly, and she seemed close to terrified tears. "We might not."

Sam couldn't find a reply. He knew she was right.

A couple blocks away at the same moment, Dean was sitting in silence in a mostly-empty bar... realizing he didn't even want anything. Comfortably Numb was playing on the crappy bar sound system. How fucking fitting. The sound of pool table balls cracking as they hit against each other reminded Dean of Heaven all over again.

There was literally nowhere left to turn and Dean felt like he was drowning, held underwater, losing his hold over life without a way to break to the surface. What the hell was he supposed to do? Dean propped his elbow up onto the bar counter and put his face in his hand wearily. Listened to Pink Floyd singing exactly what he was feeling.

"I can't explain, you would not understand. This is not how I am... I have become comfortably numb."

Fergus Roderick McLeod—that had been his original name before paying up on his soul deal and going to Hell, before becoming a demon, before taking the name Crowley. It had been a pitiful
little existence he'd led in his previous, human life—but he supposed all legends had to begin somewhere. Crowley smiled to himself. He was just getting started—he had grand plans for himself, grand plans for Heaven, Hell, Earth. There was the small matter of getting the devil out of the way, but he'd find a way. If those Winchester idiots couldn't make it happen, Crowley would find someone who could. He swirled the whiskey in his glass, strolled to the other end of the room of his house and set the glass down for a moment, perusing the book titles there with mild interest.

And suddenly he felt an unwelcome pull—he was being summoned, yanked out of his home and into a new location. The warm home he'd been in was gone, replaced by... he blinked, trying to make out his surroundings. It was dark here—a subway tunnel? That was new. He stood in the middle of a single-rail subway tunnel, somewhere deep inside of it. He heard water dripping, the sound echoing in the large, damp space. He looked up slowly and saw a huge devil's trap spray painted across the arching ceiling—and a damn good one, too. He turned around to see what pathetic sap had summoned him here, all air and attitude—then faltered slightly. Not who he had expected to see.

The angel in the trench coat stood in front of him, his expression deadly. "Ah, blimey," Crowley said, recovering fast, not letting his surprise show. "If I'd known we were going to be meeting, I'd have worn something special." No sooner had the words left his mouth than he was suddenly seized, turned, and smashed up against the far concrete wall—still inside the large radius of the devil's trap, and now in a good deal of physical pain. "Oy! What did I do to you!?" Crowley protested, and he felt the angel's grip tighten. His face was close, eyes dark, glittering with aggression.

"Why does Alex Winchester have no heaven?" Castiel demanded.

Crowley forced himself not to react, not to move—he didn't let it show that he had no idea. Instead he smiled smoothly. "If you really want to know—" he drawled casually, "let me go."

The angel stared at him wrathfully for a couple more seconds—then shoved hard, let go. Crowley made a great show about brushing off his lapels. "Thank you very much," he said, a little sarcastically. He eyed the angry angel with interest. No heaven? He'd never heard of that, but thinking quickly, Crowley decided this would be useful to him, that he could use this to his advantage. This angel was clearly quite invested in the human girl. Well, Crowley had already known that, but exactly how invested he was remained to be seen. Guardian angels did tend to become attached to their humans. But this one, this Castiel—he seemed more attached to his charge than what was normal. Crowley remembered the little show he'd seen them putting on, all mouths and breathy panting and gyrating—he smiled softly, chuckled lowly. Yes, very interesting, this.

"So, you want to know if she's on the special guest list downstairs," Crowley said smoothly, and pretended to be thinking, then changing his mind. He grimaced slightly. "I'd hate to spoil the ending, though."

He should have known what that comment would get him. Castiel grabbed him again and smashed him back into the wall again, harder. "Tell me, now," the angel demanded with increasing aggression.

"Jesus Mary and Joseph, they weren't kidding about you and her!" Crowley protested, feeling red in the face and wondering if his suit would be ruined or not. It was Dolce and Gabbana for God's sakes!

"Is she supposed to end up in Hell?" the angel practically snarled.

Crowley decided, for the sake of his suit, to come clean. "Come on mate, how's a two-bit demon
like me gonna know that?"

Castiel narrowed his gaze at Crowley, seeming surprised... then resolved. "You'll find out."

"Oh, shall I?" Crowley asked challengingly.

"Yes," the angel replied in a dark, low, gravelly tone. And then his eyes went to his right. Crowley followed his gaze. "Or... you'll have to find a new vessel."

From somewhere far down the track, there was the sound of a train horn. And the faintest, growing light. Crowley looked at the angel in surprise, scrambling suddenly. "Oh, really, come on. All of this for some little mortal human? Some little speck on the page?" he realized that was the wrong thing to say—Castiel slammed him against the wall again with renewed vigor, sending a crack zigzagging up into the concrete wall.

Crowley grimaced, looking up and squinting as rubble dusted over him—and then he had a thought. Actually—if the angel kept pounding him into the wall, he might be able to escape the devil's trap completely. He glanced up at it—another good slam might crack the wall far up enough to break the trap. It sounded closer now, he could see the headlights clearly as the train rounded the bend.

"Find out if her name is written in the book of Hell or I lay you to waste," the angel threatened again, and Crowley's mouth crooked into a little smile.

"She's important to you, innt she? Your beloved little Alex... won't it be sad when she comes downstairs with me..." Castiel's expression was cold and furious. Crowley sealed the deal with a meaningful smile and the raise of a solitary eyebrow. "Oh the things I'll do to that sweet little soul of hers..."

Cas slammed him into the wall again with devastating force—and Crowley's theory proved true. He felt the devil's trap break, among other things—his back would have been broken completely if he was still human. It did sting a bit, either way. However, he was no longer bound, and the angel, too wrapped up in righteous anger, didn't notice. The train horn was close now, the lights were bright. Crowley wiggled his eyebrows at the angel just once. "Should learn to control your temper, mate. Lands you in all kinds of sorrow. See ya later."

Crowley disappeared, left, returned home. He looked down at his suit. Absolutely ruined. He made a displeased face, then sighed heavily. No matter. A ruined suit was a small price to pay for what had just happened. He felt pleased, actually. This could be useful.

*Very* useful indeed.

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Dean had stalked back in from his visit to the bar, packed his stuff, barked at his siblings that they were leaving and to get a move on. Cue the five hour, silent car ride. Tension thick enough to cut with a knife. Dean was taking them back to Bobby's—they needed to regroup and figure this mess out. He'd planned on driving all night, but then Sam had insisted that he and Alex needed rest in a real bed and so they'd gotten a motel room in Austin, Minnesota. None of them had said a thing to each other, just turned in. Dean had been watching his siblings all day from the corner of his eye—seen Alex avoiding looking at him, Sam giving him all these passive-aggressive stares, trying to guilt trip him. He felt like he had no one left who got him anymore. No one who realized why he was so jacked up, why he was so angry about everything.

So now Dean laid there in the dark on a stiff motel bed, unable to sleep. His mind was racing,
troubled, tortured with so many thoughts and fears. Sam, however, had knocked out as soon as they'd arrived and was snoring noisily in the bed to Dean's left. Dean looked to his right—he could see Alex's familiar outline in the dim light. She always slept on her side, and was turned like that right now, away from him. The second they'd gotten to the motel, she'd laid down on the bed, still in her jacket and shoes, then hadn't moved at all again. Dean could see her shoulder rising and falling now. He saw that like himself, she wasn't asleep either. Her sleep-breathing was much slower than that.

As he watched her, he felt an incredible sadness wash over him. He only wanted to protect her and Sam too, dammit. He only wanted to keep them safe. Maybe he had a hell of a way of showing it, huh? Right now Alex was mad at him for caring, and had ever right to be, he guessed. He'd kind of lost it on her. But he was under so much pressure—he was backed into a corner, and every time he looked up, there was always one more thing going wrong.

All Dean knew was that he couldn't say no to the angels forever—it was clear that Zachariah wasn't going to give up, in fact, he'd been more pissed off than ever before today, and he'd specifically threatened Alex then shown Dean exactly how much power he had. Alex mute again couldn't happen. Alex dead again couldn't happen. Sam being Lucifer's vessel was awful enough, but really, why did both of his siblings have to be in mortal peril? Why did he have to be a failure at protecting both of them? Why did God have to decide to pull him, a supposed righteous man, out of Hell... send an angel to task him with a heavenly mission... then leave him high and dry? With no way out? It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. It was complete bullshit.

Dean stared at Alex's shoulder unseeingly now. It didn't matter why or that it wasn't fair. It was his reality. And sooner or later, Michael, Zachariah... whoever, would catch up to Dean, and subsequently, to Dean's family. Sooner or later, Sam was going to face the devil. Sooner or later, Alex was going to be caught in the crossfire. And they might not get a lucky break like today again. Next time, she might stay dead.

His heart ached as he thought of his silent sister and long car rides in years past. Alex in the back, nose in a book because she was unable to contribute to the conversation. And Dean would look in the rear-view and wonder what she was thinking, if she'd ever be okay—if he'd be taking care of her until the day he died. And then he'd wonder if and when he died, would Sammy take over? Would Sam shoulder the responsibility, or run off like he did with so many other things? And Dean would ask himself if she'd ever be able to survive on her own if it came to that. Not so much physically, but mentally and emotionally. But now he had to worry about what waited for her when she left this world for good. Now he had to worry about her eternal fate, he had to figure out why and how to change it.

He didn't want to be in Heaven for all eternity without her there, knowing she was drifting somewhere in darkness. To him, that wouldn't be Heaven, it would be Hell.

Dean thought how it had always been her and him, always. Sometimes Sam had been gone, most of the time Dad had been gone. But Dean and Alex—that had been a guaranteed. That had been a given. Maybe it was selfish of him to think she'd always be there with him. And maybe he needed her more than he was willing to admit.

Dean had never even considered that maybe she would go off and start a life of her own... meet a guy, even. He'd always just assumed she'd be there with him, living this life on the road, fighting at his side, letting him take care of her. Dean felt a strange feeling in his stomach when he thought about how he just didn't trust anyone else other than himself to protect her like he knew he would. He would die for her, without question. He would do anything for her or for Sam. He didn't think it was possible for anyone else to care about his siblings as much as he did.
So seeing Alex gravitating toward the angel in the backwards tie… it inspired nothing but negative feelings in Dean. The thought of his baby sister—who'd never had a boyfriend, had spent most of her life disabled, who had no heaven—messing around with a two-thousand year old angel who was walking around in a body that wasn't even his—Dean couldn't handle it. It set all his warning bells off, especially knowing that in some weird twisted version of the future, Cas got Alex killed. He had to keep them apart. Had to. He almost felt like he could have a panic attack as he remembered seeing Alex curled into Cas's side when he'd first come back from the dead. When the hell had she gotten that comfortable with Cas, anyway? Dean was lost. Confused. Worried sick.

Yeah, Cas cared about her, wanted to protect her—Dean got that. But were there strings attached? Did the angel have some dark interest in her? Was he taking advantage of Alex's little, naive, romance-novel-loving self? Castiel was a freaking angel—not a human—he barely knew how to do anything, how could he be emotionally capable of a relationship? And even if he were—it was still wrong, as wrong as Sam and Ruby had been. Any way Dean tried to look at it, he saw nothing but bad, nothing but weird, nothing but Alex making a huge, huge mistake.

And that's when Dean heard the softest little struggling breath, the quietest little restrained sob. And he froze, his heart clenched, his thoughts all flew out the window. Alex's shoulder moved oddly, like she was fighting herself. He recognized the way her body had stiffened and was shaking slightly. Dean hadn't said a word to her all day, had shouted at her and said horrible things, but on instinct he got up and went to her, not even thinking, because she was crying and he couldn't let her cry alone—he'd never been able to. He sat beside her, pulled her up, turned her around all in the span of a second or two. She was crying hard but with a clamped-shut mouth.

For a second, Dean wondered if she would push him away or reject him, but their eyes met, her expression was broken and anguished, and they embraced each other at the same time—she shook with sobs she struggled to keep silent, and Dean's arms tightened around his sister, his eyes filling with stinging tears. He squeezed his eyes shut and held her even tighter, afraid to let go, just wishing things could be like they used to be. But every part of him felt terrible, lost, defeated. He thought about Fourth of July, 1996. When the three of them had been these wild, carefree, stupid kids who had burned a field down and that had been their biggest problem. And now? He had started the Apocalypse. His brother was Lucifer's vessel. His sister was caught in the middle of a battle between Heaven and Hell.

Dean was losing it now, and fast, breaking down. "What am I supposed to do?" he choked out softly. In his arms, Alex just cried harder, held onto him tighter.

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**Liquor - Spirits - Beer and Wine**

Castiel stared up at the glowing neon sign morosely. He remembered a time when Alex had told him she drank to feel better. He had never felt worse. Crowley had escaped thanks to Castiel's foolishness—and must have put together a protective hex—because Cas wasn't able to summon him again. It was like he had hit a wall and there was nowhere left to go.

To his right, a church sign glowed in the dark night. In large black letters it asked: **LOOKING FOR GOD? HE'S LOOKING FOR YOU, TOO.**

Castiel wanted to destroy the sign. It was a lie. A total, complete lie. Cas looked back at the liquor store in front of him. Whiskey. He was going to drink some. Perhaps several gallons. It wouldn't have any effect, anyway.

He considered, for a moment, going to Alex instead. She could make him feel better—but then he thought of Dean and grudgingly, Castiel realized he couldn't go see her. Dean wouldn't allow it.
Perhaps it was for the best. He didn't think so. But he felt so empty, so depressed, that for a moment, he just accepted it.

Sam watched his brother and sister hugging each other. Dean had his arms wrapped around Alex protectively, comfortingly, and she'd calmed down. Dean had calmed down, too. Sam felt a pang of jealousy. He'd always been on the outside like this and he didn't understand why. He could hear Dean whispering to Alex, things like *it'll be okay*, and *I'm not going anywhere*, and Sam just didn't get how their sister could let the guy who had torn into her earlier that day be the one who comforted her, too. Dean even had the nerve to kiss Alex there on the forehead at one point, like he was some caring, tenderhearted brother—not the guy who had ripped her a new one earlier. Dean had been way out of line, hadn't apologized to her at all, and she was just… okay with it? The display made Sam a little mad, honestly. It bordered on abusive in his opinion.

But he just laid there, pretending to be asleep while stewing and figuring that's what he got for leaving the family when he did. Just then, his phone buzzed loudly on the bedside table. Sam pretended to wake up groggily. Dean and Alex kind of started, looked at Sam curiously, who turned on the lamp between the beds as he picked the phone up. "It's Bobby," he said, and answered.

"Kid," Bobby's urgent voice blared over the speaker, "get your asses over to Blue Earth now—demonic activity *off the charts.*"
"Hey, hey—what is that?" Sam asked in the front seat even as Dean was slowing the Impala down.

Ahead in the middle of the road, two cars were in flames and three people had been thrown clear of the incinerated wreck out onto the asphalt. The fire cast an odd, intense orange glow over the horrible scene.

"Holy shit," Dean said, and the Impala jerked to a complete halt. Both brothers were already halfway out of the car with Alex close behind, all running full speed—they didn't even bother to close the car doors behind them. The heat was intensely suffocating.

All three of the siblings reached a different victim at the same time, and all three of them realized it was a trap at the same time too. Because the second Dean crouched over a middle-aged woman, the moment Sam knelt to pick up a teenage boy, the instant Alex grabbed onto the feet of a thirty-something man to drag him away from the flaming vehicle he was sprawled next to—the three accident victims opened their eyes. Eyes that were black as night.

"Demons!" Dean bellowed a few feet off, even as Alex let go of the demon's ankles—but not in time. He grabbed her wrists with lightning speed, yanking her down onto him, grabbing her and flipping her over, slamming her back-first onto the hard concrete and… trying to bite her neck—?! Holding the demon back with every ounce of strength she had, Alex took a stupid chance and shoved it back as far as she could, let go with one hand, punched the demon across the face—and was immediately hit in return—her head whipped sideways, she yelped, pushing on the demon's shoulders, trying to get it off of her… it was growling, snarling, trying to bite her again—what the fuck?!

"Hey!" Sam's voice roared somewhere nearby, and her attacker was torn off of her and slammed up against the flaming truck. Steam hissed and the demon screamed in agony as Sam, face twisted up in pain from being so close to the fire, held the demon down, searing clothing to skin against the hot metal shell—Sam punched the demon brutally across the face, holding it by the front of the shirt—not noticing the teenage demon running up behind him—and Alex was scrambling to her feet, screaming "Sam!" in warning, but it wasn't in time. The teenage demon jumped onto Sam from behind, bit him on the shoulder savagely—and Sam screamed in pain, let go of the demon that was on fire and stumbled back, struggling—and Alex who was on her feet now, lunged across the space separating herself and her twin, grabbing the teenager and managing to clumsily tear him off of Sam, and the two of them fell to the ground, where they rolled across the rough pavement, fighting for dominance.

The teen had to be only fourteen or fifteen, so he was smaller, a little less strong than the others—but still strong as hell—and he managed to end up on top of her, choking her, grinning savagely as she struggled mightily—and Sam was suddenly there again, grabbing the kid up, tossing him aside like he weighed nothing—but then Sam was tackled by the demon who was on fire—and the two of them went down fast and hard. Alex was stuttering up to her feet, whipping out her hunting knife, not even sure what she was gonna do with it—and then she was suddenly pulled backwards.
by the teenager—she twisted and struggled hard, but then maybe two seconds after she was grabbed, she felt the demon go tense, he screamed and his grip went slack on her—Dean, Ruby's knife in hand, yanked the blade out from where he'd plunged it into her attacker's back. And before she could even fully register what had happened, he moved her aside roughly, holding the blade high, bringing it down on the demon Sam was trying to fight off.

With a horrible scream, the demon's skeleton flickered as it died and fell off of Sam. And a stunned, breathless silence fell over the scene. Dean pulled his brother up to his feet, and they all stared at each other, shocked, realizing they were lucky to be alive, that they had been totally unprepared for that very unexpected turn of events. Alex realized her mouth was full of blood and she spat and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, faced wrinkled up in revulsion. Sam was grimacing, making a pain-filled sound as he held a hand over a bloody gash on his shoulder, and Dean and Alex both reacted at the same time, noticing the wound, examining it with the same shocked, horrified expression.

And then Sam startled fearfully, noticing something. "G-guys!" he managed, and they looked where he was staring—where they saw at least fifteen demons, in a horizontal line, walking up the road toward them purposefully.

Dean grabbed Sam tightly. "Car, car, car!" he shouted, and they all ran. The demons broke into a run, too. Alex got to the car first and without a second thought, slid into the driver's seat as Dean shoved Sam into the backseat and tumbled in after, shouting at her to drive, to punch it, to get us outta here! The Impala swung around, jerked and shook as it dipped off the road for a second, turning around to head to opposite direction. They side-swiped one demon as the car barreled forward, and the body hit the hood, fell away with a sickening thud.

"Faster!" Dean roared in the back seat.

"It doesn't go any faster!" Alex snapped, cutting the wheel sharply at the turn in the road, her eyes jumping to the rearview in alarm.

Sam made a pain filled sound and Dean was temporarily distracted from his backseat driving.

"You okay?" Dean demanded of his little brother.

Sam seemed to suddenly think something was funny. "Yeah, I'm amazing."

"I've never seen that many!" Dean exclaimed, whipping his head around and craning his head, looking behind them, trying to see if they were being pursued. And then suddenly they swerved around another corner and Alex slammed on the brakes, swearing loudly. There was an overturned semi truck trailer across the road ahead, and it was in flames, blocking the way completely.

"What the hell!" Dean exclaimed, aghast—and then suddenly irrational in his alarmed anger. "See this is why I never let you drive!"

Alex threw him a brief, crazy look over her shoulder. "What, because there might be flaming debris in the middle of the road?!"

"Just drive!" Sam shouted even as she slammed the car into reverse.

"I am!" she sputtered, and the tires squealed as she whipped the car around—then suddenly a man with black eyes flung himself into the side of the car on Dean's side, the car shuddered to a stop, and the window shattered beside Sam, startling them all—but especially Sam, who was was abruptly being pulled out of the window by a demon—and without a second thought Alex yanked up the e-brake, jumped out of the car, went to draw her pistol—and was grabbed and tackled to the
ground from the side by a female demon.

And then suddenly a floodlight bathed the entire road in light, water rained over them from the nozzle of a high-powered hose somewhere overhead, and the demon who had tackled Alex to the ground was convulsing and screaming, giving off steam, letting go of Alex—water then jetted at the demon holding Sam, and with a scream the creature let go—was that holy water? Over a bullhorn, a male voice was reciting some sort of incantation—not one Alex recognized, it wasn't even Latin, she didn't recognize any words at all—and confused, shoving the flailing demon off of herself, she pushed herself up onto all fours, then onto two feet, watching frozen in a tense position—she wasn't sure whether to run or what. She stood right beside the driver's side headlight of the Impala, and in front of her, on the ground, there were about five demons, all convulsing as black smoke shot out of their mouths. Sam and Dean watched with total shock.

A man with sandy blond hair stood across from the Impala, holding a bull horn—standing on the bed of an old red pickup, another guy was aiming the floodlight at the road, there was a tank of holy water jerry-rigged into the truck bed behind the guy—and to the left of the truck stood a teenage kid holding a shotgun. Alex looked at the fallen demons, then the guy with the megaphone with extreme suspicion. Her hand hovered near her gun. "What the hell is all this?" She demanded, looking over everything again, wondering if these guys were hunters or what. "Who are you people?"

The kid with the shotgun seemed jumpy and nervous—when she took a step toward them, he was hefting his shotgun to aim it at her—but after years of hunting, of practice, years of experience and years of depending on instinct—this time completely sober, not about to be shot to death again by some idiot with a gun—Alex whipped her pistol out and had it aimed at him in less than a second and he froze, wide-eyed.

"Hey, hey—" the blond man appeased, raising his hands up in an act of nonaggression, looking surprised to see her weapon. "Put the gun down—we're not the enemy." He nodded his head toward the dead bodies on the ground. "They were."

Alex didn't take her eyes off the kid, who looked like he had an itchy trigger finger and no idea what he was doing. "Him first," she said. She heard Sam and Dean closing in behind her.

"Put it away, Dylan," the blond man told the teenager, and the kid looked from the man to Alex nervously, uncertainly… and then grudgingly obeyed. Watching him carefully, feeling her brothers coming to stand on either side of her, Alex took a couple seconds, then reluctantly did as she'd said and put her pistol away… but stayed on high alert, ready to draw again if she had to.

The blond man looked at Sam's wound, frowning a little. "You kids all right?" he asked. He sounded suspicious, eyes flickering to Alex again.

"Yeah we're fine," Dean said, sounding plenty suspicious himself. "Who the hell are you guys?"

"Rob, I don't think—" the man on top of the firetruck started, addressing the apparent leader, the sandy-haired man—but Rob held up a hand.

"It's fine, Paul." Rob turned to address the Winchesters again, to answer Dean's question. "We're the Sacrament Lutheran Militia."

"I'm sorry—the what?" Dean asked. Maybe like Alex, he'd expected them to say they were hunters. Rob seemed to feel like he was humoring them at this point, like he was telling them something they didn't already know. "I hate to tell you this, but those were demons and this is the apocalypse.
So… buckle up.

The teenager and the man named Paul were coming to stand beside Rob now.

"How do you know about the apocalypse?" Alex asked him, incredulous.

Rob looked at Alex in surprise, then at Sam, then at Dean, then back at her, frowning, clearly not expecting to hear what he just had. "...how do you?"

Dean smirked at that point, wet his lips, then chuckled dryly. "It's kinda our line of work." The three men—this supposed militia—exchanged confused looks at that comment.

"What do you mean?" Rob asked, even as Dean turned, ambled over to his car, opened the trunk up and looked at Rob then the other two men, waving them over. "Have a look-see," he said. The three men approached slowly, exchanging hesitant glances. They looked over the trunk contents in surprise as Sam joined them, Alex trailing behind, wondering what Dean was doing.

"Looks like we're in the same line of business, huh?" Sam asked as the men looked at the trunk full of weapons and supernatural paraphernalia.

"And among colleagues," Dean said. "That's a police-issued shotgun. That truck is, uh… inspired. Where'd you guys pick up all this crap?"

"You know how it is. You pick things up along the way," said the dark haired guy, Paul, neatly sidestepping Dean's question. All three men looked guarded and suspicious.

Alex, hanging back beside Sam, was dubious. "So… this is all of you?" she asked. "Three guys is a militia these days?"

Rob looked at her with an unreadable expression. "We've lost a few good folks here lately. And, there's more of us back in town." He glanced at Dean now. "But that's really not any of your concern."

"Guys, come on," Dean said. "This whole corner of the state is nuts with demon omens. We just want to help. That's all."

Rob and Paul look at each other warily, even as Alex fixed Rob with a piercing, questioning gaze, testing her theory. "Was that… an Enochian exorcism you used?" The two men looked at her in surprise and she shrugged. "Well it sure as hell wasn't Latin."

Rob looked at Paul again, and then looked back at the Winchesters, seeming to have decided something. "Follow us." He turned back to their truck, then paused, looked at Dean significantly. "And stay close. It's dangerous out here."

"Yeah, we got that," Dean muttered and let out a heavy breath then began to walk around to his side of the car. He got in his seat, started the car back up, glanced at Alex in the rearview. She was shooting a suspicious look after the guys getting into their truck as she rummaged for the first aid kit out from underneath the passenger side seat. Sam slid in beside her in the backseat, brushing the broken glass off the seat gingerly and shutting the door behind him.

"Enochian?" Dean asked Alex as he turned the car around. Sam was taking off his shirt, hissing as the fabric peeled away from his wound.

"Yeah," Alex answered Dean, distracted as she dug around in the first aid kit. "I dunno, you got any other ideas? Definitely wasn't Latin."
"Yeah, no, I know it wasn't," Dean said. She didn't see the skeptical, disapproving frown on Dean's face at the offhand mention of angels—she was too busy pulling out an alcohol wipe from the first aid kit. Dean let it slide grudgingly. "Okay, so how the hell would these middle of nowhere yahoos know an Enochian exorcism that we don't?" Dean asked. He was casting watchful glances around them as they followed Rob's truck down the dark road.

"That's exactly what I'm wondering," Alex muttered, ripping open a packet and grabbing Sam's arm without any ceremony, rubbing the deep gash firmly with the disinfectant.

Sam hissed and Alex gave him a look. "It stings," he mumbled pathetically.

"Suck it up, Samantha," she told him, a little teasingly, trying to lighten the mood—and even though he was clearly suffering, he smiled a bit, shook his head, and looked down. Alex grabbed some gauze, pressing it against the bite mark to stop the bleeding, muttering for Sam to hold it there, which he did, while she took out the medical tape, ripping off a couple pieces. "Does anyone else think it's weird that these demons were… bitey?" she asked, looking at Sam and then glancing up at the rear view mirror, where Dean's eyes met hers for a second, then he looked away.

"Demons getting their kicks in before the last call, I dunno," Dean said, sounding downtrodden and distracted.

The last call? Alex looked at the rear view mirror for a couple seconds more, waiting for her brother to look back at her, but he didn't. She remembered how he'd been crying on her shoulder just a few hours ago, how he'd said he didn't know what to do. She'd known he was depressed for awhile now, but after yesterday—finding out God wasn't going to help them sidestep the apocalypse—clearly, he'd taken it hard. When he'd flown off the handle, it had been difficult not to take personally. Usually Alex was able to roll her eyes and remove herself from the situation and realize that when Dean got mad and verbally belligerent like that, he was letting off steam and processing whatever he felt. But yesterday… the things he'd said about the end being near, about having no options… she'd listened. She'd believed. And she, too, had despaired. Did he really think there weren't any options left? Dean always knew what to do, and even if he didn't, he was tenacious. He never gave up, he never talked about giving up. She almost felt like his apathy and hopelessness were contagious.

Swallowing, refocusing, she taped the gauze down onto Sam's arm. "Antibiotics later," she said distractedly. There really wasn't a need to say that, about the antibiotics… after an entire lifetime of patching each other up they knew the drill by now.

"You need any help?" Sam asked, and Alex frowned, then realized she didn't even know her state as of the moment. "Your arm, lip… face," Sam said, gesturing to the pavement-burn on the side of her arm, the scrape across her upper cheek bone, the blood that was drying in the corner of her lips. She'd bitten part of the inside of her mouth when the demon had punched her.

She shook her head at Sam and dodged his concerned eyes. "I'm fine."

"Uh, okay," he said, sounding kind of like he didn't believe her. But he let it go, grabbing his duffel bag from where it was half-shoved up underneath the passenger side seat. Alex stared out the window. It was becoming light now outside and the landscape was covered in a thick blanket of fog. It seemed eerie.

In the front seat, Dean was glancing back at his brother and sister in the rear view, deeply troubled and distracted by thoughts of the end, of the apocalypse. He just wanted to know what the right thing to do was, but he literally didn't know anymore. And the two of them—Sam and Alex—they were his responsibilities, his life—and they hung in the balance. Dean was starting to wonder if
any of them were going to make it out of this apocalypse thing alive. He didn't think so, actually. That thought should have sent him into a rage, called him to action. But he just stared at the road ahead unseeingly. Hopeless.

The car ride remained mostly silent and they came to the town after maybe fifteen or twenty minutes. They'd been to Blue Earth before, but not for a few years. It was almost unrecognizable now. The entire town was enclosed with chain link fences that had barbed wire spiraling across the top—some guy in a baseball cap with a rifle slung over his back manned the makeshift gate and let them in. As they rolled in and the guy shut the gate behind them, Dean looked uneasy. "Is it just me or did we just enter the twilight zone?" he asked.

His siblings were too busy gawking to answer. People with guns walked the streets, their faces drawn tight with suspicion and stress. The Impala passed devil's traps spray painted onto the sidewalks in front of houses, and there were demon wards chalked onto windows of businesses. "These people aren't playing around," Sam commented in quiet worry. On the road ahead of them, Rob's truck pulled up in front of what was a quaint old church once. But surrounded by the haze of fog and people with guns, concrete barriers topped with barbed wire…it seemed like something out of a post-apocalyptic horror movie. Honestly, it reminded Alex of the camp in 2014. She caught Dean's eye in the rear view, and from the look on his face, she immediately knew he was thinking the exact same thing. Her chest clenched.

Dean parked the car and they all got out, Sam tossing his bloody shirt at Dean, who shoved it into the trunk. Rob, Paul, and Dylan walked toward the church, leaving the Winchesters to follow. Two guys stood on either side of the sidewalk that led to the church steps—they held long-barrel shotguns. A huge red devil's trap was sprayed across the sidewalk between the two men. Alex knew Sam and Dean were thinking what she was: none of them had ever seen anything quite like this before. It was weird. It inspired a lot of dread in Alex, for one. They followed the supposed militia up and into the building.

When they got into the dim church, they were met with a very unexpected scenario. Three couples stood up at the front of the church, facing the pulpit. "Who would have thought the apocalypse could be so romantic?" asked a man, clearly the pastor. He smiled at each couple in turn. "Marriage, family—it's a blessing. Especially in times like this. So hold on to that."

In the very back of the tiny old church, the Winchesters were staring, all three of them wearing very astonished expressions. "A wedding?" Sam asked in almost a whisper, understanding…and then scoffing. "Seriously?"

"And at six-thirty in the morning?" Dean added quietly, sounding just as skeptical and unconvinced as Sam did.

"Yeah," Paul confirmed furtively, startling all three of them—Rob and Dylan had sat down in a pew next to a red-haired woman, but Paul had apparently remained standing there with them against the back wall. "We've had eight so far this week."

"What's getting married gonna change about the end coming on?" Alex asked in a hushed tone, not really to anyone in particular.

"Well, it's not," Paul said, shrugged mildly. In the front of the church, the ceremony progressed, but Alex wasn't listening, she was paying attention to Paul now. "That's not the point," he said, and he looked reminiscent. "I mean, if you can spend the last time you have on earth with someone you love, someone you felt strong enough about to marry, be with for the rest of your life… why not? No time to waste."
Alex blinked a couple times in mild surprise—when he put it that way... it kind of made sense. There was something in his voice that made Alex look at him, really look. "So if you feel that way... why aren't you up there?" she asked. She got the distinct feeling he was talking about someone he felt that way about. Dean and Sam were looking at Paul now, too.

Paul's expression was hard to read, he looked down and shook his head as his mouth turned downward briefly. "Even if..." he looked up, decided to reword himself. "They wouldn't let us, even if we had wanted to. He's... dead now anyway."

"Oh," Alex said. She was quiet a minute, understanding. Feeling a twinge of distaste at the fact that he'd said they wouldn't let us. It wasn't much, but it was all she could say, about everything. "I'm really sorry."

Paul nodded, looked at the wedding in front of them again. The pastor was droning on. "...in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live?"

Alex watched the wedding with a growing sense of panic, not joy or any other positive emotion. Maybe she should have thought this was romantic, but it was just a stark reminder that the end was near. And not only did she know it, but the rest of the world was beginning to get the message, too. She glanced at Dean, who was watching the wedding with an unreadable expression. Did he really think the end was near, too? Was it?

Alex looked at the couples up there holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes with smiles. And all she could think about was that she had died yesterday. She and her brothers had died yesterday. And everything was wrong with the world, everything was falling apart and God didn't care about any of it, but still these people were getting married, their eyes were still shining bright with hope. And Alex wished she could have some of that hope, because it was getting harder and harder to find within herself.

She thought of Castiel and wondered where he was, if he was okay. Missed him, worried about him. She'd thought of him all night long, all yesterday after he'd disappeared. He'd been so disappointed, so defeated, so wounded to learn that God wasn't going to help. Was he all right? Did he feel as faithless and hopeless as she did? As Dean did? As Sam did? Because even though they hadn't really talked about it, Alex knew all of them—herself, her brothers, Cas—that they were all clinging to mere shreds of hope at this point. Shreds that were blowing away in the wind. Leaving them with empty hands.

"You may now kiss the brides!" the pastor proclaimed with a broad smile, holding his arms wide. Everyone cheered as the three couples kissed.

Alex and her brothers watched. None of the three of them were able to muster a real smile.

It was mid morning. Maybe. Castiel stumbled out of the liquor store, the world spinning around him mightily. What a strange sensation. He pitched sideways. The wall had seemed further away and he was a little surprised when his shoulder slammed into the brick. He almost fell down, but he leaned away from the wall, shuffling sideways, finding a brief moment of balance. He paused and held absolutely still, squinting deeply. He waited five seconds, concentrating with all his might.

He took a step forward—and promptly fell the other way—he tried to catch himself again, and then collapsed backwards, falling down onto his back and elbows. He heard himself groan pathetically and he reflected on what had become of him. An angel of the Lord, fallen down drunk on a sidewalk.
Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Those who dwell long over wine. The verse of scripture came to mind suddenly, and Castiel felt a strange sensation—his throat rumbling, his vocal chords vibrating… and a low, cynical chuckle broke out of his mouth. A slurred, sloppy sound. He’d had those things—woe, sorrow, strife—long before he had ever even thought about consuming the alcohol. In fact, he still had those things. The smile on his face wavered and dissipated. Why hadn't the alcohol worked? Alex said it made her feel better. Why hadn't it made him feel better? If anything, he felt worse.

His mind drifted to her, how she'd been dead just a few hours ago, how horrible it had been when he'd arrived, how terrible to wait, not knowing if she'd live again or not—and inwardly, Castiel felt himself stagnate, despair. He didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to think about anything.

All night long, Castiel had downed shelf after shelf of alcohol, waiting to feel its effects, waiting to feel nothing and think nothing, because of what had happened yesterday. He remembered begging God for help, for a sign, for anything. And his pleas had fallen onto deaf, uncaring ears. The love he'd had for the father he thought loved him too and the faith he had maintained for centuries was shattered. Why didn't God want to help them? Why didn't God want to save them? These fragile, precious humans.

Castiel felt weighty and clumsy and drowsy. He thought now, absently, that the owner of the store would be surprised when they came to open up the store and found the entire inventory gone. Cas had left the store a complete mess, bottles littering the floor, some smashed, some still half full and spilling onto the cheap linoleum floor. Oddly, Cas didn't feel any guilt about stealing the liquor. He felt regret because he was so drunk that he couldn't focus enough to walk, let alone travel through the fabric of space. Which meant he couldn't get to the Winchesters even if he wanted to. And now he realized maybe he shouldn't have become inebriated this way. What if they needed him? What if she did?

Someone walked by and threw coins at him, and Cas blearily turned his head, his eyes crossing when he tried to focus on the ground beside his head where a few silver circles were rolling to a halt. What was he supposed to do with those? Everything was spinning again, even though he wasn't moving at all. He suddenly smiled, amused. Everything was spinning, even though he wasn't moving at all! He chuckled again deeply, and then a little harder, realizing how funny a sound that was that his vocal chords were making.

"Hey, get a job, you lazy bum!" a shrill, female voice said somewhere nearby, and all Cas could think was that the voice was the worst one he had ever heard, like screeching tires. He heard footsteps fade away, and nothing was funny anymore. Cas decided he needed to stand up so he tried to roll over—and couldn't. He made a sound of frustration.

In the pocket of the trench coat, his phone suddenly made a little sound, the sound it made when the device received texts. The only person who ever texted him was her. He fumbled for it, he dropped it, he managed to get it again. He realized he had the phone upside down and righted it then squinted at the screen, his vision double for a second. He blinked a few times, clearing his eyes.

It was from Alex, just like he'd assumed. She'd written three words.

Are you okay?

Alex and Dean sat in the little crappy town bar. Dean was drinking a beer, people-watching halfheartedly as Alex was trying to text incognito. Sam was over at the bar, leaning across it, talking to Paul—who turned out to be the local bartend. It was a little bit after lunch time and they
had now been in town for a few hours—gotten a motel room, learned a little more about what was going on in town.

After the wedding ceremony, Pastor Gideon, the guy who ran the show here in Blue Earth, had shown the Winchesters around. The basement of the church was full of kids packing salt rounds—the church was stocked with a freaking weaponry—apparently this town was some kind of magnet for demons and had been overrun with them for the past couple months, but the attacks were getting worse and worse. It was possible that Blue Earth attracted demons because there was apparently a prophet here. The pastor's daughter, Leah Gideon, allegedly heard from the angels and got visions of where demons would be, allowing the townspeople to defend themselves. Dean, of course, had flirted with her. Right in front of her dad. The pastor. A bit embarrassing if you asked Alex. Leah had some kind of otherworldly calm quality to her—and she had known who Dean, Sam, and Alex were, had looked over the three of them with knowing eyes. It was chilling actually. Chuck had never been creepy like that.

Anyway, now that they knew a prophet was involved, Dean had told Sam to call Cas just a few minutes ago. Alex wasn't sure why Dean wasn't going to do it himself. She was too busy trying to contact Cas, herself.

Alex stared down at her phone, dying for it to light up. She'd texted Cas about thirty seconds ago to ask if he was okay. She was worried about him. She was worried about a lot of things, but he was pretty damn near the top of the list. He'd disappeared yesterday, depressed and sullen, telling them all that he was going to find out why she had no heaven. She wasn't sure if she wanted to know why, to tell the truth.

Her phone vibrated just then and she quickly looked down at it… and was suddenly very confused. rvlkjg:';

rvlkjg:';? What the hell? Alex glanced Dean's way furtively—he was staring off at nothing, his beer in hand—Alex began to type in a reply text. Cas? Is everything ok?

A few agonizing seconds passed. And then his reply came in. yes iM GOOD

She stared. Was something wrong with his phone? Alex didn't even have a chance to compose a new text because another one came in. HOW Are you '?

Alex hesitated, frowning, then quickly wrote out her reply. Why are you typing like that?

idrank some{ whiskey adnd alclcohol

Holy shit! Was Cas drunk? She did the only thing she could think to do was get more details. How much?

5shelves

Her eyes went wide. She wasn't sure what to say back. She settled on: Five shelves?

His reply to her question made her eyes go even wider. n0 MY MISTAEK I MEAnt 50 shelves

Clutching her phone tightly, Alex got up from the table, her chair scraping across the floor loudly. Dean gave her a cursory glance. "I'll be back in a minute," she told him, and got some kind of mumbled "yeah okay," from him in reply.

Alex hurried to the bathroom, locked the door, then called his number, pacing a small little circle
on the floor. He picked up and she heard the sound of swishing, like he was rubbing the phone speaker across cloth. She stopped pacing, craning her neck to press her ear hard into the phone, listening. "...Cas?" she asked. More swishing. And then she finally heard him.

His voice was deep and gravelly, sort of sharper than normal. "I dropped the phone," he slurred. "It's too small."

Hearing his voice so different rendered Alex into quiet shock for a second. "Cas? Are you all right?"

"Uh… yes." A pause. "No. I don't know."

Stressed out, Alex absently ran a hand through her hair. "What's—you drank fifty shelves of alcohol?"

There was a long pause. "More or less."

She couldn't bring herself to find the humor just yet. "… why?" she asked, and she was guessing it was because of everything that happened yesterday, but she was supposed to be the one who ran to alcohol when she was upset, not him! That was too much like the Castiel she'd met in 2014.

"Why?" he repeated, and he sounded dumbfounded. He took a long time to reply, maybe thinking about it. "It... seemed like a good idea at the time."

Okay. Okay. Focus. Alex took a deep breath. "Where are you, Cas?"

He was breathing noisily into the phone, and it suddenly sounded like he had the phone right up against his mouth. "Uh. I don't know."

Alex pulled her ear away a little and it began. The amusement. Even though she didn't think she should be amused about this. "Okay… well, what do you see where you are?"

"Um. The sky."

"The sky." She blinked a couple times, arriving at the only logical conclusion she could think of. "Are you laying down?"

"Yes." He sounded so, so drunk. Alex closed her eyes and put a hand to her forehead, absently scrubbing her palm against it.

"Okay, well… do you know what town you're in?" she asked. She had this crazy idea in the back of her mind that maybe he'd know where he was, if it wasn't too far, maybe she could go find him and pick him up. But his answer was a very unsure "um…"

Getting exasperated, Alex tried again. "Can you come here to where I am?"

"Not right now," he said, said, garbled. "I seem to be incapacitated." He stopped. "Incapacitated," he tried again. "In...capab...si..." he stopped, gave up. Sounded extremely cranky about it. "I can't get up."

She'd tried to stay serious and be mature, but it was too much and she stifled a giggle as she pictured him laying on the ground somewhere, drunk, his little trench coat bunched up around him on the ground, his expression confused, sort of grumpy, and completely adorable. Smiling fondly and wishing she could see it for herself, she shook her head with chagrin. "Okay, well… when you can stand up..." she said, "we're in Blue Earth, Minnesota. At the Green Valley Motel, room nine."
She paused, and wavered. Wishing to be close to him, and now. "Come as soon as you can?" she asked softly.

"Yes, of course," he replied automatically, and those three words set her at ease. He would always come. She knew that, but hearing him say it gave her an immense and unexpected amount of comfort. He surprised her completely with what he said next. "I like your eyes. When I'm looking at them, I mean. Well. Just in general."

A little caught off guard, it was her turn to fumble verbally. "Uh…" she managed. "Thanks, Cas."

There was a long pause, followed by a very unexpected statement. "I just really never want you to die."

It surprised her to hear that spoken out loud. She already knew that he didn't want her to die—but it touched her to hear him say it in that way. She suddenly felt way more emotional than she wanted to be. She cleared her throat and blinked to clear her eyes. "Just, uh, come as soon as you can, huh?"

"Yes, I will." He paused. She could just see his expression of tortured guilt. "I'm sorry I can't come right now."

Helplessly, she smiled a little, because she knew he meant it. "It's okay." She paused, then tried to sound soothing. "Call me if you need me, all right?"

There was a long pause and she heard him breathing heavily into the speaker. Then he finally said, "Yes. All right."

She was quiet a second. It was time to hang up then, wasn't it? "Bye, Cas," she said, not really wanting to end the call.

He sounded like he was testing the words on his tongue. "Bye, Alex."

For three long seconds, she didn't move and didn't say anything. Neither did he. And then, knowing it had to end sometime, she pulled the phone away from her ear, feeling an emptiness settle into her chest. Her thumb hovered over the end call button. Why couldn't he be there now? Alex tightened her jaw, told herself to get her shit together, then hit the end call button hard and stared at the words Cas: Call Ended. She then looked up at the bathroom mirror where she saw a girl who wanted an angel more than anything else in the world. Saw a girl who would die and exist in darkness with no heaven. Saw a girl who was barely keeping herself together mentally and emotionally. But as always had to. Had to.

She pocketed her phone and wandered back into the main part of the bar, distracted and troubled. Dean still sat by himself at their table. When she sat down, Dean didn't even acknowledge her. His beer was only half empty. Weird. Usually he would be on his second or third by now. Sam came over just a couple seconds later, three fresh beers in hand.

Alex poked at the bowl of peanuts on the table. "You get a hold of Cas?" Dean asked Sam, who was setting the beer bottles down on the table.

"Went straight to voicemail, but I left him a message," Sam said, then paused, a funny look on his face. "I think. So uh, what's your theory? Why all of the demon hits here?"

Dean looked tired, like he didn't want to have to think about answering right now. But he still did. "I dunno. Trying to gank the girl? The prophet, maybe?"
Sitting back in her chair now, hands in her lap, Alex wasn't so sure. "Chuck never attracted demons like that."

Dean made a face like he was considering that she had a point.

Sam was nodding, then looking at Dean for a second opinion. "I mean, why are these angels sending these people to do their dirty work?" he asked. "Making these people hunt all these rabid demons, when the angels could do it for them?"

"I dunno," Dean said. Taking a swig of his beer, he didn't look too bothered either way.

Alex and Sam looked at their brother with similarly perplexed expressions. Something just wasn't right with Dean. Sam leaned forward, looking at Dean intently, frowning in disapproval. "Aren't you concerned at all that these people could get ripped to shreds?"

Shockingly, Dean looked almost amused as he gave a blunt, uncaring reply. "We're all gonna die, Sam. In like a month—maybe two." He looked at Alex, whose slightly offended expression prompted him to say, "I mean it." His words, that dead-in-the-eyes smile stretched across his face—Alex was chilled. "This is the end of the world, but these people aren't freaking out. In fact they're running to the exit in an orderly fashion." Dean shrugged. "I dunno if that's such a bad thing."

Alex stared at Dean with a slack-jaw from the astonished horror. She couldn't believe her ears. Her heart felt like it had been broken and her world had been shattered after hearing Dean talk so with such blasé disregard for what she thought they lived for. Saving people. Saving each other.

Sam seemed to be on the same page as his sister: hurt and disillusioned. "Who says they're all gonna die?" Sam asked, growingly emotional. Dean didn't respond, making it worse. "...What happened to us saving them?" Again, no reply Sam's eyes flickered in the direction of their sister, then back to Dean. His brows furrowed earnestly, his eyes full of pain. "What happened to us saving everyone?"

Dean was silent—and then the church bell began to toll loudly. As if on cue, all of the bar patrons began getting up and filing out—"something I said?" Dean wisecracked, watching with vague interest.

"Paul—" Sam said, nodding to the bar tend, who was shrugging his jacket on, making to leave with everyone else. "What's going on?"

"Leah's had another vision," Paul said, pausing at their table. "Mean's there'll be a hunt. You guys in?"

An Hour Later

Five Miles off Talmadge Road, Blue Earth

The eight of them crept up the hill that the abandoned old house sat on—they'd parked half a mile away and cut through some wooded property, trying to keep this assault a surprise to whatever demons waited. There wasn't any movement or sign of life anywhere in the house or around it. This is where the prophet Leah had said the demons would be. Apparently, she was never wrong. The little group of eight was armed with shotguns, holy water, and the demon blade—it was fair to say this was going to get interesting. There might be two demons in the house, there might be twenty. Either way, Alex was ready. Her adrenaline was beginning to pump, but especially now as the group knelt down and Pastor Gideon began to signal them out.
He motioned for Sam, Alex, and Paul to go left, Dean and Dylan to go right, and Rob and Jane (Rob's wife and Dylan's mom) to accompany him. Jane apparently was the only woman other than Alex who had ever gone on any of these demon hunts.

Their little assault team broke ranks, approaching the house quickly and discreetly. As Dean and Dylan broke right, Alex caught Dean's eye for a second—usually before they went on hunts, before they did stuff like this, he'd lecture her and remind her about a million things she knew already. But today he hadn't said a thing. She gripped her gun tighter. She was glad she was gonna get to kill something today.

Sam led Paul and Alex to the back door of the house—they kept to the side of the house as they skirted it—and they quickly, quietly ascended the back porch stairs. Sam gingerly tested the back door. He turned to Alex. *Locked*, he mouthed to her, and she nodded once. Sam knelt and began to pick the lock, face crunched in concentration as Alex covered him, watched his back hawkishly, shotgun pulled tight into her shoulder—there was no movement anywhere in the yard or anywhere on either side of them. Paul backed up against the window beside the door, his weapon held high, too—and then they heard a shot somewhere on the other side of the house at the same time that a demon shattered the glass of the window where Paul stood, grabbing the man with astounding quickness, tearing him into the house. Even as Sam shot to his feet in surprise, Alex kicked the rotting door down, busted into what looked like the kitchen, her shotgun trained on the space ahead of her. Paul was grappling with the demon, who had its back to her, and she aimed, every muscle in her body screaming with adrenaline.

"*Down!*" she shouted, and Paul ducked—and the second he did, Alex took the shot. A headshot—and blood splattered everywhere, including half of her face. Paul looked at the somewhat headless demon's corpse on the floor in wide eyed shock.

Sam stood there, frozen, looking down at himself. "I hate it when you do that," he complained—he had the demon's blood all over himself and a grossed out expression on his face. Alex shrugged.

Paul shouted—two demons had appeared in the doorway—Sam was already halfway there, demon blade high and plunging into one of the demon's chests—and the second demon took buckshot in the abdomen, courtesy of Alex. Paul, looking sort of shocked at the quickness that the Winchesters reacted, recited the demon exorcism then quickly followed after the two of them, who were already halfway out the door, looking like they'd done this a million times (they had)—covering each other's backs, weapons ready, instincts trained, sharp, and trustworthy. The three of them advanced through the house, cutting and mowing down demon after demon—the house was full of gunshots and screams.

"*Over there, over there!*" Alex shouted, firing at the demon that was in front of her but trying to get Sam to notice the demon that was to her right—Sam did, and slashed the demon violently with Ruby's knife, sending sparks flying as the demon's skeleton flickered. He charged forward at another demon in the main room, but Alex whirled, hearing footsteps behind her—and blasted down another demon in the nick of time, just before it was about to get to her. She heard Paul shouting the exorcism again, and she looked to her side—"Paul, look out!" she shouted, about to shoot the demon that had appeared out of nowhere and was advancing on him—but she was suddenly feeling something slamming into her. Her shotgun went skittering across the floor even as she stopped herself from hitting the floor face-first by with her palms—she felt herself being dragged backwards by her ankles and she kicked, screamed, trying to break the hold—and then there was a loud shot and she was let go. Panting hard Alex looking up and over her shoulder.

The kid, Dylan, stood over her, looking scared shitless—he'd shot the demon who had gotten her, and the demon had fallen half-off of Alex, stunned temporarily by the shot. Just a few feet away,
the demon that had Paul was choking the guy, and Dylan was frozen, following Alex's eye line and seeing it, too. "Don't just stare, shoot it!" Alex shouted at him from the ground—and she kicked the demon that had attacked her in the face, because she felt its hands clawing at her again. Dylan seemed to remember himself, he aimed and fired. Alex, who had slipped the clutches of the demon on the floor, jetted up to her feet now, tried to remember the Enochian exorcism, because Paul was unconscious and Dylan was staring again and the two shot demons were recovering. "Rah bah zu na ooh zow tay...?" Black smoke poured out of the demon's mouths and Alex stood back, breathing a little heavily, relieved. She shrugged, eyebrows raised high. "Good enough I guess."

She realized the sound of gunfire was gone. "Clear!" she heard Dean bellow in a room close by. "Clear!" came another voice, further away. Pastor Gideon, Alex thought. She added her own, "Clear!" to theirs then she bent to pick up her shotgun. When she straightened, she saw Dylan staring at her.

"Y-you've got blood all over you," he said, sounding freaked out. She thought, absently, how nice it would be to be his age—seventeen? Eighteen? And to be freaked out by this stuff. By the time she'd turned eighteen, pretty much nothing had fazed her anymore.

She looked at the demon's blood that was spattered on her jacket arm. "It's not mine," she told him, but he looked really freaked still—his knuckles were white from how tightly he gripped his shotgun. Alex put a steady hand on his shoulder, looked him in the eye. "Hey—we're fine. And not a bad job here today, kid."

He looked very offended, the panic in his eyes disappearing in favor of indignance. "Kid? I'm seventeen."

She squeezed his shoulder then let go. "Like I said." Some people made it too easy to ruffle their feathers.

He rolled his eyes, re-hefted his grip on his shotgun, tried to look grown up. Alex smiled to herself. On the ground, Paul groaned loudly, becoming conscious again. Alex and Dylan helped him up, regrouped with everyone else in the main room—and they all walked out of that place feeling like a million bucks.

Things could change in a matter of seconds, Alex thought. Like how one second that little militia of theirs had been the victors, had been puffed up and feeling great about how they'd just kicked those stupid demon's asses. And then just a minute later, Dylan was dead. His bright young life taken by a demon they'd overlooked. It could have been avoided, too. It didn't have to have happened that way. At least, that's what Alex thought.

It was now about four hours after he died and his makeshift funeral was being held at the church. Ironic was the word that heavily came to mind. Wedding in the morning, funeral in the late afternoon. When it was the end of days, people just couldn't wait around to do the things that mattered, she guessed.

Alex was outside of the church, unable to go inside. She didn't do funerals, she just didn't. Couldn't. She remembered standing around about a quarter of a mile off from the psychic Pamela's funeral, too. Some people thought it was disrespect. It wasn't. It was deep, horrifying, overwhelming grief and the incapability to deal with the finality of death.

Leaned up against the wall beside the door with her hands in her jacket pockets and her gray hood raised up over her head, Alex was still with a terse expression. The town was quiet—a crow called in the distance here and there but other than that it was eerily silent almost. Pretty much everyone
was inside the church. She vaguely wished for a cigarette. Or a punching bag. Or maybe a bed to lay down in and never get out of.

Or Cas.

Just then the church door opened beside her and a single person walked out then shut the door behind himself. Paul gave her a thin, wan smile, his hands in his jacket pockets. No one else followed him. The two exchanged a brief look but made no greeting.

He took out his flask, drank a little, then leaned on the opposite side of the door. He was quiet a minute, and it seemed like they weren't going to interact. Then the sound of his voice startled her. "So who'd you lose?" When she furrowed her eyebrows at him questioningly, he shrugged one shoulder up a little. He looked as drawn and heavy as she felt. "I recognize the look."

She looked away, eyes down on the old concrete sidewalk, thinking about the answer to his question. A little huff of cynical air passed between her lips. "Who haven't I lost." There was another long silence, and then Alex looked at Paul sadly. Almost didn't ask. But felt compelled to. "When did he die?"

Paul's flask stopped halfway to his mouth. Lowered. "Couple months ago," Paul replied. His voice was heavy with remembrance. Tight with emotion. He seemed to be thinking about something intently. His eyes went up, passing over the skyline in front of him. "You know, I'm not the marrying type, it just seems so meaningless in the world today... but... with him?" There was another long pause. "I thought about it. I thought about it a lot." His flask raised to his lips now, he took a swig, grimaced. "I like weddings better than funerals, I'll tell you that much."

Alex could hear and feel how regretful Paul was. She thought about Dylan. She was literally right next to him when he'd gotten pulled underneath the car. It had taken seconds, and his life had been snuffed out. She wondered if she could have saved him somehow, if she'd been paying more attention, or had reacted faster. She bowed her head down, thinking about all the ways she could have prevented what happened.

Paul let out a heavy breath, his mind clearly on Dylan too. "Kid went down swingin'. That might be as good as it gets these days," He paused, then held his flask out toward her. "Want some?" Alex shook her head no, the pit of her stomach heavy and sick. "Suit yourself," Paul said, took another swig, then looked at her with a sad, cynical smile on his mouth. "You should come see me at the bar later. Drown your sorrows a little."

Alex pressed her mouth up into a thin line meant to be a smile. "Nah. I prefer to drown my sorrows alone." She'd meant to say it humorously, but it just sounded pathetic and sort of true. She felt restless, heavy, horrible, and stood all the way up, pushing herself away from the church wall. She just needed to be alone right now. "I'm gonna head back to the motel—tell my brothers if you see them?"

"Yeah, sure," Paul said, but seemed mildly concerned. "You sure you wanna walk there? It's a couple miles away."

Alex shrugged. She'd be fine. "I could use the air," she said, and he nodded, watching her as she walked down the church steps, hands still in her jacket pockets. She looked back at him over her shoulder, gave him a sad attempt at a friendly smile then left, thinking about how bad she was with people other than her family as her footsteps took her away from there.

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About An Hour Later
Dean walked along the sidewalk, eyes on the ground. Sam had ditched him after the funeral, Alex was who-knows-where. He'd just been to talk to Leah, the prophet, and what she'd said to him was bothering him. He'd gone to ask her if she knew the deal. The stuff about the Michael Lucifer showdown, the stuff about how the world was supposed to tear itself in half and burn. He'd just wanted to know everything the angels were telling her. He'd wanted her to give him a lifeline, to convince him that his life wasn't just a heap of hopeless bullshit.

"There's gonna be a prize-fight," she'd said. "And... it's gonna get bad. But after we win—and we will—the planet gets handed over to the chosen. And... it's finally peaceful. No monsters, no disease, no death. You're just... with the people you love in Paradise. New earth."

Just with the people you love, Dean repeated in his mind. Alex and Sam. Only, Sam was the other half of that prize-fight Leah had mentioned. "After we win—and we will win," Leah had said. We. Heaven. Michael. Did she know that for sure? She was a prophet, after all. Maybe she'd foreseen the outcome. And maybe that was good news, Heaven winning. Dean felt his lip curl in distaste. Heaven and Hell could both kiss his ass. They sucked. This grand finale crap was for the frigging birds.

Dean hadn't wanted to consider saying yes to Michael. Ever. But if he could save one of his siblings, if he could just save one of them, instead of letting all of them get destroyed in the firefight... wouldn't that be the right thing to do? Dean wished he knew. He tried to picture a future world where Alex could live in this supposed new earth. Maybe, if he said yes to Michael, he could strike up a bargain, make sure she got a heaven. Make sure she was okay in the end. That didn't sound so bad.

But, Sam... how could Dean let his little brother burn away in the fire? How could he let Lucifer take him, use him? Dean wondered morosely what Dad would do. These thoughts of the end, of his family, should have made him want to break down and weep for all the hopelessness he felt. But he could muster no emotion. He felt so empty, like his insides were a large echoing room.

"Yeah, Paradise," Dean had retorted cynically. "Of course, that's if you can get past the velvet rope," he'd said, felt jealous of Leah in that moment. "Must be nice—being chosen."

Leah had sounded almost surprised, looking at him with big, doe eyes. "Dean... you're chosen."

He could have laughed in her face at that comment, only he hadn't had the energy. Instead, he'd shaken his head and managed a self-loathing smile. "Yeah, more like cursed."

And that was the truth of the matter. He was cursed. He had lived a life of horrible violence, destruction. His family was shattered, the remaining parts falling apart. His brother and sister were slipping out of his grasp, he couldn't protect them anymore and had been an idiot to think he could. And the worst part was he could barely feel anything anymore about anyone or anything. He barely cared whether he woke up the next day or not. What did it matter? What did any of this matter?

"Don't wanna touch you too much baby. Cuz makin' love to you might drive me crazy."

Def Leppard rang out of the cheap motel clock radio and Alex, curled up, sitting against the headboard of the twin bed, cradled a bottle of Jack. She was really quite pathetic, she thought, looking down at herself. She had gotten to the motel room a little while ago and been struck by the sudden urge to change her clothes, hating everything about her jeans, her tank top, her jacket—which was now ruined with blood, anyway. She'd dug through her duffel bag, then stilled when she saw the dress. The dress she bought under the influence of Famine. She hadn't gotten rid of it, even
afterwards. She kind of liked it, actually. Maybe because of what had happened in that dress. So, she'd found the dress, put it on again, then looked herself in the bathroom mirror. Wondered if she should decide to be the kind of girl who wore dresses sometimes. World was about to end, maybe she should mix it up a little bit.

Castiel had liked the dress. And she thought, remembering in detail, what it had been like to be in his arms that way, with him kissing her. Her body ached thinking of that—of him. "Love bites, love bleeds—it's bringin' me to my knees. Love lives, love dies, it's no surprise. Love begs, love pleads. It's what I need."

Annoyed, Alex switched the radio off. Love. Ha. She took another swig of the whiskey and thought about those couples who had gotten married that morning. She was too busy dying a virgin to be worried about dying single. Oh well. She sighed heavily, realized she couldn't be too mad. She wasn't going to die without having fallen in love—that had happened. She thought of Castiel. We can't, he'd told her a few weeks ago. But still, they were. In a way they didn't talk about, didn't acknowledge. And if that's the way it had to be, fine. She'd take whatever she could get, however she could get it. Desperate times, desperate measures.

But would he just disappear on her again? Trying to protect her from the future? Actually… she didn't think so. Her instincts told her he would stay this time. But why couldn't he be here now?

Alex tried to remember the time when she'd hated him—well, hate wasn't the right word. Mistrusted was better. But she couldn't remember what that had felt like, because now, and she wasn't even sure how it had happened, she trusted that angel almost more than anyone else. She thought about how yesterday she'd been leaning against him and in his arms, telling him all about what happened in Heaven, she'd felt like he was her shelter from the storm. She'd known he wasn't going to let go of her or let her be hurt. She wished so badly for him to appear now. The thought that she needed him kept crossing her mind, and the thought startled her each time. And what startled her more was that she didn't really want to fight it anymore. She didn't quite understand what she felt, she just felt it.

She looked at her phone, which hadn't gone off again. She'd thought about texting Cas a thousand times, but hadn't. God, the sweetheart. Angel-equivalent of passed out drunk somewhere after fifty shelves of alcohol. She shook her head softly. Actually, fifty shelves of alcohol didn't sound bad right now. She thought about texting him I miss you. What would he think of that? On second thought, maybe she shouldn't.

She wished abruptly that when you died, you could just be dead. Why did you have to go on existing and being conscious after this life closed out? She thought of an eternity in the darkness of heaven, all alone, and she stared down at her feet, becoming deeply disturbed. She really needed to get a new pair of boots. This pair was barely holding together anymore. She paused. Well, what was the point in new boots if the world was ending in a couple weeks like Dean had said? Maybe, she thought absently, maybe everyone was wrong. Maybe the end wasn't near. Maybe, last minute, something would change. Maybe they would still find a way. Maybe, maybe, maybe. She took another drink of Jack. She was a little past tipsy now.

As if he knew she was thinking about him, the motel room door opened, in walked Dean, a hard look on his face. His presence was like an immediate dark cloud over the whole room. She could already tell, before he said a frigging thing, that he was about to be a complete jackass.

"Seriously?" he asked, tossing his keys down. "You been sitting here with Jack Daniels instead of going to that kid's funeral?"

Alex looked at him unhappily—suspicion confirmed, Dean was gonna be a douchebag. And today
she didn't have the patience to even try. "You're gonna lecture me about drinking?" she retorted, made a face.

Dean rolled his eyes, threw his jacket across a chair. "Can it, smartass."

"Where've you been, anyway?" Alex asked sullenly. "Where's Sam?"

"I got no idea where Sam is," Dean said apathetically, not looking at her as he answered. He went to the TV, got the remote. "I went to talk to the prophet."

"Talk, huh?" Alex asked sarcastically.

Dean shot her a look as he sat down on the end of one of the other beds. "Yes, talk."

"And…?" Alex prompted, setting her bottle of booze down on the bedside table, sitting up where she could see him a little better, not just his back turned to her. "What did you find out?"

His expression was stony. "A whole lotta jack squat." He switched on the TV, didn't pay attention to her.

Alex looked at him, scowling intently. Dean was just off. Wrong. All kinds of wrong. She tried to soften her voice. Tried a new tactic. "You okay?"

He barely acknowledged her with a brief side glance. "Yeah, fine, why?"

Well. That hadn't worked. She couldn't take this anymore. Alex stood up, grabbed the remote, switched the TV off and stood in front of him deliberately. "You're not fine," she said, a little louder than she'd meant to. "Come on. I've known you my whole life. Don't pretend."

Dean looked at her, frowned, eyes taking in her outfit. "Why you wearing a dress?" he asked, trying to sidestep her question. "I mean, who are you?" he was pretending to joke but Alex could see he was just trying to get her to go away.

"Come on, Dean," she said, ignoring his question. "What's with you?"

He got agitated, stood up, walked a couple steps off, turned around. Looking like he'd been set off. "What's with me?" He threw his arms wide. "How about the end of the world, Al? The friggin' apocalypse or the angels on our asses or the fact that Satan wants to ride Sam like the rodeo?" he shut his mouth, pressed his lips together for a second, looked down, shook his head. And when he looked back up at her, he looked cold, cynical, done. "You know what I'm thinking? You really wanna know? I'm thinking maybe I should."

"Should what?" Alex asked, confused, but the second she asked it, she realized. "…say yes?" she asked, her voice rising in panic and disbelief.

Dean shrugged. "Michael defeats Lucifer, everything's okay again."

Alex blinked, unable to believe what she was hearing. "Everything's okay again? What version of reality have you been tuning in to? If Michael loses—the world is screwed." Alex stared at her brother, confounded. Was he listening to what he was saying? "If Michael wins, millions still die," she appealed, then stopped, looked at Dean in horror. "And… could you really kill Sam?"

Dean looked at her without blinking, his expression blank, resigned. "It wouldn't be Sam. It'd be Lucifer."
Those words were like a punch to the gut. Alex's voice was barely above a whisper, her face was filled with fear. "Dean… you're scaring me."

Finally, a little emotion showed on Dean's face, he looked away, softening a little into doubt. "What other choice do I have?"

"Keep fighting it!" Alex told him emphatically, her heart hammering in dismay. "Say no. Don't let the angels do this crap!"

Dean was suddenly pissed. "I keep saying no, they keep screwing with the people I love!" he nearly shouted, then let out a short huff, clenched his jaw. "No thank you." He got quiet then put a hand on his face tiredly, looking like the picture of defeat. "There's literally no other goddamn choice left, Al," he told her, gesturing with his hand now emphatically. "Try to understand that." He looked wrecked inside and wouldn't look at her. "If I can keep one of you alive… that's better than nothing, right?"

Alex's blood went cold when she realized what he meant. "Don't choose me over Sam, Dean—" she said softly, becoming suddenly breathless in horror, "don't tell me you're gonna do that!"

Dean's eyes met hers and Alex saw that was exactly what he was thinking about doing. She grabbed him by both arms, dug her fingers into his arms, shook him almost, suddenly so angry and scared shitless. "We all go down fighting together or we beat this somehow but we are not letting Sam die so we can live!"

Dean didn't tell her to get off of him, didn't yank away, didn't rant at her. He just stood there. "I mean, I don't care if I live," he said with heartbreaking earnestness. "I just want one of you two to survive this."

Filled with so much indignant anger, Alex shook him. "Well I care if you live, Dean!" she shouted. "I do!"

He finally pulled away from her, put his walls up, no longer reachable at all. "Thanks," he said sarcastically. "Appreciate it."

Alex could have slapped him. Instead she just looked at him in complete disgust. "What is wrong with you?!"

He waved her away as if he were annoyed and he reclined on the bed against a pillow, kicking his feet up in front of himself. Shut his eyes and folded his arms. Alex stared at him. Was he really just going to lay there? Ignore her? Say all that crap and then shut her out?

Flabbergasted at him, Alex was boiling mad. "Hello? I was talking to you." She glared at him.

He didn't open his eyes back up. "Conversation's over," he muttered apathetically, and turned away from her pointedly.

Asshole.

A couple hours later, this is how Sam found them: Dean on his bed, arms folded shut, eyes closed. Alex on her bed, turned away from him. Stony silence filling the room.

Dean cracked an eye open when Sam came in. "Where you been?" he asked.

"Drinkin'," Sam said.
"You rebel," Dean wisecracked, lacking enthusiasm. Alex turned a little, acknowledging Sam with a glance.

Sam paused, looking between both of his siblings and their body language, and his eyes narrowed slightly, eyebrows pressing together. "Something going on here?"

Dean glanced Alex's way. She'd sat up on her bed now, shoes on the bed, her back against the headboard. "Nah," Dean said.

Sam wasn't totally convinced, but had other things on his mind. "So, get this. I just got kicked out of the bar… because it was curfew." Sam stood, folded his arms, waited expectantly for a reaction. Alex just looked at Sam blankly. Curfew?

"Right," Dean replied, not sounding like he gave a damn either way.

"You hear they shut down the cell towers?" Sam asked, looking between both of his siblings.

"No. That's, uh, news to me," was Dean's reply. So that's why my phone hasn't had a signal for the past hour, Alex thought morosely.

Sam was pacing a little now, agitated, animated. "Yeah. No cable, internet. Total cut off from the 'corruption of the outside world.'" Sam said, making angry, sarcastic air quotes over those words. Alex was listening, but said nothing.

"Huh," Dean commented.

Sam stood there, looked at his sister, who was taking a huge swig of Jack, then his brother, who looked like he couldn't even think about giving a fuck. "Are you guys hearing me?" Sam asked, bemused, making a weird face. "They're turning this place into some kind of fundamentalist compound."

"Yeah, I think we got it," Dean muttered, arms still crossed.

"And all you've got's a 'hmm?'" Sam asked judgmentally. "What's wrong with you?"

Alex expected Dean to fly off the handle again, rant about the apocalypse and Michael and Lucifer. But instead Dean just shrugged, swung his legs over the edge of the bed tiredly. "I get it, Sam. I just don't care."

"What?"

"What difference does it make?" Dean asked, giving Sam a weird, cynical little smile.

Shocked, Sam's immediate response was "it makes a hell of a—" he stopped, started approaching Dean, getting riled. "At what point does this become too far for you?" Sam sat down across from Dean, began listing off everything that was wrong. "Stoning? Poisoned Kool-Aid? The angels are toying with these people!"

"Angel world, angel rules," was Dean's indifferent reply.

"And since when is that okay with you?" Sam demanded.

"Since the angels got the only lifeboats on the Titanic," Dean said sarcastically, and stood up, went over to the coffee maker, leaving Sam to watch in stunned disbelief. "I mean, who exactly is supposed to come along and save these people? It was supposed to be us, but…" he poured himself
some coffee, the rest out of the pot, he sounded calm, certain. "We can't do it."

"So what?" Sam questioned, beginning to sound less angry, more afraid. "You wanna, you wanna stop fighting, roll over?"

Dean shrugged, took a sip of his coffee. "I dunno, maybe," Dean said, his uncaring attitude clearly getting under Sam's skin. And then suddenly Sam turned, fixed Alex with a pointed, expectant look.

"And what about you, Alex?" her twin questioned. "You done fighting too?"

Alex held the bottle of whiskey close. Her gaze faltered. "No," she said.

Sam shook his head just barely, gave a soft huff of disbelief. "Why don't I believe you?" Alex looked at her twin guiltily.

"Maybe because she's seeing reality for what it is," Dean cut in, looking at Sam sharply from over his cup of coffee.

Sam's jaw worked oddly. He tried a smile, but looked like a barely restrained angry bull instead. "Don't say that."

"Why not?" was Dean's reply.

"Cuz you can't do this to me," Sam said, suddenly intensely emotional. "To us," he added, clearly referring to himself and Alex. Sam stood up from the bed finally, not finished, getting zealous. "Cuz if you aren't fighting, how the hell are we supposed to? Dean, you can't give up now, not now." "Actually, I can," was Dean's unmoved, unaffected reply. And Sam seemed to explode at that comment.

"Are you friggin' serious?" he demanded, approaching Dean. "No, you can't, I won't let you! You can't do this to me—to her!" he jabbed a finger at Alex, who still sat on the bed, silent. "Dean—I got one thing, one thing, keeping me going—my family. Us!" Sam threw his arms out wide, desperate. "You think you're the only one white-knuckling it here? We need you. We can't count on anyone else—what am I supposed to do if you give up?"

"I dunno Sam!" Dean thundered, setting his coffee mug down with a loud thud, finally showing a little emotion. He stared at the counter where coffee now leaked out of the cracked mug. He sounded broken. "I'm done with taking care of everyone else's problems."

Alex was looking at Dean in defeated heartbreak, and Sam, looking back at her, seemed to have had enough, approached Dean, then got in his face. "Okay, you know what? It's bad enough you're pulling this crap on me, but do you see what you're doing? You're dragging her down with you!"

"I'm facing reality, Sam, and you should too," Dean said, cool, calm, collected, aloof again, enraging his brother even further.

"What reality?" Sam demanded in a near-shout. "You're giving up, you're deciding to pussy out because you're tired of fighting?" Sam was shouting now. "We're all tired of fighting. But that doesn't mean we stop!"

Dean looked at Sam, shook his head hollowly, seeming to be entirely over the entire exchange. "You know, I don't need this crap from you," he said, already on his way out, grabbing his jacket
from where he'd tossed it before. "I got to clear my head," he muttered, leaving without a backward glance.

"Come on Dean—Dean!" Sam appealed. "It's past curfew." The door shut, Sam turned around, a hand in his hair. "It's past curfew." He sighed in frustration. "What the hell is his problem?" Sam complained to the air in front of him, then he pushed his anger aside, looking at his twin appraisingly. After about ten seconds he went over to her and sat beside her feet, near the end of the bed. "You okay? You don't look so good."

Her eyes flickered up to his. "I'm not."

Sam looked like he was trying to be reassuring. "He'll pull through. It's just... a bad day or something."

It was nice of him, really, to try to comfort her. But she was so far past comforting, too busy staring reality down the barrel. "You really believe that, Sam?" she asked him. "That any of us are gonna 'pull through'?"

Sam looked chastened, then hurt, like her suggestion was personally offensive to him.

"I used to think we would," Alex continued, then shrugged shallowly. "Now..." she trailed off, defeated.

"Stop that," Sam said, suddenly dark, angry, and standing up. "You sound just like him." There was a tense silence and Alex was shocked, feeling small and stung. Sam pinched the bridge of his nose, then refocused, turning back toward her. "All I'm saying is... you can't give up. Not yet. Cuz I'm not. Please."

Alex didn't want to tell him how hopeless she felt—Sam didn't look like he could take another blow. So she forced herself to nod—give him a wan smile. She couldn't think of anything to say. "I'll try, Sam."

He looked at her sadly—like he saw that her heart wasn't in it. But he said nothing else. Mirrored her nod, the wan smile. "Okay. Good." He sighed heavily, ran his hand through his hair, looked around the room, so world-weary. "Look, I've got some books I borrowed from Bobby I've been meaning to read. You wanna help me?" he paused. "Might have some useful information in there about... all this." He gestured vaguely.

Research. Sounded like an okay distraction from all this horrible misery. It was better than laying in bed drunk. "Sure. Yeah, but only if I can get some coffee." She paused, looking at the bottle in her hand. It was a lot emptier than it had been when she'd first gotten her hands on it. "I'm a little wasted."

Sam chuckled a little, shrugged, smiled kind of mischievously. "Yeah, I am too."

Alex shook her head fondly at him, went over and started working on making a fresh pot of coffee.

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**Forty-Five Minutes Later**

Sam walked across the room, dug in his duffel for another book. "I'm pretty sure it was in this one," he said loudly, loud enough for Alex to hear him in the bathroom.

"Sam!" she shouted back, exasperated just like he knew she would be. "How many times do I have to tell you—don't talk to me while I'm in here?!"
He chuckled, hearing the sink water running. He pictured her rolling her eyes. Sam turned, new volume in hand, heading back to where they'd been sitting for the past little bit, paging through ancient volumes together and trying to sober up. They were both definitely still buzzed, but nothing too sloppy. Sam suddenly heard a noise behind him and turned to see—Castiel? In front of the motel refrigerator, holding the door open.

"I got your message," Cas said, staring into the refrigerator aimlessly. He sounded irritated. "It was long, your message. And I find the sound of your voice... grating." He shut the refrigerator door clumsily, backed away from it—**stumbled**.

Sam watched, wide-eyed. "What's wrong with you?" Cas wobbled a little in the kitchen. Sam had a sudden, crazy theory. **No... no way!** He looked at Cas a second longer, barely daring to believe it. "Are you... **drunk**?"

"**No!**" Cas replied gruffly, walked forward, only just catching himself against the wrought-iron partition. Sam's eyebrows shot up high. Cas seemed to change his mind. "...**Yes.**" Said it with a lot of attitude, too. Sam looked at the angel oddly in disbelief.

The bathroom door opened and his sister came out. Cas saw her and his expression changed from angry annoyance to almost happiness. He clung onto the partition as Alex stopped, seeing him too. "**Hi, Cas!**" she said, sounding really surprised but pleasantly so, and she was smiling at the angel, **really** smiling—actually, Sam hadn't seen her smile like that in months. Where her eyes crinkled up, her little faint dimples showed. Sam looked at Cas in confusion, whose head was leaned against the partition—his eyes soft, a little smile on his face, too.

"**Hello, Alex,**" the angel greeted in return, and Sam felt his sister come to his side.

"**You okay?**" she asked Cas, and he looked like he had to think about it. She was looking Cas up and down, probably noticing the same thing that Sam had—the angel was toasted.

"I can stand up now," he said, still looking at her. "**You're... wearing the dress again,**" he said, and Sam was suddenly mortified, realizing that was what Alex had been wearing the night that he'd seen them making out. And Cas apparently remembered that too, **liked** it even.

Uncomfortable, Sam switched subjects, trying to get Cas's attention. "**What... uh, what the hell happened to you?**"

Castiel turned his attention back to Sam, seeming annoyed. "I found a liquor store."

"**And?**" Sam prompted, not understanding.

"And I **drank it,**" he said, sounding pissy, like Sam should have known that already. Cas looked at Alex again, the attitude suddenly gone. In its place was deep, drunken sadness. "I'm sorry you have to see me like this," Cas said, to which Alex just shrugged.

She looked understanding and fond. "**You've seen me drunk.**" She squinted a little, thinking about something. "In fact, I'm still kinda buzzed right now."

Sam looked between the two of them, surprised—they were having some kind of wordless conversation with their eyes almost... and Sam realized he hadn't noticed until now how the two of them seemed really close, in a way he couldn't put his finger on. He didn't get to think about it any longer. Cas finally left the partition, walking unsteadily toward Sam—who held two hands, just in case. "**Whoa. There you go. Easy. Are you okay?**"

Blinking slowly, sleepily, Cas motioned for Sam to come closer, like he had something to tell him.
"Don't ask stupid questions," Cas grumbled in Sam's ear, and Sam was shocked, watching the angel in disbelief. Alex, just behind Sam, was what the angel was looking at now—he'd noticed the scrape on the side of her face and was frowning at it. He seemed to remember himself a little bit, looked at Sam intently. "Tell me what you called me about." He leaned back against a chair, seeming woozy, but trying to focus.

"T-there have been these—these demon attacks," Sam said. "Massive, right on the edge of town. And we can't figure out why they're—"

"Any sign of angels?" Cas asked, cutting Sam off. He was looking at Alex, and she at him.

Sam wondered if Cas was even listening to his reply. "Uh, sort of. They've been speaking to this prophet—this girl, Leah Gideon."

"She's not a prophet," Cas said immediately.

"I'm pretty sure she is," Sam said. "Visions, headaches—the whole package."

At that point, Cas finally looked away from Alex, gave Sam almost an eye roll. "The names of all the prophets—they're seared into my brain," he said, being downright sassy. "Leah Gideon is not one of them."

Sam stared at Cas, baffled. "If she's not a prophet, what is she?" Alex asked.

Castiel looked at her, seemed to be struggling to think clearly. "False… prophet."

"What?" Sam asked, not catching what he'd said. Castiel stood up again, wobbled a little. "I think I know what she is but… I need to get a book."

"A book?" Sam repeated. Alex was still hovering at Sam's side.

"Yes, a book," Cas responded. "The thing with pages and a cover and words inside."

Sam blinked, surprised and even amused by the angel's use of sarcasm. "I know what a book is, Cas."

Cas was looking sternly thoughtful. "Alcohol is very interesting isn't it," he said, apparently forgetting what he was doing.

Trying to refocus the guy, Sam put a hand on the angel's shoulder. "Where do you get this book from, Cas? Can I find it at the church library or—"

"Don't be stupid," Castiel grumbled. "It's at the Vatican." He straightened a little. "I'll go get it."

Sam held his hands out again. "Okay. Well whoa, whoa, wait… I don't know if you should go stumbling around in Italy by yourself."

Castiel's eyes narrowed just slightly. And then nodded, like he understood Sam's suggestion. "Yes. Good." He almost smiled, his chin raising a little bit. "I'll take Alex."

"No wait I meant—" they were gone. Sam threw his hands in the air. "I meant me."

The Vatican Library
Vatican City, Rome
"Whoa—" Alex said, staring. They were suddenly standing in a totally different place—above them, arched ceilings etched with Renaissance depictions of saints and angels—below their feet, immaculate marble checkered floors—intricate columns lined the hall they stood in. Was this the Vatican Library? She didn't see books anywhere. Maybe this was an entry hall or something. She remembered Cas and looked to her side—saw that he was looking at he as he came closer to face her, wobbling a little. He brushed two fingers against her cheekbone, where she'd gotten scraped that morning.

"You... didn't have that yesterday," he said, sounding disturbed. The touch and intense gaze startled her.

"Yeah, well, we got attacked by demons this morning," Alex said. Trying not to notice how close he was or how his concern made her feel. His eyes met hers. Then flickered down to her lips. And then his knees seemed to buckle for a second, he almost fell sideways, and she grabbed him. "Whoa," she told him, held him still. "Are you—?" she asked.

He tried to stand up, unassisted. "It's alright," he said, blinking blearily. "I've... got... this." He made a frustrated groan. "The vessel is having trouble."

"You said it," Alex muttered. She spied a water fountain over beside a doorway labeled il bagno and gently she began to steer him that way. He looked confused. "Drink some water," she said, motioning to the fountain. "It'll help sober you up." She paused. "Maybe."

He looked uncertain about that, but did what she said. And Alex watched her drunk guardian angel lean awkwardly over a water fountain. He'd never have used one before, she realized, and smiled a little, watching him as he processed it, sputtered a little, then figured it out. He stopped after ten seconds. "More," Alex told him. "Like... a few gallons worth should do the trick." After fifty shelves of alcohol, he probably should drink a whole swimming pool. She felt herself smiling a little ruefully as she folded her arms, leaned shoulder-first into the wall, and watched him.

Today had been weird to say the least. Well, maybe weird wasn't the right word. Horrible. Up until now. Just being close to Cas was a relief and made her feel a lot better. Alex tested her patience as Cas drank and drank and drank—finally, he raised his head up, squinted his eyes. "Now my mouth feels cold." It wasn't a complaint. More of an observation. His eyes were very full, gazing at her openly—he seemed a little more aware and keen than he had a moment ago. And Alex felt herself step back, just a little—intimidated suddenly. By how much control he didn't even know he had over her... because when he looked at her like that, her entire body flushed over immediately.

"So um, what about this special book or whatever?" Alex redirected, anxious to get a move on and escape her own feelings.

He seemed to remember their mission. "Yes. Of course. This way." He began to lead them down the grand hallway, watching her as she took everything in. He was definitely walking a little better than he had been a moment ago. "Do you... like it?" he asked after a couple seconds.

"What, this place? It's..." she let herself take it in a little better. And her voice softened.

"Amazing." Amazing was barely the right word. The gilded columns, intricate painted ceilings and walls—she imagined how much time and work must have gone into creating this place.

"I like it when you like things," Cas said, and Alex looked away from the ceiling—he had this little tipsy smile on his face. She tucked a little hair behind her ear, not sure how to reply. "Only the Pope is allowed to borrow from the archives," Castiel told her absently. "This place has some of the oldest volumes on earth."
"And which one are we after?" Alex asked.

"It's the *Vaticanus Graecus,*" he replied. "Very old. Very detailed."

"Where *are* the books, anyway?" Alex asked. She assumed they were headed that way, but if this was part of the library, it sure was lacking in the book department. It was just huge, long hall of columns.

"The books are in the library," Cas answered her factually. *Well, duh...* "There are over a million books here."

Alex made an overly incredulous face. "You picked a good day to try booze, Cas." She remembered how much whiskey she'd had, offhandedly and expelled a heavy breath, forced herself to focus. She really wasn't *that* drunk. The coffee had helped a lot earlier. Cas tripped abruptly and she quickly stopped, bracing him. He looked at her with deep, dark eyes and Alex felt her body flush over in unexpected desire. *Dammit, Cas.* He needed to stop doing this to her. A little frustrated, she turned away, leaving him to continue after her. She didn't really know where she was supposed to be going, but this long hallway seemed to have one general direction: straight. Ahead there was a large archway entrance into what looked like a grand room. After a couple seconds Alex slowed down to Cas's pace, remembering that he was having motor skill problems. As if on cue, he staggered slightly away from her and she grabbed the sleeve of his coat, catching him, helping him right himself.

"Whoa there, cowboy," she told him, chuckling a little now. He looked at her oddly, opened his mouth to say something, but she held up her hand. "I know, I know, you're not a cowboy," she said, before he could try to correct her. The hand motion she'd made set her off balance and she stopped walking, stumbling slightly, surprised—she usually could hold her alcohol better than that. He caught her this time, grabbing her around the wrist to keep her from falling over. Alex reflected briefly how funny this was, heard herself giggle in a very silly, embarrassing way. It was perfect irony... two buzzed people stumbling around the Vatican. Well, a buzzed person and a tipsy angel. That was even funnier, wasn't it? Alex grinned up at him, then stopped. He was looking at her in a way that reminded her of the looks he'd given her when they'd been under Famine's influence.

And then she realized how his hand felt closed around her wrist, how much she liked the way his thumb brushed up against the thin, bare skin of her wrist bone—the simple touch made her buzz all over. She gazed down at his hand. She liked how it looked whenever he had a hand on her. His skin was a shade darker than hers and she realized that his hands looked so boyish. Was he really centuries old? Now the sight of his hand on her wrist saddened her. She longed for him so desperately and didn't understand. She pulled her wrist away, feeling a tightening pain in the vicinity of her heart.

Again, she began to walk forward, leaving Cas to trail after her again. He was an angel, he'd be fine if he fell over. She needed to get it together—all of that whiskey had been a bad idea. She was annoyed with herself, at her lack of ability to control herself when it came to Cas. How was she supposed to feel less or make the intense yearning stop? It was always growing and increasing. She watched the ground absently as she walked forward, but was caught suddenly by the arm, jarred to a halt—and she looked at Cas in confusion, then realized she hadn't been going straight anymore, that she had been about to run into the side of the grand doorway she'd been walking toward.

"Careful," he said, glanced down at his hand that held her arm—there was a long pause, and then he let go, began to lead the way into the grand room, which Alex realized wasn't a room—it was a great hall. Above them an all-glass atrium arched—a dark starry sky was visible through the panes, the high and bright silver moon cast a cool, faint blue glow over everything. Centered underneath
the dome a white marble statue of a male saint stood silent and watchful—on either side of the saint, stretching out for what looked like well over the length of a football field, two long halls. These halls were lined on either side with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Above the halls were beautiful stained glass ceilings. It was beautiful, almost felt magical.

Cas was heading to the hall to the left, and she followed, casting her gaze around, gawking, trying to take in everything as she followed. She forgot everything for a second, just amazed at the intricacy of this place. Only the Pope was allowed in here? It seemed a waste that only one person would be granted access to all of this. The smell of old paper and musty book bindings hung thickly in the air. Alex was slowly realizing how huge a place this was—remembered what Cas had said about millions of books—and suddenly she felt overwhelmed—how were they going to find one book in all of these? Did Cas even know where it was? He seemed kind of aimless. The exact second she thought that, he stopped, turned, looked at her with his arms hanging at his sides—and she sort of got the impression that he didn't have a clue what he was doing. He looked stupid—the kind of stupid that alcohol makes you. Feeling overwhelmed again, she looked down the row of books they were next to. There were so many volumes. The shelves were crammed, there wasn't an empty space anywhere. And none of them had call numbers like books in America did—how the hell were these books organized, anyway? She pulled one out, looking at the spine of it, then the inside cover.

Cas watched Alex as she turned over the old volume in her hands. She looked so beautiful with the moonlight illuminating her. She seemed to glow almost, radiant, and he drank in the sight of her—the way her slender fingers splayed against the book's cover, her dark tousled hair tumbling over her bare shoulders, her graceful neck, the artful lines of her jaw, her full soft lips… lips he had kissed more times than he should have, and yet not enough at all… he wondered dimly why he wasn't supposed to kiss her again. It had seemed very clear to him a day ago, but now he didn't really remember or care about the reasons. He just wanted.

Alex slid the book back onto the shelf, sounding sort of frustrated. "Is there a reference desk or a—" she started, turning back toward him, but Cas—who knew exactly where the *Vaticanus Graecus* was, who didn't need help locating it—it was on the shelf across from the one she was standing next to, actually—all he could focus on was her, even though his ability to focus was greatly diminished right now. The library was tilted a little, and he felt gravity pulling down on his left shoulder, he leaned oddly, realizing he was falling. He overcompensated, jerking to the right and stumbling sideways and forward, almost falling—but she darted forward in a huge stride, she braced him, grabbed him by either arm, trying to help steady him.

Cas clung onto her by the arms tightly because she was the only thing that was stable in the world right now—he waited for everything to stop spinning—looking up from the ground and into her face. She looked kind of sympathetic and ruefully amused at his condition and Cas tilted his head to the side curiously—then he noticed that his whole body was leaning the way he'd tilted his head—he jerked oddly when he realized, when he tried to stand straight again. But instead of righting himself, he stumbled them forward, knocking Alex's back up against the bookshelf—and Cas just barely managed to catch himself, one of his hands gripping the bookshelf for balance, the other still clenching her arm—he tried to remember what she had asked him a minute ago but couldn't quite recall—and then he was noticing how she was pinned underneath him and he liked that, how she was staring up at him with surprised eyes. Faintly he thought maybe he should probably stand up, right himself, move away. But he didn't want to move.

Well. He *did* want to move. Closer. And so he did, a little, so close that one of the sides of his shoes hit against the side of hers, his trench coat brushed up against the sides of her bare knees. He could feel her warmth radiating into him, feel her quickly beating heart pounding against him. "W-what are you doing?" she asked, looking up at him with those big, astonished eyes of hers.
Her question paused him. What was he doing? He thought about it, a little taken aback by the question and by the realization that he really didn't know what he was doing—it was all instinct and craving that drove him now. What was he doing? He couldn't answer that, his brain seemed unable to give him an answer. He only knew what he wanted... and that was her. He'd laid there on the sidewalk all day, thinking of how she had been dead and lost only a day ago—and even now she had a new wound on her cheekbone, a reminder that she was fleeting and mortal, transient... that someday he would exist and she would not. But now, right now, she was alive and here with him and everything about her was luminous, divine, desirable—Castiel was drunk on the nearness of her, he was feeling the things he was usually able to repress breaking free: the mounting hunger to be close to her, to have her. To never leave her. Everything else he had ever believed in or hoped for had proven flimsy and false, but this? Her? She was real, she was the realest thing he could think of, and he moved even closer, watching her unceasingly as she swallowed, stared at him, her mouth open a little in a silent call.

He felt bolder than he ever had; bolder and more foolish, brazen. It should have worried him, it should have halted him. But he didn't care.

Later, he would reflect that in this very moment he started a fire that would blaze out of control. But right now—he could bring himself to care about nothing, literally nothing except the despair he felt at how beautiful she was, how much he needed to know she was alive and maybe feel alive, himself, too. Protective and tender feelings welled up inside of him as he looked into her eyes, unsure why he had ever thought it was wrong to be with her. He thought about her question again. What was he doing? What he wanted.

Alex was frozen, unsure what was happening, only that they were suddenly in this moment where the air had left the room, where she couldn't seem to breathe anymore. His expression seemed to burn and smolder as his slid his hand up her arm and pressed it against the front of her shoulder, a touch that seemed very forward and blunt, filled with intention she didn't expect from him. His eyes were darker than normal as they flickered from her eyes to her lips, then back again—slowly, unabashedly. "I would very much like to kiss you right now," he said in a husky, low voice.

Her heart fluttered in her chest and she withered under his unflinching gaze that was so open, so filled with longing... she almost leaned in to answer him with a kiss him right away but then she stopped herself and hesitated, forcing herself to remember that he was some unknown level of inebriated and she was too—she made herself remember that apparently they weren't supposed to do this, to keep snatching these brief moments of the most beautiful closeness she had ever known. She should tell him no right now, shouldn't she? But she didn't. The thought of saying no seemed to be the most awful thing she could think of—that, combined with knowing how much of a joke her life was, how her brothers were good as dead, how the world would probably end any day—all of that plus the whiskey from earlier—it all took away her ability to care about anything except taking any moment with Castiel that she could get. Because being with him was one of the only bright spots left in her existence.

I would very much like to kiss you, he'd said.

And given over to bold and foolish courage, she raised her chin a little—heart hammering wildly, every part of her screaming for his lips on hers. "So then do it," she challenged him softly. The words had barely even left her mouth before he bridged the gap. He crushed his lips against hers, grabbing her by the back of the head, bearing down on her heavily and clumsily, opening his mouth on hers—he made a low sound in the back of his throat and sent feverish chills throughout her as his tongue nudged hers. He was pressing her up against the shelves without really meaning to as he kissed her with fierce sloppiness, his free hand still bracing himself against the shelf beside her. Against Alex's back books poked uncomfortably. His mouth tasted like whiskey. His touch
was taking her to heaven.

Floundering underneath the brute force of his kiss her hands were on his lapels, tugging him toward her more. His hand tightened on the back of her head as he dominated the kiss completely. His free arm came to wrap around her waist tightly, his hand pressing flat against her back and Alex whimpered softly as their bodies moulded together. He felt so firm and solid, so strong and so reassuring against her. She hadn't realized how desperate she'd been for this. How had she forgotten perfect it felt to be held by him? His mouth was less harsh on hers now, more intimate and searching and sweet, which only maddened her more.

Her hands slipped beneath both his coat and jacket, fingers curling around the tops of his shoulders and into the thin fabric of his white dress shirt—she could feel how taut the skin of his shoulders was. Her hands drifted lower to the strong planes of his upper chest. He groaned softly into her mouth as they kissed, he pulled her closer when her hands slid up to cup either side of his face—his grip was gentler now, less domineering. His hand came forward from the back of her head and she was surprised when he touched the side of her neck, tracing his fingers down in an exploratory, reverent way. The pads of his fingers left a trail of fire against the sensitive skin there, her breath caught in her throat, her hands fell away from his face to grab onto his arms and she hung on tightly, fingernails digging into the thick fabric of the trench coat. He had her high as a kite on arousal and he was barely touching her.

Just as she thought that, he got brazen. In a very swift, unexpected swoop, Cas shocked her when his hand moved down from her lower back to grasp her rear and pull her tightly against him—as their bodies crushed against each other's she gasped into his mouth, louder than she meant to—because it was suddenly and abundantly clear to her that wasn't she the only one who was extremely turned on. He was hard against her and she could feel just how so even through all the layers of clothing.

She was a little mortified at how loud that sound she'd made was, especially when he drew back, just a little to look at her curiously like he was gauging her reaction and wondering if he were doing the right thing. She felt sort of small and helpless, caught off guard by what he was doing—and then she was suddenly backpedaling mentally—what was happening? Sober, Cas would never do this, would he? The only time he'd been so sexual like this was under the influence of Famine and she was suddenly afraid to continue even as at the same time she wanted nothing more than to keep going, see where it went, wrap herself in him completely and never leave.

Cas was leaning in to kiss her again but Alex tensed up, hands pressed against his chest lightly. He stopped and looked at her questioningly. "I thought—I thought we weren't supposed to... to do this," she stumbled out breathlessly, feeling flushed and muddled, trying to do the right thing but regretting it immediately, knowing she had just ruined the moment. She expected him to get that dawning look of 'oh' that he always got when they got too close. But this time that look didn't come across his face. Not even for a second.

He didn't blink, his predatory, consuming gaze stayed on hers steadily. "I don't care anymore," he said—and if it were possible, his voice was even deeper than it ever had been before, filled with so much dark hunger that it made her chest constrict. He leaned in to kiss her, and she almost dropped it, almost just gave up and gave in—but her conscience won out over her lust and she did the thing she never thought she would do—she held him back firmly, stopping him.

"Cas, are you drunk though?" she protested, not sure how else to put it, afraid she was taking advantage of him, not sure how far this would go if they kept tempting fate.

There was a short silence, and understanding showed in Cas's eyes. "I'm in full possession of my
faculties," he replied. "If that's what you're asking." Maybe she still looked doubtful, because his
eyes were dark and unmistakably sultry as he leaned a little closer, tempting her to kiss him. "I
don't know how else to say it—" he said so softly against the silence of the library. His voice was
open, earnest, simple. "I want you badly."

Those four words and the way he said them did her in. She just couldn't hold herself back after that
confession and whatever resolve she'd had, whatever strength, whatever morality… it was all
smashed to pieces and she was abruptly kissing him again, but this time she wasn't just being kissed
—she was kissing him. Deeply, passionately, messily, hungrily. He seemed to notice, too, because
he moaned a little, less dominant than before, a little surprised by her ferocity for a moment. Her
hands had gripped him tight behind his neck and head; she pressed her body against his hard, not
holding back anymore, not at all. And then he regained his bravado, began returning the kiss with
growing intensity, pushing her against the bookcase as his hands began to roam up and down her
sides with growing boldness, lighting her already heated body on fire.

He breathed heavy breaths into her mouth as he kissed her; his hands began to wander more and
more—his fingertips tracing down across her hip bone, then lower still, ghosting along the
incredibly sensitive space between her hip and her upper thigh. Even through the dress his light and
untrained touch felt electrifying and Alex panted into his mouth dumbly, wishing he would move
his hand to where she was aching and screaming to be touched. Cas drew back from the kiss for
just a moment and looked at her, fingers loosely threaded into the hair at the side of her head. Had
any man ever looked at a woman the way he looked at her? He kissed her again, slowly this time,
burningly, using his tongue to coax soft helpless sounds from her. In her belly so much hot,
building pleasure pooled and she was overwhelmed, frantic for something, feeling like everything
inside of her was clawing at the walls and going insane from anticipation.

Cas's hand moved from her hip up her side a little, then back down, then across her lower
abdomen, touching her through the dress, stretching his fingers across her, pressing them in and
testing the feeling of her as he kissed her slow and hot—and she couldn't tell if he was being
teasing or if it was an accident, but his hand passed so close to the place she desperately wanted to
be touched, but it never did actually touch her there. Each time it came anywhere close she tensed
up, her body screaming for him to let his hand stray downward and touch her there please—but his
hand just kept tracing back and forth everywhere but there. After a few seconds of the frustration
Alex got brave, or stupid maybe, too overcome to remain in control of herself.

She grabbed his hand, stopping it mid-movement, then shoved it down boldly to cup her between
her legs. Her hand stayed over his the whole time. She gasped loudly, moaning as their mouths fell
open—his because he was surprised at the sudden control grab; hers because it felt so damn good,
the luscious pressure of his hand against where she was so warm and aching. Her body shuddered
with anticipation and relief all at the same time. Even through two layers of clothing—her
underwear, the dress—feeling his hand against her there was… there were no words or coherent
thoughts to describe it. A little shocked with herself, Alex stared at Cas. He looked intrigued and
entranced. Her fingers closed over his. He remained frozen with bated breath, watching her and
waiting to see what she was going to do next.

She almost didn't, she almost let the sudden shy fear rule her body—but she forged ahead, driven
on by the all-consuming desire and by the courage her tipsy state afforded her—but maybe even
more so by the way Cas was looking at her in mounting adoration, like everything she was doing
was stunning magic to him—Alex bit her lip, feeling exposed and defenseless, unable to look at
him as with her hand over his, she shyly showed him what to do, how to move his hand on her. It
was making her insane, was satisfying the ache and making it so much worse at the same time. Her
forehead and brows twisted in strained, expectant focus and she was shocked at herself.
He kept looking at their hands and then her—he looked awestruck, like he couldn't believe she was letting him touch her like that. Alex was rapidly forgetting her shyness. She was barely able to concentrate because of the waves of pleasure it sent ricocheting throughout her entire body. She felt hot all over and even biting her lip didn't work anymore—she was gasping and panting involuntarily, her vocal chords were letting out spastic little moans without her permission. Her other hand dug fingers into his neck with painful force, but he didn't seem to notice.

She was afraid to look at him fully, afraid he would be judging her suddenly or that the sounds she was making would have left a confused, disconnected look on his face. But she did look at him, and she was thunderstruck: he was looking at her with so much adoring fascination, his eyes were bright and awed and aroused—and that look made her whimper, or maybe it was how his hand felt against her. Her hand stayed over his as his free arm wrapped around her waist again, pulling her tight against him, his mouth seeking hers again, and when he found it, he kissed her more deeply than he ever had, his tongue sweeping over hers as he continued to bear down on her, pressing himself into their hands, a beautifully frustrated sound escaping his throat. She could feel the hard shape of him, the evidence of his readiness, and in response she made a strained little sound. They existed for a moment in this crazy haze of grinding and rubbing and sloppy, messy, loud kissing. Alex almost sobbed as the pressure and intensity built up to unmanageable levels—

And then Cas's hand pulled away, left her, and she was confused, disenchanted, let down, not sure why…and then she felt his warm hand grazing up the bare skin of her inner thigh and she shuddered against his mouth anxiously—his hand brushed against her, he hesitantly ran his fingers across the underwear between her legs and Alex gripped him by the shoulders tightly, a desperate sound like “ahhh” tearing out of her throat as she trembled, going slack against the bookshelf, completely at his mercy, in total shock, not even sure how this was happening at all.

His hand had skimmed up underneath the dress and it now pressed flat against her bare stomach, fingers curling in just slightly. Her breathing hitched—she felt so very vulnerable to him; like right now she would let him do anything to her, anything at all. His dark eyes held her gaze—and his hand turned, fingers pointing down now, tracing their way lower, rendering her completely incapable as the light touch trailed scorching electricity across her skin—and then when his fingers moved past the waistband of her underwear, made contact with the place she ached for his touch the most—“ah, fuck!” she exclaimed in an astounded, strangled voice, surprising them both. "Cas!"

He looked at her in total shock, frozen. Had he done something wrong? "Should I stop?" he asked, confused, afraid he had misunderstood.

She shook her head immediately. "N-no…!" she gasped, looking at him with eyes wide, watching him in expectancy and disbelief.

That's when Castiel realized how she felt to his hand, and his ability to breathe lessened. Beneath his fingers there was a stunning wet heat—a pliable softness like no other texture or sensation he had ever encountered—and he wasn't sure how he was supposed to react to it, but the sensation only inspired greater desire, greater awe of her and this moment, and his heart hammered into his throat, he felt like he was going to burst out of his skin—she looked so desperate for something, and he then realized she was waiting for him to continue—and he remembered how she had shown him a minute ago how to move his hand. He did that again slowly and uncertainly—and she responded immediately; whimpered frantically, clutching onto him tightly. She made a loud sound that echoed in the space of the library. Her head fell back and the sound escaping out of her mouth almost made it seem like she was suffering—and for Castiel it was new terriory that was suddenly intense and frightening, he wasn't sure if it were correct or not, and he stopped abruptly.

"Is this—am I doing this right?" he asked her, filled with dread that he had done it wrong, that he'd
caused her pain—he watched her closely—she swallowed, breathed out, distracted, her eyebrows pressing close together, her eyes were closed.

"Y-yes," she said, flustered, shy again. Her eyes opened and her pupils were dilated widely, he could barely see any of her iris at all—she looked at him like she had a minute ago, so filled with need, and she seemed hesitant to say it, her voice faltering, she was having problems speaking properly. "I want—I want you to keep g-going, uh..."

Thunderstruck at the wanton quality of her voice, swept away by the way she felt against his hand, not even really remembering who he was or anything outside of this moment, he did exactly what she asked, and she again responded immediately, bucking in his arms almost, her soft shallow breaths and choking moans furthering his need to please her—he felt such an intense physical frustration, desire was howling in his veins, curling low in his stomach as he learned this side of Alex. This was the most intoxicating thing he had ever encountered in his entire existence, and to inspire pleasure in her had him in a trance. He made a soft, strained sound and pushed her underwear down and away, trying to get better access to touch her more fully, pleasure her better. The white cotton panties fell down completely to her ankles but Cas didn't notice and it only made Alex even more ready for him to please god take her right there against the library bookshelf—she whimpered again, louder this time, despairing at his touch because it was clumsy but unrestrained and fervent. His blood was pounding loudly in her ears, her body was shaking, she had never known it could feel this good. His breathing was ragged beside her ear and she suddenly wasn't content, wasn't satisfied, realized she had to touch him, too. Her inhibitions forgotten, she reached for his belt with both of her hands, fumbling with it—could barely remember how to work the thing, her mind was so overrun and so focused on Cas's hand between her legs—but it came undone and she pushed at his pants frantically, unbuttoning and unzipping them, all while Cas continued to breathe heavily in her ear, touch her, hold her close. She wasn't sure if he even realized what she was doing.

Barely able to focus, Alex pushed his pants down and away, clumsily fumbled with the soft material of his boxers, not really sure what to do, driven by pure fanatical desire. She rubbed an exploratory hand down the front of him, across the fabric of the boxers and he made a soft, surprised sound then went still—even as she was reaching down into his boxers, finding him waiting. She was stunned, startled. He was hard as a damn rock and yet soft like velvet and it was bigger than she'd thought and warm—she groaned, not sure what to think or do... and that's when she realized he'd stopped everything that he'd been doing, that he was frozen and looking at her with this look of utter shock on his face. Like he couldn't believe she was touching him there, skin to skin, like he was aware of how defenseless he was. Like he was waiting to see what she would do next.

With total freaked out uncertainty, she gripped him gently, not sure how much was too much—and experimentally, slowly, gingerly, she moved her hand downward over his length. Immediately she was rewarded with a frantic, astounded sounding groan from Cas—his eyes had squeezed closed, his mouth hung open, his eyebrows had slammed together, his free hand grabbed her hard as if for support. Holy shit! She went still, couldn't believe she did that to him, made him react like that—and he had opened his eyes back up and was gazing at her, totally amazed and entranced. Feeling emboldened, powerful, braver—Alex tightened her grip, did it again, and he fell forward toward her as another pathetic, stunned groan broke free from his mouth—he had to put his free hand out to catch himself against the bookshelf behind her. His face buried in the side of her neck even as she was stroking him again. He made another sound, a sound he'd never made before... a soft little helpless groaning cry—and that sound, at the feeling of him in her hand—it was almost enough to make Alex come right then and there.

Getting fed up and frustrated and desperate and bold, she let go and pushed his boxers down, not
even sure how far she pushed them, just pushed them away and pressed herself, dress and all, against the warmth and shape of him, her arms circling around his middle tightly. She was trying to get closer, trying to find satisfaction but only feeling more frustrated as a result. He pressed back as he kissed her again, seeming to be over his temporary shock, seeming to be feeling as frenzied and desperate as she was—he pinned her flat against the bookshelf—and clumsily, like highschoolers fooling around for the first time they ground their hips against each other in increasing dissatisfaction. Alex wasn't sure how it happened but as they made out and moved against each other he shifted, pushed her upwards a little, and she was suddenly no longer standing on the floor—automatically, she hugged her legs around his waist, braced her hands against his shoulders... and when his hand pressed against her hip over the top of the dress, when he moved his hand up her side—she would never know if it were accidental or intentional, but that movement pulled the bunched-up skirt of her dress away from in between her legs, leaving no barrier between them at all.

The second she felt the warm length of him pressed up against her between her legs, a frantic little groan escaped her mouth and he echoed her, his distress doubling at the feeling of her against him bare skin to bare skin. He pulled back, mouth hanging open, looking at her like he was out of it and totally gone. When he did that, when he pulled away like that—their bodies came apart too. And then, the moment that happened by accident, the moment that they would never be able to take back. They were both completely frozen, shocked, unsure of how it had happened—staring breathless at each other when they felt him unintentionally nudge up against her entrance. Their shocked eyes clung. And the silence was so great that a single pin dropping would have been too loud.

Holding still in shock, Cas stared at her, afraid to move at all, unsure what to do. All he could do was stare at her—he saw deep trust and desire there in the hazel depths that stared back at him. Alex's grip tightened at the back of his neck—he was looking at her with wide, sobering eyes. Castiel, please, please, I need you—is all she could think, but she didn't move at all, afraid to break the moment, afraid to ruin everything, afraid he was suddenly going to stop and leave her empty, aching. Her hands, tightly holding the back of his neck, pulled his head and neck forward slightly—she despaired for him, she wanted to beg and plead him take me now.

Castiel was no expert on human copulation but he knew what it was and that everything inside of him raged for her in that way, begged him to give in to the desire and the moment. He wanted to take her, know her, have her. But it wasn't permitted, and he tried valiantly to remember that. But there seemed no concrete reason left in the universe for him to say no or to stop it. He felt her legs tighten around him, he felt the warm sheath of her press against him and he breathed in sharply, looked at her in the eye, his whole body begging him to do this—his entire being seemed to be screaming at him that he needed her. Alex leaned her face in and pressed the simplest, softest kiss to his lips that lingered.

And Castiel realized that he didn't care. Not about God, not about the laws of Heaven. Not about the future, not about the past, not about anything or anyone but her and this urgent, desperate moment between the two of them. Nothing mattered except the girl he held in his arms. She was the pinnacle of his existence, the center of everything. He desired her so completely and unrelentingly, in every way he could fathom, and he could no longer resist. Their mouths broke apart, but stayed so close that they breathed in each other's breaths. He gripped her tighter and her fingers dug into him, her entire body bracing itself, overwhelmed by anticipation and adrenaline, stunned desire, disbelief—and shaking, finding breath impossible, Castiel pushed inside, taking their union and relationship to the most intimate level in existence.

Castiel was unable to hold back a stunned, primal sound at the indescribable and devastatingly
overwhelming feeling of being completely enveloped in secure and tight warmth, being part of her—his nerve endings, his entire body seemed to short circuit, the intensity was baffling and jaw-dropping, he had never experienced such complete and utterly overwhelming physical pleasure before, his mind could barely even comprehend it, that such a feeling were possible—how could it really feel this good? He suddenly understood why humans loved sex so much.

A strangled, pleasured sob came out of Alex's mouth as she wrapped her arms around his neck, both of her hands tangling into his hair. She moved experimentally, grinding him tentatively. She was unable to keep another groan silent and she grabbed his face now, thumbs brushing across his cheeks. He looked into her eyes helplessly, letting her take the lead now. Her arms tightened around his shoulders, she buried her face in the side of his neck, felt overwhelmed with emotions and ecstasy all at once.

She moved again, this time a lot more than she had before and she felt him shudder when she did, he let out a soft, stuttering breath and she pulled her head up, looked at him. His eyes were glazed over. She moved again, boldly, a lot, and they both gasped, floored by the feeling, the knowledge of what they were doing together. Absolutely astounding pleasure came over her that time, and Alex felt like she could pass out. Him, here, buried deeply inside of her was holy and sacred and everything to her—this angel had saved her, had restored her, had given everything for her—and now his body was with hers, they were joined in a way she didn't imagine possible. Overwhelmed, she said his name softly—and it sounded like a prayer, like a plea, like worship—she was completely dependent on him in this moment, she felt like she belonged entirely to him, she wondered if two people had ever loved each other more than they did.

Castiel held onto Alex tightly as she continued to move on him. His vision went black for a second, and then bright stars were exploding in front of him. He heard himself make a deep, urgent sound. His eyes whipped up to hers. She was looking back at him with heavy-lidded pleasure-drenched eyes, her mouth parted open—and he was overcome. She was the most precious and valuable thing on Heaven or Earth or any place in between.

"Cas, please," she begged softly, gripping him tightly, trembling, waiting for him to move, too. And he didn't know how to tell her no. Clumsily, one hand holding her underneath her thigh, the other around her waist—he was completely horrified to do this wrong, to disappoint her in any way—with utmost care and dread, he moved in her—and he was unable to stifle his reaction; he felt like he could collapse, like he could shatter, he heard a deep moan in the bottom of his throat—and when she made another soft gasping sound, he felt a surge of deeply instinctual desire. Her expression was still rigid, but not with pain as so much with expectancy and anticipation. She was breathing loudly, he was too, and he did it again, moved himself out, then back in, making them both respond. He felt her fingers digging into his shoulders.

He hesitated still to move much more, he was afraid—the sensation of literally being inside of her was intense enough, but he was afraid he was that he might break her somehow. But there was a pleading tone to her gasps and pants, he knew she needed something from him, and he tried to give it, moving inside of her unsteadily, trying to do what she wanted, trying to imitate what he'd seen humans do before. He felt so very unsure of himself and was unable to look at her, just confused and filled with a stark fear that he would do it wrong; and he was guilty because it felt so good to him, he was worried because he didn't know how to do this—the thought was interrupted when she grabbed him by the side of the head by his hair and made him look her in the eyes. All of his chaotic, horrified feelings subsided, he suddenly forgot it all.

She was looking at him with eyes that held complete adoration and desire—and he didn't understand how she could feel those things toward him. But he was rendered awed by it, how sacred this moment was, how much it must mean to her, how much it meant to him, how
astounding it was that she would allow him to do this with her… and he made the softest sound
then kissed her, stopped thinking—just allowed instinct to take over—melted into her as the vessel,
his body, seemed to remember what to do… and her arms wrapped around him tightly as praised
her mouth with a kiss from his, one of his hands coming to grip the back of her head gently. He
began to move in her again, but this time, it was different—he was sure, he knew what to do, he
didn't think about it, he just did. He gave everything he had to her, he let his body love hers, he let
the many things he felt for her translate into the way that he moved. In response her head fell back,
a relieved, amazed sound escaping her open mouth, and Cas watched her now, unable to look away
—she was the most beautiful sight he had ever witnessed. The air around them filled with the
sound of their ragged breaths—they clung to each other desperately, both shocked, both
overwhelmed and amazed, overtaken by the other, as the rhythm they found became more intense
and certain. Their eyes met and clung and their hands tightened on each other.

The sounds she was making were becoming higher and more and more strained, she sobbed, she
grabbed his face and then his neck in both hands, beginning to sound frantic, desperate for
something, and he was too, for the same thing, but he didn't know what it was—his breaths were
now coming sharp and shallow, he could barely concentrate, barely hold himself together, so
enraptured with the way it felt to be with her like this.

There was an alien pressure and pleasure building in his body, rising up in him—it was the most
intense physical sensation he had ever felt. It overpowered him, began to scare him—it felt like
there should be a limit but he couldn't find it and he heard himself making pathetic, unsure sounds
that rose in pitch because he was beginning to feel lost, like he would never find it, but he needed
to. He clung to her tighter and tighter and he felt like his mind was slipping away, he couldn't
control his breathing or his vocal chords, all he could do was lose himself in her, despairing for
something he couldn't name.

Under the spell of what he was doing to her, Alex was tortured and yet in complete bliss. Cas was
groaning, panting, grunting with increasing intensity and volume, his hands were grasping her
tightly like she were the only thing he could hold onto to keep from blowing away—it was surreal
and left her in the throes of ecstasy to have this effect on him, to feel him like this. She heard how
afraid he was despite his bliss, how scared, and she thought how he never would have felt anything
like this before, how he might not know what was happening to him at all—and she loved him
even more for it. With her eyes squeezed shut, she buried her face in the side of his neck, she held
him tighter, one hand gripping his shoulder, the other clenched at the back of his head—trying to
hold onto him, steady him, make sure that he knew that she was there with him in this. He was
moving faster, and the crescendo was inevitable. Her entire body was tensing and shaking, ramping
up for release, and Alex held on harder as she began to gasp in surprise at the feeling of
approaching ecstasy—holy shit, oh god, it was too much! Her hands tightened on him as he thrust
her off the world itself. "Oh... oh, Cas!"

Cas suddenly shuddered in her arms, cried out with intense surprise, pitched forward into her arms,
his groans no longer groans but noisy choking gasps and realizing what was happening to him was
the absolutely final straw... Alex abruptly shattered too, crying out loudly and uncontrollably in
response to the blinding apex that hit her full force. She hung onto him for her life itself and she
could have sworn she heard glass breaking overhead as she convulsed in his arms, completely
wrecked and made whole at the same time. He held onto her tightly, not letting them part for even
a minute as they helplessly rode the waves of ultimate ecstasy together. She realized dimly that
broken glass rained down over them from above and she didn't know why, she only knew that she
felt Castiel leaning over her as they came, his arms surrounding her, enveloping her body with his,
sheltering her protectively as he quaked against and inside of her—and Alex wouldn't have cared if
the world itself was ending, all she could do was hold on to him, sobbing from the intensity as they
reached infinity together, as they discovered perfection. All she could do was surrender—he was
light, he was power, he was ancient days and formless shape, he was creation and destruction, he was like taking in the entire universe in one single breath. And in that sacred, devastating, astounding moment, every part of her body and soul was alive and free and with him.

Thrown headlong into the brilliant blazing sun for the first time in his existence, Castiel was no longer just cells and atoms and consciousness, flesh and bone. No. He understood eternity, he felt the rushing rivers and the stormy tide of the ocean and the crash of every typhoon break over him. He was left amazed, confounded, overcome, forever—and breathless, in wonder, he clung to the one he loved, gone still as the room became quiet again. The monsoon of pleasure had faded and left him feeling utterly confounded and amazed. At their feet, shattered stained glass littered the floor. He was trembling in Alex's arms, reeling from what had just happened, from the storm they had stirred in each other, from the feeling of being taken over the edge, of being dashed over rocks and of being sent crashing into a supernova—he knew that he would never be the same, he felt like he had tasted the finest wine, that all other things would always pale in comparison to this, to her, to what they had found together, what they had created.

He drew back just enough to look at her again, at the same time that she lifted her head off his shoulder. Her eyes raised to his. She was flushed, shaking, breathless, beautiful... his. This fragile, breakable, mortal human being. And overcome with tenderness, with so many thoughts and emotions, Cas's hand reached up to touch her face. With all the gentleness and affection that Castiel felt for her, he leaned closer helplessly, his nose brushing hers, his lips tenderly pressing to hers in a simple, chaste kiss. He felt her returning the gesture, felt her hand against his face now too, her thumb grazing over his jawline.

And all he could think was that he loved her. For every and any reason, he loved her.

Beyond measure. Beyond compare. Beyond anything.

And then he thought about that. Beyond anything.

More than he had ever loved God. Or Heaven.

He pulled away from the kiss, the elation fading—she looked at him, breathing raggedly, her gaze questioning—because she could see his face changing. It was because he was suddenly overcome by tens of thousands of years of programming and duty, by the sinking-in realization of what had just happened, what they had just done—the sin he had committed. She looked so wrong to him all of the sudden or maybe he felt wrong, all he knew was that she seemed smaller than he remembered—and he thought of himself, a formless vapor that had existed in Grace and the void for thousands of years, a towering angelic being who knew no limits or death. The centuries he had witnessed passed before his eyes. The reality of who he was crashed over him. An angel almost as old as time itself.

So when Cas realized with dawning horror that he'd just taken her virginity, that he'd initiated it and done it while alcohol-addled, against a wretched bookcase, with a body that didn't even belong to him—he was suddenly terrified, looking at his beloved Alex—who he loved but shouldn't, who he was supposed to always guard and protect and never involve himself with in improper ways—and all the good things he'd felt were gone, and instead all he could think was that he had defiled her. Made the biggest, most abominable mistake of his existence.

What had he done?
It was like coming back down to earth from paradise itself.

The fever pitch of perfection and ecstasy was fading away now, and in its place there was an overpowering sense of wonder. Left breathless and dazed by a dumbfounded kind of amazement, Alex was flushed all over in dizzying heat, she was left to reel in every way possible in the aftermath of what had just happened between herself and Castiel. She was so very aware of the all-powerful angel who was trembling in her embrace. Her arms tightened around him just a little bit. Only able to focus on one thing at a time, Alex's mind struggled to regain the ability to think clearly. She was aware that Cas's strong arms were holding her up, felt the fabric of his trench coat against her bare legs which still hugged around his middle. The two of them were pressed against each other so closely that she couldn't tell which thundering heartbeat was which—only that she felt two. His rapid breaths hit the curve of her shoulder and the side of her neck in little puffs of hot air. His warm forehead gently leaned against her temple, his hair tickling her forehead. But none of that really compared to the feeling of him still inside of her. The sweet, torturous pressure still remained, filling her to a point that didn't seem possible. She shut her eyes, let out a trembling breath. Was this real?

She turned her head toward him slightly, and opened her eyes slowly, his head moved back a little, and their eyes locked. And that's when she knew it was real. All of it. His expression was so unlike any expression she'd ever seen on his or any face ever before. He was looking at her like he was content, satisfied, wanting for nothing. Like he loved her. Surreal and overwhelming emotions tumbled over Alex as he touched her face gently, his grazing fingertips leaving a hushed tingle across her skin. Cas leaned in, his nose brushing against her nose as he brought his lips to hers, kissing her with slow and simple sweetness. Helpless and in love, she touched the side of his face, too, returning the kiss. And for a moment, as they shared that gentle, quiet kiss, everything was right—the troubles of the world were still there of course, but right now Alex didn't feel anything but complete, safe, wanted, adored. She was with the one she loved. Everything was okay.

And then it all went away.

With startling abruptness, Cas pulled away from the kiss, and the second he did, Alex could tell something was wrong, something had changed. Her stomach dropped when she saw how his expression had become clouded and troubled... where there had been euphoria and amazement a moment ago, now there was dawning horror and panic. She suddenly began to feel those things, too—what was wrong? He looked down and around, as if he were coming out of a fog, like he was realizing what he was doing, what they had done... and then he moved, began to remove himself.

And Alex was suddenly empty and blindsided, standing on two shaky legs, feeling discomfort and stark confusion. Cas had taken a couple stumbling steps back, turning away from her completely. Suddenly cold and feeling his absence in every part of herself, Alex looked at his back in silent, baffled shock. What had she done—what happened? Why did he suddenly react like that? She heard his zipper go up, then his belt buckle clinking. And in a strange state of dazed confusion, she looked down at the ground, saw broken stained glass littering the polished floors. Saw her discarded white underwear beside her foot. In a daze of autonomy, Alex stooped and picked up her panties off the floor—as she straightened, a series of horrible thoughts slammed into her like a
solid brick wall.

She was the one who had moved his hand to touch her how she'd wanted to be touched. She was the one who had unzipped his pants, had touched him, had pulled his boxers down. Oh my god, maybe it was because he hadn't wanted it. Maybe he'd just done that with her because he had known she wanted it, or maybe he'd been much more drunk than she had realized, maybe it was just his vessel and not him at all, maybe she had misinterpreted everything—but why would—and did he really not—had she gotten it wrong and made the biggest mistake of her life?—how could she have let this happen?—she hadn't meant—

Alex was having a hard time breathing now, she felt lightheaded and queasy, her thoughts were half-finished and frantic. All she could think was had she forced him somehow? Taken advantage of him or something? Had she wanted it so badly that she hadn't cared to really find out if he wanted it too or not? He had seemed fine until that last kiss, why? Her heart sank. She was thunderstruck, confused, remembering how eager he'd seemed, how willing and even impassioned. How could she have imagined that? Even as she wondered that, Castiel turned halfway, looked back at her over his shoulder.

His expression was unreadable; she couldn't tell what he was thinking. Her heart sank even further, her horror increased. She wanted to disappear and was too afraid to ask him what was wrong. His eyes flickered to her hand—she followed his gaze—she had clenched her underwear so tightly that her knuckles almost matched the white fabric. Cas's jaw worked strangely and he looked away pointedly, giving her a chance to put her underwear back on. Her shoes crunched on the broken glass under her feet as she did, and she was completely and totally mortified—she hugged her arms around herself when she was done. Swallowing thickly, feeling wretched and low, she tried to look at him but was only halfway able to. "A-are you all right?" she asked fearfully. Her voice wavered badly, there was no strength to it.

His eyes met hers just barely. "I should be asking you that," he said. He sounded weary and sickened, disgusted, grieved. He couldn't seem to look at her now, his despair deepened. "I-I shouldn't have done that," he said miserably, his brows tense and knit together. He had never looked so guilty or torn.

"W-why?" she asked, filled with dread. Her stomach was nauseated beyond belief, she almost felt like she could be sick. Any answer he could make would devastate her. Well, devastate her further. But maybe she hoped he would answer her in a way that could dispel the horrible suspicions coursing through her.

His answer did nothing but make everything worse. "It was wrong." His words were startling and stinging, like a slap to the face, and he still wouldn't look at her. It was like the air had been ripped from Alex's lungs. She had felt fulfilled and loved and complete a minute ago—and was now left with a crumbling world. It was wrong?

How could that have been wrong? Did he really believe that? She couldn't let herself believe that, and chancing everything, putting everything on the line, Alex went closer to him. "Cas—" she appealed, and hesitated, then tried to touch his face, get him to look at her—but he turned his face away from her hand and she froze. His gaze was still on the floor, he was purposefully not looking at her.

She stood there stupidly, unable to reconcile the passion and love she'd felt from him with this cold and unwilling Castiel before her now. Had she imagined that love she'd felt from him? Had she gotten it all wrong? With increasingly ill feelings, she again remembered how he had begged her to stop at first and she hadn't listened. Horrified, she asked herself what have you done? Everything
inside of her protested, tried to understand, tried to convince herself that she'd done nothing wrong. She loved Castiel—\textit{loved} him—didn't ever want to hurt him or mistreat him in any way… but the reality stared her down the barrel: she had wronged him anyway.

\textit{Stupid, childish, naive}. She wanted to die, she suddenly hated everything about herself and she turned around, hiding her face from him, fighting the urge to break down and cry. There was a long silence and then she heard him draw a book off the shelf.

"This is the book we came here for," his deep voice said, and he sounded distracted, weary.

Barely able to hold herself together at this point, Alex shook her head, fighting to keep her composure. Trying not to lose it completely. "Just... just take us back to the motel," she said in a voice barely above a whisper. Turned to look at him a little, trying to find a glimpse of the Castiel who she thought wanted her.

Their eyes met for an instant. Then suddenly, they were not there anymore—and Alex realized that for the first time, he took her through the fabric of space and time without touching her. And that realization was another blow, another devastation.

Her feet were now on cheap carpet—they were back in the motel again—it was dim, smelled faintly like cigarettes and disinfectant. Alex almost jumped out of her skin when she heard Sam behind her. "Did you guys find the book?" he asked, and Alex turned around to see her twin getting up from the little couch, an open book on the coffee table in front of where he'd been sitting. The second Sam saw his twin's face, it was clear he could see something was wrong—he stopped and frowned, glanced at Cas, looked back at her. His eyes were narrowing in attentive concern.

"Something wrong?" he asked, directing the question to his sister who just looked away from him, her jaw tight.

Sam's piercing stare went back to Cas, who was looking down at the book in his hands. Sam's frown was deepening, his eyes narrowed even more when he looked back at Alex, his tone taking on a suspicious note. "What... what took you guys so long?" he asked.

Alex exploded. \textit{"Jesus Christ, Sam!"} she exclaimed, "There were a shitload of books, okay?! Like you could have found it any fucking faster!" The words flew out of her mouth and left a stunned silence in the room. Shocked at herself, feeling herself rapidly dissolving, Alex had to flee. Without grabbing a jacket or looking at either man, she shook her head, holding back tears, and charged out of the motel room wordlessly, leaving a very confused Sam behind and a very shocked Castiel.

Sam looked at the door, eyes wide, eyebrows raised high—he was blindsided by Alex's strange behavior. "Cas, what—" he started out, then went silent, turning back around to see an empty room. The book was sitting on the table and Cas was gone.

It was freezing outside, she was in the highly impractical sleeveless, above-knee dress—but she didn't care. She just had to keep moving. She stumbled sort of blindly through the parking lot and toward the road, vision made blurry with angry, shameful tears. She couldn't stop herself, she just needed to \textit{get away}. From him, from what had happened. From the pain, from herself, from everything. She was sobbing loudly, miserably, distraught when she thought of all the ruin and wreckage in her life, all the mistakes she'd made. She ran into something solid, felt herself being stopped mid-step—was temporarily shocked into silence and stillness as she looked up and into the face of Castiel, who looked down at her with a face full of pained concern. He was the one she'd been running from, and coming face to face with him was too much.

She felt almost like she could collapse, her emotions were so heavy and all-consuming. "I'm so
sorry, Cas, I'm so sorry," she sobbed out, and covered her face with both hands, bowing her head, wanting to escape the impossible guilt. "I t-thought you, that you wanted it, I thought that we were —that you wanted—" she looked up at him through tear-filled eyes, did the only thing she could think to do with her hands, and that was grab onto his arms as he continued to hold hers. "I'm sorry," she blubbered. "Please, please, forgive me, I thought you really wanted it, I d-didn't think that you were that drunk and I, I wanted you, I wasn't thinking clearly," she stumbled out excuse after excuse as he stared at her with a strange, confused expression. "I used you to get what I wanted," she rambled blindly, getting more and more hysterical by the second, "I didn't think of how it would affect you or how it's not a natural thing for you to do or what it might do to you or —"

"Alex! Stop." He had tilted his face down, trying to peer into hers, and his features were distorted by a horrified expression. "You think you're the one in the wrong here?"

She was so startled by his question that she couldn't even reply for a second. "A-aren't I?" she asked, taken aback.

He seemed equally taken aback when she asked that, and then almost offended. "How could you be?" he asked, implying with his voice and expression that he didn't even acknowledge that as a possibility.

Alex blinked a couple times, getting even more confused than before. She was racking her brain, trying to figure out what was going on, what Cas was getting at. "I thought… I was the one who made the whole thing happen..." she stated with wavering conviction, bringing her hands to each opposite elbow, hugging herself a little.

He looked like hearing her say that brought him pain. "That's... not how I remember it," he said regretfully. His eyes wandered the space of her tearstained cheeks and his hand raised, he used the backs of his index and middle fingers to wipe away the tears. His eyes followed his fingers, and her gaze stayed on him, her confusion not lessening at all, but a small wave of comfort washing over her at his gentle touch. His gaze flickered to hers guiltily, and his hand froze, withdrew, as if he was realizing what he was doing.

He looked down, shut his eyes for a beat, let out a heavy breath through his nose. His arms hung at his sides now. He was silent for a moment, and Alex was breathless and confused, hoping, teetering on the edge of absolute heartbreak. He finally spoke, in a low, quiet voice, his eyes hesitant to meet hers. "Alex… I did want it." The admission made her heart jump and stomach roll, even though he sounded conflicted when he continued. "I just… I shouldn't have."

She didn't understand. "Shouldn't have wanted it or shouldn't have done it?" she asked, heart hammering in desperate hope at hearing that he had wanted it.

Cas looked burdened, every muscle in his face tense with grief. "Alex… I am… thousands and thousands of years old." And that reminder of fact suddenly smothered the hope she'd felt. She was forced to remember that the man in the trench coat, the man she'd fallen in love with... wasn't a man. That they weren't supposed to love each other, that he wasn't even the same species as her. His eyes were heavy with the weight of countless centuries, and she felt how impossible this was, heard his message loud and clear: even though he had wanted it, even though it had happened… it shouldn't have. "I'm not a human, Alex," he continued, looking at her, his eyes pleading with her to understand.

All she could do was nod and look down, attempt a smile to cover her true emotions, try to keep the brokenhearted tears from coming. Say in a weary, spent voice: "I know, Cas. I know."
He shook his head, his agonized expression mirrored hers almost exactly. "This isn't even my body," he said, each word driving a stake of pain further into her heart. But then he said something she hadn't expected. "I had no right... to do that." His voice caught oddly. "To take... take that from you." He swallowed, a muscle tensed in his cheek.

Alex looked at him, stunned, realizing his distress went a lot deeper than she'd thought. And suddenly, she could see light at the end of the tunnel again, saw a million-to-one chance that maybe they could get past this. "You're upset because I was... because it was my first time?"

He looked guilty and upset. "It shouldn't have been with me."

His statement shocked her, offended her almost. "I wanted it to be," she told him pleadingly, feeling absolutely defenseless. He looked down and away, his face a mask of misery. Alex bravely sought his gaze, craning her neck a little, trying to get him to look at her, trying to make sure he knew he was wrong. "Cas... you didn't take anything." She briefly thought, in the back of her mind, that she was insane for continuing to pursue this and him. But she did anyway. Maybe startling them both, she reached down, took hold of one of his hands gently. He looked down at her hand in his. "I gave it to you," she told him quietly. His eyes jumped up to hers, and the amount of emotion on his face was overwhelming. Even though he'd seemed so old a moment ago, he now looked unsure, young and inexperienced, like a teenage boy. And she remembered again how tonight had not only been the night she'd lost her virginity. He'd lost his, too. And the very thought of that left her speechless for a minute. Her body still felt warm with the afterglow.

"I mean, remember," she said softly, trying to sound lighter than she felt, trying to make him feel better, trying to fill the suddenly-awkward feeling silence. "It... it was your first time too, right?"

His expression changed a little, softened. It was a rhetorical question that she'd asked, but he answered her anyway. "Yes." She felt his hand tighten around hers, just a little, and the reality of it hit her anew: she'd been with an angel. They had lost their virginities to each other.

Her body tingled with a rush of memories: his breath in her ear, his hands wandering her body... and every touch and sound and sensation had rendered her into mindless putty, had driven her to shamelessly beg him for everything he had to give. And the term 'making love' came to mind—even though she'd always laughed at it before—nothing else seemed to fit. She thought of how, for a moment, they had been together in every way possible. For a moment, he'd been hers completely. For a moment Heaven and Earth and all the reasons they weren't supposed to had just melted away. She was flustered, recalling how he'd been beyond passionate with her—tender and careful and giving, like all he'd cared about was giving her what she had needed and wanted.

Alex was suddenly feeling overwhelmed, unsure what an angel could see in her worth loving or worth wanting to please. A minute ago he'd said that her first time shouldn't have been with him, but she suddenly wondered why he had wanted that with her. How was she worthy of this? Of him? What did he see in her? She was a weird and broken little human with a million issues and no functioning understanding of the real world. She had maybe ten dollars to her name and a biography that would give most people in their right mind a stroke. She had nothing to offer him except herself. And she didn't know why he'd want that. But even though she didn't know why he saw anything in her, she still knew he did. You could tear it all down, the universe, the laws of nature, entire civilizations, whatever: take it all away but she knew Castiel would always care about her. She just didn't know why.

"What is it?" Cas asked her, his eyes narrowing in concern, and Alex looked away, at the empty road and dark sidewalk; wanting to hide from him and also burrow into him all at once. Her emotions were going haywire and she was suddenly so very tired.
"I just… where do we go from here?" she asked brokenly, looking back at him with eyes that pleaded him for an answer, a clear solution. A cut and dry answer that would take away all the unknowns and misunderstandings. But Castiel looked at her openly, a helpless kind of sadness on his face.

He looked as confused as she did. "I don't know."

Watching from about thirty feet away, Sam hung back in front of the motel door—he'd grabbed his jacket and made to follow after his clearly upset sister, then stopped when he'd seen that Castiel had met her in the middle of the deserted road. Sam had stopped, unsure if he should remain back or go to them and demand an explanation. He'd settled on staying back, but he watched them closely. Alex was upset and Sam could tell that something had happened—maybe she and Cas had argued or something at the Vatican. It didn't matter—whatever had happened to upset her, Sam wasn't going anywhere until he made sure that his sister was okay. He wasn't used to her going all Dean on him like she had a minute ago.

So he stood there, waiting, not really even sure what he was witnessing—he couldn't hear them at all, but he could see that Alex had calmed down. The two of them had been speaking intently for the past couple minutes, appearing to be anxious or emotional about something. They were currently staring at each other silently… and then, what little space had been between them disappeared. Surprised, Sam wasn't sure who initiated the embrace—only saw Alex bury her head in Cas's shoulder, saw Cas wrap his arms around Alex protectively, securely. And Sam was even more shocked to see that than what he'd seen when the two of them had been making out under Famine's influence. There was an enormous amount of visible trust and an intensity, an intimacy that he saw in the embrace. Sam felt his eyebrows raise up high.

Cas was an awkward guy, or at least, that's what Sam had thought before. But right now, it was very, very obvious to Sam that he'd underestimated the angel. Cas held Alex tenderly, in the way that a man held a woman he loved—and Sam could see how much the angel thought of his sister: it was in the gentle way that his hand cradled Alex's head, in the tilt of Cas's head toward Alex's. Sam stared openly, unsure about witnessing this.

And that's when the sharp sound of a gunshot cracked the air in two. Sam's heart leapt into his throat, he saw Alex jump and for a second he thought my god she's been shot—and he was shouting her name and running—getting to Alex and Cas, who both looked confused—and still held each other tightly, looking up at Sam in surprise and confusion.

"Are you all right?" Sam demanded frantically grabbing his sister by the shoulders, assessing her and glancing at Cas, too—

"Fine, I'm fine," she said, looking around, alarmed. "Where did that come from?"

Cas, who was stern and frowning now, looked at the bar. "It came from there," he said, nodding toward the little building that was plunked beside the motel. As soon as he said it, Sam was heading that way, and he didn't even know if they were following, all he could think was Dean… oh my god, Dean. He just knew his brother was either getting shot at or the one doing the shooting.

The tendency to not think things entirely through was one of Sam's weaknesses when he thought one of his siblings might be hurt or in danger. Such was today. Sam reached the door to the bar and practically knocked it down as he slammed it open and barged inside, then froze at the scene that waited inside. Paul was shot and crumpled on the floor against the bar, wasn't moving. Jane held a pistol on him, her hands shaking badly. "Just give me the gun, Jane," the pastor was coaxing, standing between her and Paul's body.
"I had to do it, David," Jane said. She didn't sound remorseful. She sounded dangerous.

"What the hell is going on in here?" Sam asked cautiously, his steam fading as he laid eyes on Dean, who crouched beside Paul, putting pressure on the gunshot wound, but it looked like it was too late. Paul was still and unresponsive.

"He was compromising the flock. He deserved to die." Jane spat contemptuously, gun still aimed in Dean and Pastor Gideon's direction. "He was a sinner."

Sam's eyebrows raised at the audacity the woman spoke with and he opened his mouth to reply—and then heard the angry voice of his twin behind himself. "Isn't murder a sin?" she snapped angrily, clearly not thinking, and before Sam could react at all, Jane's head swiveled sharply to stare Alex down, there was a snarl on the red-haired woman's face.

"You," she spat, "have no right to say that to me. You and your brothers got my son killed."

It all happened so fast. Jane suddenly seemed to snap completely, was swinging her arm around to bring the to aim right at Alex—and Sam couldn't move fast enough, it literally happened in one, maybe two seconds: Cas suddenly appeared out of thin air in front of Alex and the sound of another shot rang out loudly even as everyone in the entire establishment jumped in shock—maybe from the loud sound, or maybe from the shock of seeing a man appear out of thin air. Jane lowered the gun, stunned. "How—" she started, but was cut off when Sam tackled her, sending the gun flying through the air.

"Hey, hey!" Rob was shouting.

Dean stood up, pointed a finger at Castiel and then Alex, barely looking at either of them in the rising chaos. "Cas, get her outta here, now!"

Alex opened her mouth to protest, but it was too late. She and Cas were already back in the motel room—Cas had moved them without touching her again, his back was to her, and he reached out a hand, steadied himself against the room partition. And Alex went still, looking at him with a frown. Why was he having a problem standing again? "What's wrong?" she asked, and then he turned around slowly. He was frowning slightly, looking down at his chest in confusion. A perfect circle, just a little smaller than a penny had been punched through the trench coat, right above his heart—and bright red blood blossomed out onto the beige fabric.

Her breath caught, her chest twisted, her stomach dropped, her entire nervous system seemed to suddenly be on fire with alarm. "Oh my god—Cas!" Alex gasped out, rushing across the short space between them, grabbing hold of him, looking at the bullet hole and then his face in complete shock. "You're shot!"

"I'm... fine," he said, but he sounded unsure, and his expression was strange, slightly pained.

"Fine?" She repeated, aghast. He looked a little woozy, he blinked oddly, twice, and she realized she needed to pull it together for his sake. "Okay, just..." Alex tried to think clearly, tried to calm herself down. Castiel was shot, but he was an angel, he would be fine, right? Maybe not though, he wasn't as invincible as he'd been once, he was cut off from Heaven, he'd lost many of his abilities—shit, shit! Just keep your head, she commanded herself. Treat the wound, figure out how bad it is. She breathlessly told him "sit down, sit down," as she maneuvered him over to a bed, sat him down, stared at the blood seeping out onto the trench coat. Appalled at the sight, automatically doing the only thing she knew to do, which was to put pressure on the wound, she looked at him in alarm. "What were you thinking?"
He looked up at her without hesitation, frowning slightly. "That I was saving your life."

She was taken aback by his simple and sincere answer. By the realization that he had saved her life. By the fact that he had taken a freaking bullet for her. And if she hadn't loved him before, she sure as hell did now. And she felt warm blood underneath the palm of her hand where she shakily applied pressure. Her nauseating worry increased. "But now you're…"

"Fine," he repeated. She looked at him like he was crazy, wondering how someone with a bleeding chest wound, angel or not, could be fine. "Alex, I may be cut off from some aspects of Heaven, but this bullet wound… it's not fatal to me." He grimaced just a little. "It is, however, surprisingly painful."

"I'm so sorry, Cas," Alex said, pained by association, by the thought that he was hurting because of her. She looked around the room, trying to focus herself. "Okay," she mumbled, trying to think, holding her clean hand against the side of her head. "Okay. First aid kit."

She left him sitting on the bed and hurried over to where the duffel bags had all been tossed, wiping the blood off her palm against her dress skirt haphazardly as she crouched down and began frantically rummaging through Sam's bag. She knew there was a first aid kit and some medical tools in her twin's bag somewhere. Cas watched her quietly. She found the kit and then went to her bag, pulling something out of the very bottom—a flask.

Alex came back to Cas and handed him the flask, wincing a little—the irony of this wasn't lost on her. "I have to take the bullet out," she told him quickly. "It's going to hurt a lot. This… might help with the pain, a little? I don't know. It's worth a shot." Cas took the flask from her slowly, looked at her questioningly. "It's absinthe," she explained, glancing at him as she raked through the contents of the first aid kit. "Pretty strong stuff… my secret stash that I was saving for—" she let out a cynical little chuckle, "a special occasion." She shook her head ruefully, nodded at the flask. "Drink up." After visiting 2014 and seeing a Cas who had been into some pretty screwed up crap, Alex didn't like giving him the absinthe—it was a full flask, too—but she also knew taking out a bullet hurt like hell and it would help if he could get a little wasted again.

Castiel looked at the flask in his hand, hesitated… thought of the visions of the future he'd seen where he'd been an alcoholic and a complete wreck of a man… wondered why he hadn't thought of that grim future before right now. It might have been helpful to think about it before he'd done the things he'd done in the past twenty-four hours. Maybe when he'd been about to drink an entire store of liquor. Maybe when he'd been about to have intercourse. Things he couldn't take back or undo. He didn't see any reason to avoid this, either, anymore. He felt hopeless about his dismal future, about how foolish he was, how he was walking straight down the path he'd been trying to avoid all this time.

He raised the flask to his lips, tilted his head back, drank deeply, drained the entire thing. The alcohol burned his throat, he was viciously reminded of last night when he'd downed bottle after bottle of every kind of liquor at the store. He finished the flask off, unsure if it actually would abate any of the pain radiating from the hole in his chest. He felt mildly muddled again, a little woozy. Was it because of the alcohol or the pain?

Alex laid a silver pair of some kind of silver medical tongs—hemostats, he thought—onto the bed after quickly wiping them down with an alcohol pad. She then took out some gauze and medical tape, set them beside the tongs, looked at Cas with a tense expression, then came to stand in between his parted knees… and Castiel was suddenly very affected by her physical nearness. Memories of what had happened earlier that night, not even twenty minutes ago, suddenly filled his mind. He tried not to look at her and remember what she felt like underneath the skin of his
hands, how she'd looked and sounded near the end of it all, how she'd clung to him and made him feel…

"You, uh, you'll need to take your coat and jacket off," Alex told him, eyes flickering up to his. She said it softly, shyly almost. And Cas, forced out of his thoughts, began to try to comply, but his whole left side was struggling to move properly, and he couldn't. Perplexed at how one single little piece of metal lodged in the flesh of his vessel could so impede his range of movement, Cas stared down at himself, then started slightly when Alex began to help him. She pulled his left arm up, tugged the sleeve of the jacket and coat off together, gently. Then pushed at the right side of the clothing, allowing him to extract his arm easily. He looked at her silently. He was now sitting there in his shirt and tie—and a bright red blotch stood out against the crisp white dress shirt. Alex's eyes had gone to it like metal to a magnet—concern and pain flitted across her features again, she wet her lips unconsciously before visibly refocusing. "Shirt, too," she told him, and there was no mistaking the nervous tremble in her voice.

Hyper-aware of every movement she was making, every little thing she did, Cas held stock still as she worked his tie loose. She glanced at him a couple times fleetingly as she pulled it up and over his head—Cas continued to watch her openly as she carefully pulled his shirt out of where it had been messily tucked into his pants—their eyes met briefly, and he wondered if she was thinking of what they had done earlier, too. She unbuttoned each button, starting at the bottom button and working her way up steadily, slowly. He watched the way her pulse fluttered in her neck, the tense way her jaw flexed. The way her eyes avoided his now. She unbuttoned the top button of his shirt and finally looked him in his waiting eyes. There was a pause, and then she seemed to remember herself and pushed the shirt away and down, her eyes dropping to the wound in his chest.

"Oh, Cas..." she whispered, sounding so pained. The soft way she'd said his name was overwhelming to him. She ran a few fingers down the skin just beside the wound. Underneath her fingers, his chest rose and fell a little faster than before. Her eyes came to his again, and a sad, cajoling little smile came to her lips. "Even angels bleed sometimes, huh?" she asked him softly. And he was startled, shocked—remembering the visions of the future Anna had shown him. Remembering that Alex had said those exact words to him in the visions. Alex hesitated now, taking in his expression, seeing that something was wrong. "What is it?" she asked, voice laced with worry.

He shook his head, looked down. He was filled with despair at the thought of those visions of the future, and didn't want her to know any of the painful details. "Nothing," he told her, unable to bear the thought of any of it actually happening, even though he'd taken yet another step toward fulfilling fate that night.

She didn't seem to believe his claim of 'nothing' but nodded, looked at his wound and made a small circle with her lips, expelled a heavy, dread-filled breath through them. She grabbed up the silver tong tool from beside his knee where she'd laid it and she then leaned close, looked into the wound. "I can see it. Didn't go in too deep." She glanced up at him. "Ready?"

He gave a shallow little nod, racked over with guilt and despair but trying to push those things aside for the moment. He focused on her, watched what she did. She took a deep breath, braced his shoulder with her left hand, held him still as she carefully opened the tongs and pushed them into the hole made by the bullet. She was grimacing. The cold metal brushing against raw, exposed muscles and tissue hurt, but then he felt the lodged bullet shift as the tongs grabbed it and he gritted his teeth together. "I've got it," Alex said, and swallowed, looking at him, her face screwed up with concern. "This is really gonna hurt, Cas. Hold on."

Her grip tightened on his shoulder and she pulled the bullet straight out—Cas was surprised when
an agonized groan ripped out of his throat. Pain exploded in the vicinity of his chest at the extraction of the small piece of metal. And then it was out, it was over, he was breathing heavily, she had already pressed some gauze over the hole, was putting the hemostats down and grabbing the tape. Cas didn't understand why he was feeling so much pain. He'd been shot, stabbed, slammed around in this vessel without feeling much of anything before. But now he felt, and so much. Good things and bad things.

"Hold this," Alex told him, nodding toward the gauze over the bullet wound, and he did, obeying automatically, confused and in pain. He watched her as she ripped off some tape and carefully secured the gauze, taped it down tightly. She looked like she had done this sort of thing before. Many times, actually, she was very precise and careful. Gentle, too. And her fingers brushing against his bare skin sent increasingly familiar feelings of awakening through him—the feelings of pain lessened, and in their place, the stirrings of desire and longing. He shouldn't want this. He shouldn't want her. But he did. So much. He felt himself becoming distressed at his thoughts. He was confused and unsure as to what he should be thinking or feeling. There was a war inside of him, two sides pitted against one another. One side insisted he stop playing with fire—it had gone far enough, too far. The other side told him it was already too late and begged him not to even leave Alex's side for a moment—wanted to kiss her again, wanted to feel and know her from the inside again...

Castiel grew flustered, looking away as she put a final strip of tape across the gauze. Her eyes glanced up to his, she straightened up but remained there between his knees. She was looking at him in concern, her eyes soft. "I can't... I can't believe you took a bullet for me," she said quietly, shaking her head a little.

He frowned just a little, because she shouldn't be amazed that he would sacrifice everything for her. She should know that even though he'd failed her countless times before, it wasn't because he was unwilling. "I'm your guardian," he told her. "I would take a thousand bullets for you."

His words seemed to do something to her—he immediately saw how they affected her—eyes jumping up to his, mouth parting softly, breathing quickening slightly. "You... you can't say things like that to me," she said softly, in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Why not?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

She looked hesitant to say it, she seemed vulnerable and afraid almost, and she shook her head a little, backpedaling and taking a very long time to reply. "Never mind."

Sensing it was important, Cas looked up at her in concern. "Tell me," he requested fervently, trying to understand what he'd done wrong.

Her eyes locked onto his. He could see how frightened she was to say whatever she was about to say. And he wished he could make it so she never had to be afraid of anything ever again. She swallowed slowly. Her voice was still barely a whisper when she told him. "Because when you tell me things like that..." her voice cracked in anguish, softened to a mere whisper, "how can I not fall in love with you?"

The minute she said those words, everything in him went quiet and still, even as so much everything surged forth in him that he didn't even know how to begin to process it—he didn't even think about it, there was no protest in his mind. He only moved to meet her, craning his neck upwards to meet her lips with his—his hands boldly went to her waist, and when their lips met, he heard himself make a soft sound of relief or maybe it was despair—he pulled her to him and downward, his arms circling completely around her waist, his hands against her ribcage on either side. Her knees came to either side of his hips as he pulled her close, he felt her hands, warm and
hesitant on his torso, then braver, going around his middle—her arms encircling him, skin to skin.

And kissing was just the pressure of two pairs of lips against each other, love was just chemical reactions in the human brain; neurological processes and pheromones and libido and vasopressin and oxytocin working together to trigger reactions and connections. It was chemistry, plain and simple. Except, it wasn't. Castiel could not downplay anything he felt for Alex to something as simple as science or biology. It went so much deeper than that. It transcended everything he'd ever thought or known.

Here with her against him, her sweet and spellbinding mouth on his, Cas thought, vaguely, that this place—with her—was like Heaven to him, and his arms tightened around her protectively. She whimpered a little into his mouth, and at that sound, Cas pulled away, broke the kiss. Remembering himself, he searched the brown-green depths of her eyes, breathless. And all the things he knew, all the knowledge he possessed about how wrong this was—an angel and a human—it all seemed invalid and flimsy standing against the weight of all the things he felt for her. Their arms still circled one another, she was close to him, and he wanted to belong here—anywhere near to her. So much emotion surged forth inside of him. He thought of her giving herself to him so completely and so ardently, of how there had been nothing left between them at all, of how she'd made him feel: alive. Real.

Her eyes fell away from his for a moment, she looked down at his chest with a tense expression, traced her fingers across the top of the makeshift bandage she'd put on him. She was worried. Her eyes came back up to his, and she looked so lost, so conflicted and mournful. A wavering whispered plea left her lips. "I don't understand why we can't."

The misery she spoke with echoed through him, he could hear how she felt. Hopeless and desperate for things to be different. And he felt the pangs of regret again, realized how much of a wretched hypocrite he was. He had told her time and time again that they couldn't pursue romantic involvement—he had told himself time and time again that he couldn't allow it. And still, it had happened, had spun out of control and fast and now he'd done the unthinkable. He didn't know what to tell her. He needed her more than he knew what to do with, and yet he knew that being together was what would destroy them both in the end, if those visions of the future were accurate.

He continued to search her eyes, trying to find something to say to her, trying to determine where to go from here, what to do. He was so painfully aware in that moment that the two of them were from two different realms entirely. That the things they had done together in secret, dark places were expressly forbidden, were considered abominable to Heaven. Castiel felt grief building as he thought again of how he'd taken her innocence so readily and thoughtlessly. Not only had he wronged her by Heaven's standards, but by earth's as well.

Suddenly, the motel door swung open with a loud bang.

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**A Few Minutes Ago**

"Cas, get her outta here, now!" Dean shouted, even as he just barely intercepted Rob, who was charging at Sam—who had just tackled Jane, sending her pistol clattering to the floor.

"Outta my way!" Rob shouted, shoving Dean—who replied with a shove of his own and then a punch to the face.

Rob toppled backwards, stunned and collapsing onto the ground as Dean whirled around, heated. "Everyone just calm the fuck down!" he shouted, breathing heavily and glaring at everyone, ready to deck the first person who even looked at him wrong.
Pastor Gideon picked up the fallen gun, looked at Jane, who struggled in vain against Sam. The pastor appeared to be shellshocked by what had happened. He looked at the townspeople that had come with him—three men and a woman. "Everyone needs to go home," he told them, faintly. "Just, just go home." Looking equally stunned, the four people exchanged looks and then complied and filed out of the bar.

Jane's protesting shouts rang out after them. "I did what had to be done!" She shouted, yanking uselessly against Sam's iron grip. "I protected the flock!"

No one turned back around, the door swung shut, and Jane looked at the Pastor, angry and betrayed. "I want to see my son again! Leah said if we did what the angels say, if we purified the sinners out from among ourselves, we'd get to Paradise! Don't you want that?! David, you can see your wife again!"

"This isn't right," the pastor said in a daze of horror, looking at Paul's body, not seeming to hear Jane's insistent tirade at all.

"You're damn straight it's not right," Dean put in angrily, whirling and bearing down on Jane, who shrank a little into Sam at his sudden approach. "You killed a man, you get that lady?" Dean demanded.

"He was a sinner," Jane retorted, regaining some of her defiant bravado, jutting her chin out and staring down her nose at Dean contemptuously. In response, he chuckled darkly, looked down. "What's so funny," Jane said, voice tinged with a note of suspicion.

"You know, you act all high and mighty and righteous but really, you're just as low as the rest of us. Shooting a man in cold blood—trying to kill my sister?" Dean's smile was gone. In its place was a chilling, threatening stare. "Lady, you pissed off the wrong guy tonight." He wet his lips, leaned closer to her, giving the impression of careful, contained rage. "You know how lucky you are to still be breathing air?" His voice was suddenly a shout. "No one shoots at my sister or my brother and lives to tell about it, you hear me?!"

Dean looked back and down at Rob, who was staring up at him from the floor, blood running out of his nose and into his mouth. Dean looked back at Jane, making sure she knew he wasn't playing around. "So you and Rob here got about ten seconds to get the hell outta here before I return the favor—are we clear?" Sam looked slightly shocked by Dean's threatening rant, which wasn't over yet. Dean stepped closer again to Jane, lowered his voice. "If you come near me... my sister... my brother again... I won't hesitate to shoot you where you stand. Now clear the fuck out of here before I get trigger happy."

Sam took the cue and let go of Jane, who yanked her arms away angrily, pulled her husband up off the floor, and gave Sam and Dean dirty looks. Rob, sort of dazed, his arm over his wife's shoulder, looked at the pastor, confused and questioning. The pastor shook his head, held out a placating hand. "Just... let me handle this, Jane, Rob. Go home."

Jane said nothing, just shot Dean another glare over her shoulder as she and her husband stumbled out of the bar and into the night.

"Bitch," Dean muttered, shaken up and pissed off, half-blind with rage.

"That... that wasn't supposed to happen," Pastor Gideon said, hollow and in shock, holding the gun, staring at it blankly.

"Yeah well, it did," Dean retorted, and looked down at Paul's dead body on the ground. He
sobered, his anger faded away into deep, painful sadness. He'd thrown a punch and started the entire fight that got this poor chump killed. Adding another stupid, pointless death he felt responsible for to the roster he kept in his mind, Dean glanced at his brother, who was silent and looked upset, shocked by what had just happened just like the pastor. As usual, the only one who could hold it together when shit went down, Dean forced his feelings away, focused on the problem at hand. "What the hell was Jane saying about purifying the flock?" he asked the padre, who came out of his fog slowly.

"She, uh, my daughter, Leah… she said that the angels are angry. That some people in the town were holding us back from reaching Paradise. Paul's name came up and… I..." the pastor shook his head hollowly, he went quiet.

"What, so Leah told you to go out and gun down any poor sons of bitches who weren't compliant with angel rules?" Dean demanded incredulously.

"Dean," Sam put in, coming forward, giving Dean the 'cool it, would you?' look he so often gave. "Pastor Gideon… it's not your fault," Sam consoled earnestly. "It's unfortunate that Paul died, but we can't do anything about that now. We need to focus on figuring out what is going on here with your daughter." Pastor Gideon's questioning look deepened, was offset by fearfulness. Especially when Sam's voice lowered a little. "I have reason to believe she's not a prophet at all."

Dean looked at Sam, frowning deeply—this was news to him. "But... the angels speak to her," Pastor Gideon protested. "She knows things no one else could possibly know, she's saved us from demons."

"Come on, Pastor," Sam reasoned. "Something's wrong here and you know it."

"It's the end of times, it's supposed to be a little rough around the edges," the pastor said, a very lame excuse that he delivered without any real conviction—only a lot of growing uncertainty. "Haven't you boys read the good book? God's wrath is serious business."

"Huh," Dean commented wryly, sarcastically. "Do you even believe that crap you're trying to sell?"

The pastor looked at Dean, seeming defeated. "What else am I supposed to believe?"

Dean smiled facetiously. "How about that God doesn't give two craps about you or anyone else on the planet, and that the angels are all a bunch of assholes who want to destroy the world, huh?"

Surprise filtered across the pastor's face, and Sam looked at Dean in growing irritation. Sam forcibly stowed his anger at Dean to try and focus on mollifying the situation and the pastor. "Listen. We're going to find out what's going on here, okay?"

The words had only just left Sam's mouth before Dean was yet again speaking out of turn, making the situation that much worse. "Hey, could you us all a favor and stop trying to give the guy false hope? This is just the end of times and shit happens, like he said. Everyone's gonna die, why fight it?"

Sam wheeled on Dean, barely able to keep from hitting his brother across the face at this point. "Dean, could you just—"

"What, Sam?" Dean demanded, almost as if he were trying to get Sam to hit him. "Could I just what?"

"Just shut up and stop talking!" Sam shouted.
Dean gave him an annoyed eye roll. "Yeah, sure. I'll do ya one better," he replied sarcastically, and turned, walked out of the bar and slammed the door behind himself.

What the hell was his damn problem!? Sam watched his brother leave, his fists clenched tight—and then he remembered the pastor and struggled to calm himself, huffing in frustration, trying not to let his intense anger control him. "Listen, we're gonna figure this out Pastor Gideon, okay?" Sam said, turned on his heel to follow his brother, who needed a smack in the face.

"Wait, what am I—supposed to do?" The pastor asked, almost frantically, and Sam paused, turned back around, racked his brain. He was so flustered and riled up that he could barely think.

"Just, just try to keep the people calm, try to keep everyone in their houses, okay? Stay with Leah and if she starts talking about killing people or carrying out God's wrath, whatever, come get us." And Sam went out of the bar, looked left and right, saw no sign of Dean—and thinking fast, decided Dean would have gone back to the motel room. Sam hurried around the corner back to the motel room, distressed as hell, barely able to see straight.

He opened the door to their motel room, slamming it actually, barely noticing anything—not Alex jumping back from Cas, not the wide-eyed guilt on their faces, not Cas's shirtlessness—all Sam saw was that Dean didn't seem to be there and he turned around, desperately looking out at the motel parking lot, searching for any sign of Dean. He saw no sign of anyone. "Great. Just friggin' great," he muttered, thinking of his older brother out wandering the streets with a chip on his shoulder the size of Texas. He turned back around, closed the door behind himself, trying to figure out what to do now.

"What happened?" Alex asked, looking at her twin in confusion and concern. "Where's Dean? You okay?"

"Oh yeah, I'm awesome," Sam ranted, running a hand through his hair, coming into the room, unfocused. "Leah told the townspeople that there are sinners among them and if they want to get to Paradise, they have to… purify the flock." Sam was pissed. "And to top it all off, Dean's being an asshole and I have no idea where he went now." He let out a heavy breath, tried to calm himself down, realized he was going to have to take charge and figure this whole thing out if Dean was going to bail like this. Sam turned his attention to Cas.

"Cas, any idea— whoa." Sam stopped short when he finally looked at Cas point blank. The angel was shirtless—there was a huge wound dressing across his chest on the left, there was a discarded, bloody white shirt beside him. Sam's expression dropped, he was scrambled for understanding as sudden alarm rose up. "What—"

"He got shot," Alex said, arms crossed.

What? How? And Sam saw that his sister had some blood on her hands—oh my God—Sam realized as he rewound mentally: Jane hadn't missed his sister like he had thought—she'd hit Cas instead, who'd put himself between the bullet and Alex. Horrified, awed realization dawned on Sam, who suddenly found breathing difficult. "Holy shit, Cas," he breathed, looking at the angel intently. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Well. I'll be fine." Cas sounded grumpy. "I feel drunk again. That liquor was very potent."

He followed Cas's scowl to a silver flask laying on the bed—Alex's, he recognized it—and Sam swooped in, picked it up, sniffed, then made a face and a disgusted noise. "Absinthe?" He asked, looking at Alex with eyes that were already lecturing her before he even opened his mouth.
"Alex..." he started, his tone very chastising.

She looked at him unhappily and shook her head, heading to the kitchenette. "Don't, Sam."

And realizing there were more pressing matters at hand, he dropped the subject and the flask, too. The sink began to run as Alex washed the blood off of her hands. "All right, listen, we gotta figure out what’s going on in this town," Sam said intensely, "before more people are killed."

Cas, moving stiffly and seeming in a good bit of pain, turned toward Sam a little as Alex shook her wet hands vigorously and came to stand beside Sam. "This Leah Gideon is a false prophet. I think I know who she is," Cas said, and he looked at the book that he had brought back from the Vatican—it sat where he'd left it on the coffee table. Alex followed his gaze and went and got the book, took it to Cas wordlessly. Wincing a little, he laid the book on his knee, balancing the spine there as he paged through it. Alex sat gingerly beside him, held one side of the book to keep it from falling off. Again, Sam was stilled by the sight of the two of them near each other. Alex seemed uncomfortable under Sam's gaze, kept her gaze on the book purposefully. Jesus, Sam thought in awe. The guy had taken a bullet for Alex.

Cas was focused on the book in front of himself. It had yellowed paper and middle-english looking text filling the pages. Inky black and white illustrations filled some pages completely. Cas flipped through it slowly, with one hand, then seemed to find the page he was looking for. Sam came closer to peer down over Cas's shoulder and into the book. He saw an illustration of a woman riding on a seven-faced beast filled the right-hand page, and above the artwork The Whore of Babylon was written in red letters.

"The woman will be made drunk on the blood of the innocent," Castiel read, "and with the blood of the martyrs. And she shall come, bearing false prophecy, turning the citizens of earth against one another other." He looked up at Sam. "She rises when Lucifer walks the earth. This creature has the power to take a human's form, read minds."

"How can you be sure that's what Leah is?" Sam asked.

"I'll have to see her with my own eyes," Castiel replied, shutting the book and putting it on the bed beside him, prompting Sam to move back a little. "I'll be able to see her true face." Cas stood up, didn't seem too steady on his feet.

Sam wasn't sure if he should steady him or stay back. "Maybe you better wait a little bit...?" Sam cautioned hesitantly.

Alex, who had stood up right after Cas did, spoke up. "Cas... I just dug a bullet out of you. Can you at least put your clothes back on before you shazam out of here?" She gave him a matter-of-fact look. "You can't just go around town half-naked." She picked up his shirt then her expression faded as she saw the bright red stain. "It's all bloody."

Cas took the shirt in his hands and suddenly, the blood disappeared—the shirt looked brand new. Sam's mouth dropped open a little bit. "How do you do that?" Sam asked, awed once again.

"It's a simple manipulation sequence of the atoms in a specified area of matter," Castiel explained, blasé, as he put his right arm into the sleeve and pulled the shirt half-on. He sounded as if he were commenting on the weather out of boredom.

Sam was deeply impressed—then pausing, thinking of something. "Wait—can't you heal yourself?"
Cas glanced in Sam's direction but didn't look directly at him. "Not anymore," he answered heavily, and began to struggle with the left sleeve of his shirt, grimacing—and Alex began helping to guide his hand into the sleeve gently. Sam saw how Cas looked at her then, and he wasn't sure how to even begin to describe the quiet and subtle adoration that filled Castiel's face. And if that wasn't enough, Alex was re-buttoning Cas's shirt for him as the angels's arms hung at his sides. Sam inexplicably felt like he was witnessing an extremely private moment and a little uncomfortable, he averted his eyes for a minute, then watched out of the corner of his eye. Alex replaced Cas's tie and tightened it carefully, and Sam saw that her hands lingered a little longer than necessary on the knot, the gaze the two shared was intense as hell. Alex glanced Sam's way, stepped back from Cas, who glanced at Sam, picked up his trench coat off the bed, then looked at Alex, told her, "I won't be long," and then disappeared with the soft sound of wind and wings.

Always startled when he did that, Sam blinked, then looked at his sister, who seemed tired and looked as though she'd been through hell and back. "...you sure you're all right?" Sam asked her after a couple silent beats, and she attempted an I'm fine smile.

"Yeah, uh, it's just... crazy night," she said, and she was distracted, not really paying attention to Sam.

"You're telling me," Sam said, and fixed her with a questioning gaze. "So, hey, what hap—"

The door of the motel room opened loudly, and the twins turned to see Dean coming in, Paul's blood all over his hands, a sour expression on his face. "Dean! You all right?" Alex asked, even as Sam fixed his brother with an accusing stare and asked almost at the same time, "where'd you go?"

"Hey, hey, enough with the twenty questions," Dean muttered, ignoring them and walking over to the kitchenette sink. "Just give me a damn second." He began to wash his hands, letting out a heavy gust of air. "All I know is this is a bad time to be in Blue Earth," he commented darkly, and shook the water off his hands, turned around, looking at his siblings with an unhappy expression on his face. He opened his mouth to say something. And then the soft sound of angel wings alerted them to Castiel's reappearance. The angel stood at the far end of the room, near the bathroom door. "That didn't take long," Sam commented in mild surprise.

"It's her," Castiel announced.

"It's who?" Dean asked loudly, frowning intently. He didn't like to be out of the information loop.

"The Whore," Cas replied.

"The Whore?" Dean repeated incredulously.

"We'll need to kill her," Castiel said, and came a little closer, into better light.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Okay, back up two seconds, Cas buddy," Dean said irritably, "What are you talking about and w—" he suddenly stopped talking, looked at Cas's chest sharply. "Are you... bleeding?" The bullet hole and bloodstain had stayed there on Cas's trench coat and Dean was staring openly.

Cas looked annoyed, made an impatient face. "It... is not of import," he told Dean in a strange, clipped tone.

Dean looked officially shocked. He looked at Sam and Alex for an explanation. "What's wrong with him?"
"He's... a little drunk. Or hung over. Not really sure which," Sam supplied.

Dean had looked back at Cas, flabbergasted. "You're drunk and you got shot?" Dean demanded, apparently not able to believe it, but then realization dawned over his features, he looked at Alex, then at Cas, and Sam could literally see the lightbulb go off in Dean's head. His mouth hung open a little bit, he looked shocked and freaked out. "Cas did you... take a bullet for Alex?" he sounded awed in disbelief.

"Yes," Castiel confirmed neutrally, and Dean blinked rapidly several times, speechless, then looked at Alex, who appeared to feel guilty. "I'll be fine," Cas said, his expression stern and businesslike. He didn't appear to want to discuss the matter any further. "We need to talk about what's going on here in this town."

"Yeah, uh, sure," Dean said, sounding shellshocked and taken aback. "Uh... I'm all ears. What you guys got?"

"It's Leah Gideon. She is not Leah Gideon." Castiel took the book he'd left on the bed and crossed the room with it, sat down on the couch and laid the book out on the coffee table, tapped the page. "Book of Revelation calls her the Whore of Babylon. She's behind everything that's happening in this town right now," Dean and Sam both went to sit near Cas, Alex hung back. "She rises when Lucifer walks the earth and has the power to take a human's form, read minds, control certain forces of darkness," Cas continued, then paused heavily. "The real Leah was probably killed months ago."

"So Leah isn't Leah," Dean surmised in deep thought. "Why all the demons attacking the town?"

"They're under her control."

"And the Enochian exorcism?" Sam questioned.

Castiel frowned. "What?"

"Rah bah zu na ooh zow tay," Alex recited from memory, to which Cas became amused, a surprisingly boyish grin suddenly playing on his features.

"What's so funny?" Dean demanded suspiciously.

"It's fake," Cas explained, trying to hide a smile. "It actually means, 'you, um, breed with the mouth of a goat.'" He looked at Sam and Dean, whose faces were blank. Cas peered up at Alex, who stood across from him, leaning against the partition and mildly amused at the revelation—Cas chuckled softly, glancing at Dean again—and the smile faltered under the what the hell is your problem look Dean was giving him. Cas looked at Sam, who looked equally unamused. "It's... funnier in Enochian," the angel said.

Dean looked at Alex, who was still trying to cover up her smile and he rolled his eyes. "You two are so lame." He looked at Cas, the bloodstain on the trench coat, and visibly let it go. "So the demons smoking out—that's just a con? Why? What's the endgame?"

Refocused, Castiel thought hard. "What you just saw—innocent blood spilled in God's name. Her goal is to condemn as many souls to hell as possible. And it's just beginning. She's well on her way to dragging this whole town into the pit."

"You said we had to kill her?" Sam asked, remembering what Cas had said a minute ago.

"Precisely," Castiel confirmed.
Alright. So how do we go Pimp of Babylon all over this bitch?" Dean asked, and got a strange, puzzled look from the angel.

"I rarely understand your strange choice of words, Dean," he complained, then narrowed his eyes in thought. "We'll need a stake made from a cypress tree that grew in Babylon."

"Great, I've got one of those in the back of my car," Dean muttered sarcastically.

Cas looked at Dean sidelong. "I can get it for us, Dean. You don't have to be so cynical." Dean was visibly taken aback by Cas's comment. The angel had stood up right after saying it, crossed the room to the kitchen. He took an empty glass off the counter and filled it with water. Dean and Sam watched him do that in surprise. "But there's the issue of who will kill her," Cas said, turning around and sipping the water. Alex watched him discreetly, thinking he must have remembered how she'd shown him that water could help sober him up.

"What do you mean, who'll kill her? One of us," Dean said, like Cas was an idiot.

Cas gave the oldest Winchester an impatient glance. "I don't think so. It's not that easy."

"Course not," Dean commented dryly, and pulled the heavy book off the table, flipped through it, like he was looking for something.

Cas continued to explain. "The Whore can only be killed by a true Servant of Heaven."

"Oh yeah? And who'd that be?" Dean asked, not bothering to camouflage his snide tone, glancing up at Cas from the page.

"Not you," Cas answered matter-of-factly. "Or me. Sam, of course, is an abomination." Sam looked offended, but Cas didn't notice. "We'll have to find someone else."

There was a short silence, and then Dean looked up from the book at Sam, then Alex, then Cas. "Why not Alex?" he asked.

Cas looked startled. "What?"

"Yeah, says here a pure soul can be a Servant of Heaven, in some cases," Dean said, raising the book slightly off his lap in indication. Sam craned his neck and saw that Dean had found the page titled *The Servant of Heaven*. An illustration of a floating man with arms spread out in a welcoming, saintly gesture covered one of the pages. "I'm just saying," Dean said, "she's ganked some pretty bad sons of bitches in her day, and look at this checklist." Alex had darted over, was looking closely at where Dean was pointing.

*A pure soul is whole, human, and belongs to a virgin. Those who possess a pure soul are often found to be a Servant of Heaven, should their intentions be pure and divine.*

Dean looked at Alex, who was trying not to wither away as she realized. *Holy sh*t. Crowley... Lucifer... the pure soul crap she'd totally forgotten about until just now... oh my god. "Pure soul..."* Dean was saying with a nonchalant shrug, looking at Cas again. "She matches the bill."

Sam looked like he was having a difficult time accepting that, looking at Alex sort of intently, then Cas, who set down his water with a loud crack. "Dean," the angel said loudly, his voice harsh with sudden anger, "Your sister was gunned down just two days ago and died—she was shot at today and would have died if I hadn't been there and you want to put her in harm's way again?"

Dean was quieted at the outburst, by the sudden reminders of how close his sister had come to
dying recently. How she had died recently. How had Dean forgotten? And maybe he was so shamed by what Cas had said, how guilty he suddenly felt for everything that had happened to her that he didn't take into consideration how strange it was that Alex didn't argue or tell them to fuck off and of course she could take care of one goofy little Whore of Babylon. Her eerie silence went unnoticed by Dean, who instead looked at Cas, feeling oddly chastised under the angel's scowl. His eyes went to the bullet hole again and he clenched his jaw, realized how much he owed Cas. "Well then who?" he asked helplessly.

Cas shook his head. "I'll find someone. First, I need to get the weapon." He looked at Alex grimly, his expression going odd. "I'll be back later." And Cas disappeared with nothing further.

There was a thick silence. "The dude sure is overprotective," Dean commented wryly, looking at Alex, trying to be funny and maybe make some temporary peace—he knew he was a little hard to be around right now—but he just got an are you fucking kidding me look from her. She looked tense, drawn, and troubled beyond her years. And beside Dean, Sam was leaning over his knees, hands clasped, staring at the floor with a stiff jaw. The three of them were all completely silent, and after a couple seconds, Dean put his face in his hands, overwhelmed with life, with responsibility, with this situation they were facing in the midst of the apocalypse crisis.

He was beyond tired, beyond exhausted. He barely had anything left to give and yet life kept coming and demanding more and more of him. Being around his siblings was a constant reminder of how screwed up he was, how much he had to lose, how much of a constant failure he was. He could feel how unhappy and disappointed his siblings were with him, and he just couldn't take it. Not when he remembered himself at five years old and being the one who'd taught the two of them how to walk—watching them take their first steps and being there to catch them when they fell over. Not when he remembered how Alex always used to run to him when she was in her pre-school years, knowing he'd catch her and whirl her around in circles. Not when he remembered Sam coming to him for help with math homework, and then telling him he was the best big brother in the world. It hurt to remember all that stuff because right now he felt like the two people he loved most in the world were depending on him but he couldn't even depend on himself anymore.

Feeling overwhelmed with growing despair and emotion, Dean stood up, grabbed his jacket, heard Sam stand up, too. "Dean, don't leave again," he pleaded, to which Dean turned back, held a reassuring hand out, glanced at his sister, whose expression was unreadable.

"I just—I just need some space, okay?" he asked, trying not to sound as broken as he felt. "I'll be in the car." Sam's expression still begged Dean not to go, but Dean left anyway.

And so the siblings went their separate ways.

Dean would go to the Impala and sit in the driver's seat, a place where he felt like he'd spent half his life. He would stare straight ahead all night, alone, but by choice—sleepless and depressed, questioning his entire life and wrestling with the choice he had to make. Trying to figure out a way to protect his family, but not sure if it were possible anymore.

Alex would go to the shower. She'd sit down underneath the stream of hot water and wrap her arms around her legs—and there, she'd freak out about the pure soul she'd forfeited, wonder if she ruined a chance to defeat the devil and save her brothers. Wonder what the hell was going to happen with herself and Cas after that night. She'd think how unfair it was that Paul was dead. She'd despair at how distant she felt from Dean.

And Sam. He would watch his siblings go in opposite directions and remain uncertain of what to do. He'd go to the couch and crack open a book and stare at it unseeing, unable to concentrate, unable to think straight. He'd remain unsure as to why Dean was being so horrible, unsure as to
what had Alex so upset. Sam would think about the way Castiel had looked at her, about the fact that the angel had saved her life that night.

And when Alex came out of the bathroom, dressed in a pair of jeans and her old gray hoodie, the twins wouldn't speak a word. She would just crawl into one of the beds and curl up, facing away from him. And Sam would accept her silence sadly and wonder when his family had become such a disastrous wreck. He'd wonder how to fix it, then wonder if it were fixable at all.

A solitary figure in a tan trench coat stood on a rocky bluff where a lone, forgotten cypress tree overlooked the city of Babylon. At his side, Castiel held the bare end of the branch he'd broken off. He gazed at the beauty of creation around him. The sun was just beginning to rise here in Babylon, casting a soft pink glow over the barren, rocky landscape and the still-sleeping city. And he lost track of time, he lost track of everything. He could only think of Alex, could only curse himself for his fault in destroying her status as a pure soul—and was horrified that he hadn't even thought about that or realized it until Dean had said what he had. Cas debated with himself, thought hard about how to make it right, or if it could be made right. Tried to trace through the time that he'd known Alex, tried to pinpoint exactly when the way he thought of her had turned into this, into something that seemed impossible to walk away from.

He thought, briefly, about how Dean might react if he found out everything Castiel had done with Alex. Nothing that he didn't deserve, he thought wryly, guiltily, and he saw Alex's face flash before him in his mind's eye. His heart sank in self-loathing. How had he dared to do what he'd done? And why did he want to do it again? To crush her against himself and bury himself inside of her, find that peak of perfection and bliss again, hear her moan for him. He shut his eyes, unable to stop himself from thinking these wretched, dishonorable things. He felt despicable and confused.

His body felt awful, his head was beginning to hurt and pound, as if there were someone repeatedly hitting him there with a blunt object. His chest hurt, too, where the bullet had buried itself. Still, that pain almost made him feel better. It was a reminder that he had finally saved Alex instead of failed her. But the momentary triumph wasn't enough. He'd stopped a bullet, but he'd seen the future where he'd put one in her, ended her life after failing to protect her from a deadly Croatoan bite. It haunted him. And his logical side told him that staying away was the answer, yet every other part of him screamed in protest at the thought of leaving her. As the wound in his chest pulsed in pain, he thought about how he would do anything to be the one whose life ended in 2013. That if at all possible, he would trade places with her. And maybe somehow he could. Perhaps, knowing what the future held, he could circumvent it. It was a small hope and a foolish one, but it was all he had. He had done what he'd done, and now he was left to live with the consequences, try to repair the damage done. But he didn't know how. How could make make this right? He'd dishonored the woman who he loved.

Loved. He bowed his head. He didn't even know how to love, and yet his spirit confirmed it inside of him time and time again. That love was the thing tying him to her, was what had been growing in him from the first time he'd laid eyes on her almost three years ago. And he supposed that was the fated moment that had damned him, both of them. That gray October day when he had first seen her, this beautiful little dark-haired human with eyes like secrets.

When Castiel looked up, he became aware of how long he'd been standing there—the sun was now well above the horizon—and pushing his torment aside, Castiel went back to the motel—his wings invisibly rending the air apart as his molecules sailed through space and time, his grace carrying him back to where the Winchesters would be waiting. "I have the stake," he announced as he arrived in the motel room—and then he realized the motel room was dark and quiet. His human eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he recognized Alex's sleeping form curled up on one of the beds.
On closer examination, he saw that she wore jeans and a gray hoodie now. Her hair was damp and she looked peaceful and beautiful to him. A wave of sadness rippled through him.

"Hey, Cas," Sam said softly, almost startling Cas, who turned around to see Alex's twin was sitting on the couch, holding a book.

Cas approached him, set the stake down, glancing around, suppressing his thoughts for the moment. "Where's Dean?"

"Out in the car being a loner," Sam said, trying to chuckle, to sound light. But to Castiel, Sam sounded defeated and hopeless. Sam set the book he'd been holding down, stared at it, then shook his head. "He's been really... different lately, Cas."

Castiel sat in the chair next to the couch and looked at Sam intently. "Different how?"

Sam thought a minute. "I dunno. It's like there's no fight left in him. Like he's given up on everything."

Cas frowned, paused, trying to understand what Sam's somewhat vague statement meant. "What are you saying?"

Sam shrugged his hands up uncertainly. "I'm not sure. I guess I'm just worried." Sam let out a heavy breath. "You know, sometimes I forget that he went to Hell and was there for decades, torturing souls." Sam clasped his hands together, looking at them morosely. "He's so much more brutal than he used to be. Maybe that's why, huh?"

"Hell is a terrible place," Castiel replied darkly, remembering.

Sam turned, looked at Cas fully. "You saw him there, didn't you?" he asked.

Cas looked at Sam silently, recalled the Dean he'd seen in Hell. He felt himself sour at the memory. "Yes." Cas knew that he couldn't tell Sam the details, that it was all too awful to comprehend. So he remained vague. "Dean was... broken in every way imaginable. At the time, I didn't understand why Heaven demanded his rescue," he told Sam, then shook his head, almost smiled as he thought about everything the Winchesters had changed his mind about. How intrepid and determined they were, but especially Dean. He looked at Sam again. "But I understand now."

Sam was quiet and thinking hard. "Be honest with me, Cas. Do you really think Dean and I can really find a way to cut this whole Michael Lucifer battle royale thing short?"

Cas looked at Sam, meaningful in a quiet way. "If anyone can, it's the two of you."

Sam was quiet and thinking hard. "Thanks, Cas," Sam finally managed. He cleared his throat. "Should I, uh, go get him?" he asked, referencing Dean.

Castiel shook his head. "No. Not yet. You all need rest."

"Yeah. Sleep sounds good," Sam said, chuckling again in that airy, slight way he had. "Haven't had any in a day or two." Sam looked at Cas, and there was a long silence. Sam made a face, sort of like he was trying to figure something out. "And, uh, are you just gonna... hang out here all night?" he asked.

Cas looked at him in slight surprise at the question. "I'll watch over you," he said, as if Sam should have known that.
But instead, Sam's eyes narrowed a little bit. "...right." Sam looked over at Alex's sleeping form over on the bed, then back at Cas, and his voice lowered a little, his tongue darted out to wet his lips. "Hey, Cas, don't take this the wrong way but... I gotta do this, man. After everything I've, uh, seen. I have to." Cas frowned, not understanding what he meant. Sam leaned a little closer, over his knees, his expression intent and assertive. "See, Alex is my sister—my baby sister—and, I know I've done a crap job of looking out for her in the past but—I mean, it's still my job, you know?" Sam looked like he felt a little awkward at this point, or unsure of how to word himself. "And I'm not judging or anything, I just wanna know—are you and Alex...?" he trailed off, decided to rephrase himself. "I just wanna know what your intentions are."

"My... intentions," Cas repeated, eyes narrowing in confusion. Didn't fathers ask this of men who were courting their daughters?

"Yeah," Sam confirmed. "I just don't want to see her get hurt. And that might seem wrong coming from me..." he trailed off and regret and shame filtered across his face. He pushed it aside. "But... when it comes down to it, she's one of the most important things in the world to me."

Castiel bowed his head a little. "Yes. Me too."

Sam's expression wavered a little, hints of surprise and maybe appreciation filtering across his face. "Yeah. You, you took a bullet for her tonight, man. I believe you." He thought for a long, quiet moment, then looked over at Alex again, and his expression became a little tighter, almost sad. "But protecting her from crazy people isn't enough. You, you don't know her like I did, Cas. This tiny little girl who could never say a word. She had no friends, a crazy, horrible childhood... pretty much everyone disappointed her, hurt her, let her down..." he trailed off. "Myself included." Sam's eyes seeming to flicker over memories and he seemed regretful and weary. "I just... I want her to be happy. And be okay."

Cas nodded, his eyebrows moving together just a little in deep thought. "I understand."

Sam shook his head, looked at Cas in a way that demanded Cas's full attention. "I don't want you to 'understand', Cas," he said intensely. "I want you to promise me." He paused for effect, not taking his gaze off of the angel for a second. "That you won't hurt her or walk out on her. If the two of you are gonna... pursue some kind of relationship or whatever... you gotta promise me, man. You gotta let me know that I can trust you with her."

Cas was surprised—not only at Sam's straightforwardness in addressing him like this, but at the sheer amount of respect and love he could hear that Sam held for Alex. Cas had a new appreciation for Alex's twin, who was currently waiting expectantly for Cas's reply. This was not the same Sam who had brutally struck his sister across the face in a fit of demon-blood induced rage. This was a Sam who was worried for his sister, and rightly so. The angel took a deep breath, answered Sam's original question. "My intentions are to always keep her safe, Sam."

Sam didn't look like he was satisfied with that, his eyebrows were raised expectantly and Cas paused heavily, deep in troubled thought. He couldn't explain to Sam the entirety of the situation, how complicated it was. How Alex was the most important thing to him, how he loved her and shouldn't. How she consumed his every thought and desire. How he had all but fallen from grace for her and with her in the Vatican earlier that very night. How he didn't know what to do or how to proceed from here, only that he had to keep moving forward.

You gotta promise me, man. You gotta let me know I can trust you with her.

And with every good intention despite his many doubts and fears, Cas looked up from the floor, met Sam's waiting gaze. Spoke it aloud. "I promise you, Sam."
Sam let out a heavy breath, shoulders relaxing visibly. "Yeah. Okay. Good." He looked at Alex again, and Castiel followed his gaze. "Good," Sam repeated. And Cas felt even more uncertain than ever, sitting there in the quiet darkness, trying to determine his intentions for the girl asleep across the room from him.

What time was it? It was light outside. Alex opened her eyes groggily and squinted, realizing she was curled into her arm—she must have knocked the pillow off the bed, she did that all the time—she turned her head up and she saw Cas, sitting there beside her on the bed, a hand on his face and head, like he was trying to soothe a headache. Waking up fast, surprised to see him, not even remembering when she had fallen asleep—she had wanted to try and stay awake to see Cas whenever he returned from Babylon—but apparently she'd crashed. Alex was blinking the sleep out of her eyes and pushing herself up and trying to see if he was okay, all in the span of two seconds. "Cas, hey... you okay?"

He looked at her, clearly not feeling himself. "Everything hurts. My head especially."

"O-oh..." Alex commented slowly, then nodded, gave him a little wincing smile, knowing exactly what the issue was. "Welcome to your first hang over," she told him sympathetically.

"I don't like it," he complained pitifully.

She resisted the urge to reach out and ruffle his hair. Instead shrugged kind of helplessly, told him, "no one likes it."

A loud Sam-snore broke the silence and Alex craned her neck sideways, saw Saw asleep on the couch, still sitting up, his mouth open, head lolling toward his shoulder. She noticed a piece of a pale tree branch on the coffee table in front of her sleeping brother. "You got the stake, huh?" she asked Cas, glancing back at the angel who was clearly suffering badly from the headache—and getting an idea, Alex got up, walked across the room.

"Yes," Cas answered her, watching her curiously, his preoccupation with his head pain lessening. "What are you doing?"

She fiddled with the motel coffee pot, poured some coffee grounds into a clean filter. "Making you some coffee," she said, and pushed the brew button. The machine began to groan as it started to brew. "Helps with hangovers."

"I'm past help," he said dismally, prompting Alex to look back at him appraisingly, trying to see if he were joking or not. She didn't think so—he looked positively depressed.

"You're being a little over dramatic, aren't you?" she asked, trying to keep her tone light and teasing, but he only looked down. She went over to him, sat down on the bed across from him. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head, his gaze on the floor in avoidance. "Nothing."

Alex looked at him hard, unrelenting in careful appraisal. "Nothing?" she prompted, in a tone that suggested she didn't believe him at all and wanted him to tell her. He glanced up at her, those bright blue eyes locking on hers and captivating her. Suddenly reminded of when those eyes had stared into hers last night—and everything else, the knowledge that she had been with him—the memories of what he'd done to her—she became flustered and looked away.

"So, uh, w-when did you get back?" she asked him, fidgeting a little, glancing at the coffee maker, silently urging it to brew faster.
"Several hours ago," he told her.

So, he'd been here all night, close to her as she slept. She felt the awkwardness abate a little as she thought of him sitting there beside her for hours, feeling bad with a headache but remaining close to her, watching over her like he always did. She then noticed that the bullet hole and bloodstain were gone from the trench coat. "Is your… is the wound all right?" Maybe that was what he seemed so torn up about, she thought, but then from his reaction, she realized that didn't seem to be it. He nodded distractedly, not seeming to be concerned about it one way or another. He wouldn't really look at her, obviously distressed about something.

Frowning softly in concern, Alex watched him for a minute, then glanced back at the coffee pot, which had enough coffee in it now to at least pour a cup. She got up, bothered that Cas was closed off and unresponsive. But maybe she should have expected as much after what had happened. God, what had happened. She tried not to remember it, because it was so erotic and Sam was just a few feet away and the memories of Cas last night made her feel fuzzy and warm and Jesus, get a hold of yourself, Alex. She poured a mug of coffee and took it to Cas, who accepted the mug and stared at the steam rising up off the dark liquid. Alex sat back down across from him, looking at him questioningly, her more R-rated thoughts fading away as she saw how miserable he looked.

"I've been thinking," he said tersely in that quiet, low voice of his, and his gaze faltered away, his brows knit together, his eyes scanned back and forth over the floor by his feet. He held the mug with two hands, his elbows rested on his knees. He finally looked back up at her in worried, earnest uncertainty. "Should we... should I marry you?"

Not what she was expecting to hear. Alex's jaw dropped. "W-what?" She sat back a little, as if the question had physically blown her backwards. Had she heard him right? Her voice lowered into a whisper, like it was scandalous. "Marry?"

He seemed even more confused at her shocked reaction. "Isn't that... what you're supposed to do?" he asked. "Would it make things right?"

"Make what things right?" she asked, aghast and caught off guard. Did he think because they'd had sex he was obligated to walk down an aisle with her…? She couldn't believe her ears.

Cas looked sickened and resigned, his next statement blew her even further away. "Alex, I defiled you." "Wha—?" she stuttered out. Sam snorted a little, startling the couple—and they watched as Sam shifted, smacked his mouth in his sleep a couple times and settled back down. Alex leaned closer to Cas, speaking in an even lower whisper now. "Defiled, Cas?"

He looked uncomfortable and reluctant, looked down at the black coffee mug in his hands. "I took your innocence. Your… purity." That was the last straw. "Are you fricking kidding me?" He had to be shitting her, he knew her better than that right? "Come on Cas. I'm not some... some delicate petal of whatever bs you're telling yourself. I mean, have you met me? I've ripped apart hundreds of things that go bump in the night. I've stolen, lied, cheated, killed…" she stopped, thought about it, the things she'd said sinking in. She shook her head slowly, staring into middle distance somewhere to the side of Cas. "I am not innocent. I was never a 'pure soul'…" she looked at him again doubtfully. "How could I have been?"

"You were," he said simply. "And now… you're not." He seemed like he'd been thinking about it all night. "It's entirely my fault." He sounded very final and jaded and he sighed unhappily, then
raised his mug up to his lips, tasted the coffee and frowned, made a face. "This tastes very awful."

Alex just stared at him, speechless and a little annoyed, unsure of how to even begin to respond, a million and one thoughts swirling around in her mind. And then the motel door opened, in walked Dean, who looked tired, like he hadn't slept. The first thing he did was kick one of Sam's legs out from under him, tell him, "wake up, Gigantor."

As Sam's eyes opened and he blinked, bleary eyed, fallen half over, Sam muttered "Huh wha?" and then protested with a complaining groan. "I just fell asleep."

Dean turned his attention to Cas. "When did you get back?" he asked, neither hostile or friendly.

"A little bit ago," Castiel said vaguely. Alex eyes darted to Cas—she didn't miss the fact that Cas had just fibbed to Dean about how long he'd been there. Smart guy, she thought.

Dean didn't catch the lie. He just crossed his arms, raised his eyebrows, pursed his lips. "You got the magic tree branch?" he asked expectantly.

"Yes," Cas said, and with a nod indicated the stake of wood that was on the coffee table.

"Okay, so who ventilates this bitch?" Dean asked, swaggering over to the stake, picking it up and turning it over in his hand, then looking at Cas. "Could the padre do it?"

"Pastor Gideon?" Sam asked for clarification, running a tired hand through his bedhead hair.

"Yes. More than likely he's our only option," Cas agreed, standing up, coffee still in hand. And Alex watched him from where she still sat on the bed, thought how commonplace he looked right now, standing in the motel room holding a mug of coffee. He looked normal and everyday, like this could be him in the mornings. Every morning. And she was suddenly imagining him reading the paper and sipping at coffee and looking at her fondly across a table, where she'd be sitting with a bowl of cereal, wearing some pajamas. She didn't even own a pair, but maybe, someday, she would.

"All right, so go get him," Dean told Cas, a little rudely, and Alex's little daydream was interrupted.

Patient as ever, Cas set his mug down on the coffee table. "I can't. The Whore is with him right now—I already checked." Cas was cautioning. "We'll have to be careful. Approach him when he's out of her grasp. If she finds out he knows… or that we know… it won't be good for anyone."

Dean looked displeased. "Great, so we sit around and twiddle our thumbs all day waiting."

"Yes, precisely," Cas replied, then added in, distractedly, "though the thumb twiddling is unnecessary."

"It's an expression, Cas." Dean said in a decidedly patronizing tone.

Fed up with his horrible attitude, Alex gave him dirty, annoyed look. "Could you be a little less of a dick?" she asked bitterly. "You're giving me a headache."

Dean's eyebrows raised in a falsely surprised expression. "Oh, am I?" Glibly, he swept his arm out, indicating the way out of the room. "Door's right there if you don't like the conversation."

She stared him down—wounded, unsure how the hell he could be such a jerk to her, why he had to act that way—and trying to cover up her pain, she muttered something like "f*cking douchebag" under her breath and took him up on his offer, surprising everyone when she left and slammed the
Alex sat on the back of the Impala, feet up on the trunk, arms wrapped around her legs. The sky was overcast and the air was chilly. The air carried a damp feeling with it, and the grey clouds overhead seemed heavy with rain that wasn't falling yet. She'd walked out a minute ago, was trying to calm down. She wanted to scream or hit something. She had never been so frustrated with so many things and all at once. Dean, who was currently in first place for the dick of the year award. Cas, ambivalently proposing marriage because he apparently regretted having sex with her or… something. Sam—well, Sam actually was on her good side right now.

She took in a deep breath, closed her eyes, let the breath out. She remembered how sometimes, in the past—a past that seemed so simple and wonderful in comparison to the world now—sometimes Dean would park the car in the middle of nowhere, the three of them would sit on the hood and watch the stars silently. Throw back a beer or two. Smoke a joint. Usually nothing was said. Those used to be her favorite times, especially when she'd been mute. It had felt like the safest and best place in the world, when it was just them, the galaxies above, and a quiet, deserted country road. At those times, she'd known that she was with the only other two people in the world who knew what it was like to be her. They had all just gotten each other and everything had been okay. Dean sometimes nudged her, pointing out a shooting star or a planet, knowing it would make her smile. She opened her eyes finally to a bleak world that paled in comparison to her memories. Where was that Dean? Who was this angry, cagey, restless, hopeless man who was increasingly unrecognizable to her? Where was the older brother who used to crack a grin at her in the mornings and tell her 'mornin' sunshine,' and call her baby girl and sweetheart when she got down in the dumps? Where was the Dean who used to get upset if someone even looked at her mean? Why was he pushing her away like this?

She heard footsteps shuffling toward her and she knew it wasn't Dean—he marched—and it wasn't Sam—he loped. Cas. She turned her head slightly, and saw him. He came to a stop beside the trunk, beside her. She felt a little embarrassed about how she'd stormed out and sheepishly looked away from his gaze. "Are you all right?" Cas asked.

She wasn't all right. "I'm…" she trailed off. Cas waited, Alex sobered, grew introspective. Shook her head and shrugged just slightly. "Dean wasn't always like that to me," she said, unsure how else to say it. She looked at him, despairing, but trying to be brave. "What is happening to him, Cas? To my family?" She chewed the inside of her cheek anxiously for a second as she looked away again, scowling in notic in particular. "I haven't even told them about what happened in Heaven."

"You mean seeing your father?" Cas prompted after a second and she half-nodded confirmation.

"I mean, even if I'd had the chance—" Alex stopped short and soured. "I kind of don't even want to talk to Dean right now." She felt pure, unadulterated grief at how true that was and how true what she was about to say was. "I don't even wanna look at him right now." She stared into far distance, at the closed diner across the street. "I want to help you," Cas told her, and he sounded so heartfelt and sweet and unsure. "How can I help you?" he asked.

Touched and surprised, Alex softened, looked at him. Managed the beginnings of a smile when she saw how genuine he was. "I don't know. Maybe give Dean a personality transplant?" she rolled her eyes halfheartedly at her own joke, was surprised when his expression softened. "Actually," Alex started, paused, thought about it. "There is something you could do for me."

"Of course," Castiel said immediately. "Whatever you wish."
Whatever she wished, huh? She pushed the more R-rated responses away from her mind, cleared her throat. She actually couldn't believe she was asking Cas to do this for her. "You uh, you could tell him for me? About Dad and what he said. I mean, I told you you everything, so... you just tell him what I told you."

There was a considering pause. Then an affirmative, "Of course." Then appearing to be rueful about something as his eyes looked into hers morosely. "Things must truly be different between Dean and yourself."

Alex looked at him uncertainly, unwrapped her arms from her legs. "What do you mean?"

"You used to tell him everything," Cas said simply, factually.

And Alex remembered that Cas had watched over her for much longer than she usually gave thought to. Knew her life better than she thought he did. It made her feel strange. But he was right, and she nodded sadly, criss-crossed her legs to sit like that, shrugging her eyebrows up briefly in an ambivalent, defeated expression. "Yeah. Now I don't want to tell him anything." She couldn't even begin to put into words how upsetting that was to admit. So she pushed the thought away and looked at Cas, who stood there with his hands hanging at his sides, his shoulders slumped forward. She temporarily forgot about Dean and she smiled fondly at awkward-as-usual Cas, then patted the spot beside her on the trunk. "Sit with me Cas," she coaxed. "Don't just stand there like a telephone pole."

He looked a little uncertain, but complied, and his legs hung over the end of the car. And she stole a couple glances at him, watched him as he looked at some birds that had gathered on a telephone wire strung across the motel parking lot. Having him near was comforting and her guard was down, even though there were a billion questions she had about him and them. And she suddenly blurted out, "Can angels even get married?"

He frowned a little, his eyes drifting downward and into middle distance. "I'm not sure. I didn't think that far ahead." He looked at her sidelong, and she saw the guilt that he felt about everything. Guilt, or maybe worse, regret. "I just thought... it might fix it."

"I don't understand what there is to fix," Alex said softly, staring at her lap tensely, then looking at him, feeling the sadness return. "Do you really regret it that much?"

He didn't answer her directly, only looked away where she was staring at his profile. "I should regret it. Who I am... it goes against everything." His jaw clenched a bit. "But I don't feel regret as much as guilt, I suppose." He seemed chagrinned at himself. "I'm sorry Alex. I can't imagine my emotional incompetence is easy for you to deal with." She didn't know how to reply, so she just reached over and held his hand briefly, giving it a squeeze. He finally looked at her, and she gave him an encouraging little smile.

"Cas, if anyone gets the feeling of not doing things right, it's me." She tried to think of how to say it better. "I overthink like crazy. You do too, pretty sure."

He nodded faintly, seeming to feel a little better. And then he looked at her plainly, in anxious curiosity. "So what what I did... it was all... correct?"

Alex bit the corner of her lip as she grinned self-consciously, put on the spot because yes—it had been amazing. "I'd say so," she said, almost playful despite her hot-skinned shyness.

And there on the trunk of the Impala for only birds on a telephone wire to see, an angel of Heaven and a twenty-seven-year-old hunter exchanged a bashful smile—Cas appeared distinctly boyish.
when his mouth quirked up to one side in a little smile just for her, and unconsciously, Alex's cheek moved down toward her shoulder as she tried to suppress her smile—it was an action that made her appear demure. And both of them were quiet for a minute, together in a surprisingly comfortable, if mutually thrilled silence. Because despite all the adversity and inner turmoil they faced, they both realized that the other didn't regret what they'd done together, only regretted the difficult circumstances and unknown future and the impossible obstacles they faced.

Alex's thoughts gravitated back to earlier subject matter and she sobered a little, even though remnants of the smile Cas had inspired in her remained. "I'm not the marrying type, Cas," she told him, then halted. "Or at least, I don't think I am." She hadn't even really thought about it, honestly. She'd grown up just hoping someone would someday look at her twice—she hadn't even gotten to the wedding fantasies like most little girls did. And she didn't really think Cas was proposing traditional marriage anyway. She got that an angel was bound to think sex out of marriage was wrong or something… so this was him trying to make an honest woman out of her in the only way he knew how. And that was endearing and thoughtful despite being a load of garbage at the same time. She couldn't really take him seriously about the whole marriage thing, but it still spoke volumes of how much he cared, and led her to ask the question she'd been sitting on for a little while now. Asking it was scary, but not asking it would be worse. "Cas... did you ever stop to think maybe we're... I don't know. Supposed to be together? Even if it's just for a few years?"

And the instant he looked at her, she knew he had. "But you'll die," he said softly.

Alex wasn't fazed, she barely reacted; she'd expected him to say that. She knew that was the one guarantee in this life… a one way ticket to the end. "Everyone dies, eventually."

He looked at her sadly. "Not me."

The motel door slammed just then, and Dean's gruff voice sounded off behind them. "Hey, get off my damn car," he said.

Turning, Alex frowned. "Where are you going?" she asked sort of guardedly, seeing his jacket, his keys, and his moody expression as she slid off the back of the car. Cas followed suit. Dean barely looked at either of them. "To get some friggin' food," he replied, and slammed the car door, started the car, and drove off without any further anything. He wouldn't come back for hours and hours.

While Dean was missing in action and off who-knows-where, Cas, Alex, and Sam shared a strange, tense, distracted day, waiting for him to resurface. Cas checked a couple times on the pastor and each time returned, shaking his head no, that Leah was still with him.

In an effort to pass the time and keep their minds off of their own individual miseries, Sam and Alex taught Cas how to play poker. The angel seemed mildly reluctant to learn it, commenting that it was a sin… and then he thought about it for a second and gave an almost cynical chuckle, agreed to be taught. He did surprisingly well, winning a couple times to the amusement of the twins. He even seemed to like it once he learned the rules. Sometime toward noon, Alex fell asleep next to Cas as the three of them played another hand of cards. Her eyes blinked sleepily and head nodded down onto his shoulder and both men looked at her in surprise when that happened. Cas and Sam's eyes met—and Sam didn't say a word, just let it go. She slept for almost five hours there against Cas, who didn't move once, but did ask Sam a couple times if so much sleep in the middle of the day was normal for her. He was obviously worried about her state of exhaustion. And Sam thought that was sweet, but still felt a little weird about all of it. He tried to keep himself busy while Alex used Cas as a human, er, no, angel pillow—he read some books, made some notes, paced around, thought about going to find Dean, but decided to stay put.

Hours passed. Dean didn't return until near sundown, wouldn't tell them where he went, only
"No," Pastor Gideon said, shaking his head for longer than needed. He sat across from Dean and Sam in the motel room. "She's my daughter."

"I'm sorry, but she's not," Dean said. "She's the thing that killed your daughter."

"That's impossible," the pastor told him immediately.

"It's not impossible," Alex told him somberly. She stood at the end of the couch, nearest to Sam. "Listen to your instincts, Padre." How many times had the Winchesters had this same conversation? With countless mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers who were struggling to accept that their loved one was a demon, was a creature, was a ghost. Pastor Gideon, who Cas had finally managed to catch when he was not with Leah, was putting a shaking hand to his face in grief and confusion.

Sam continued the line of reasoning Alex had started. "Deep down, you know it's not her," he told the pastor, whose face wrinkled up. He looked close to tears. "Look, we get it—" Sam said. "It's too much. But if you don't do this, she's going to kill a lot of people. And damn the rest to hell."

Dean picked up the stake and held it out to the Padre, who looked positively horrified. "It's just... why does it have to be me?" he asked. They'd already explained in detail, but he couldn't seem to accept any of it.

"You're a Servant of Heaven," Castiel said from where he leaned against the partition. Alex glanced at him.

"And you're an angel," the pastor protested, turning around halfway to look at Cas.

"A poor example of one," he replied somberly, and his eyes flickered up to Alex, who heard what he said and seemed saddened by it. Dean, still holding the stake out to the Padre, missed the significance of it.

The Padre turned back around and looked at the boys and their sister. It was like he was begging them to please, please, find someone else. Anyone else. "You're sure I'm the only one who can do this?" He asked.

"Yeah," Dean confirmed grimly, and the pastor looked away, put his face in his hands again. Dean looked at Sam, prompted him to say something with a jab of his hand.

Sam gave Dean an impatient glance, but did what his brother wanted. "We don't have any other leads, Pastor Gideon. Everyone else here in town is falling apart," Sam gently pleaded. "You can save people tonight. A lot of people. Please."

The pastor looked at them again, hesitating, but appeared to be resigning himself, steeling himself. "She has been different," he told them wearily. "And today, she threatened me. Said she'd name me as the next sinner if I didn't shut up." He looked grievous, almost at the point of tears. "Leah would never do that. Not my baby girl. She would never." The broken way he said that last part sent a hush over the room. Maybe the pastor had known longer than he really realized. He looked at Sam, then Dean, his face a mask of torment. "What you're asking me to do is... insane—you understand that, right?"

"Believe me, Padre," Dean said heavily, his eyes glancing in his brother's direction. "More than you know." Sam looked a little startled, and Alex felt her eyebrows raise just slightly, then the
twins exchanged a glance. "We'll be right there with you, okay?" Dean told the pastor.

"All right," the pastor agreed brokenheartedly, and took the stake up, looking at it sadly. "I'll do it. I'll do it."

Cas, who had been watching with a silent, conflicted expression, let out a heavy breath and walked out of the room, his hand to his head. Curious, Dean watched his back as he walked out of the motel room, then redirected his attention to the padre. "Great. Good. Listen, you take a few minutes, get yourself together."

Alex craned her neck, looking out the window even as Dean followed after Cas, a bag slung over his shoulder.

The angel was outside the motel, sitting on a bench in the neon cast of the motel lights, his hand on his head like he was in pain. "Whatcha doing out here, angel wings?" Dean asked, walking around to the back of his car and opening the trunk to put one of his bags there.

"Trying to recover from a headache," Cas said irritably.

"Ah," Dean said, remembering what Sam had said about Cas being drunk or hung over. "Gotcha." He shut the trunk of the Impala, put his hands in his pockets and walked up to the driver's side of the car, leaned there. Looked at Cas long and hard, reluctant to admit how much he owed the guy. But he knew he needed to thank him, that Cas deserved at least that much. Even if Dean didn't like it and was pretty damn convinced that the angel was bad news for Alex overall, today the guy had been the difference between her being alive or not.

Dean cleared his throat. "So listen," he said grudgingly. "I owe you big time. I know that. And I'm… just… thanks. I don't think I can ever make it up to you."

Cas's hands were now loosely clasped in front of him, he didn't really seem to hear Dean at all. "Dean," he said lowly. "There's something I need to tell you."

Oh shit. Dean was suddenly filled with a horrible foreboding feeling, he just knew Cas was gonna open his mouth and say he was in love with Alex. Voice lowering in caution and forewarning, Dean looked at Cas dangerously. "What."

And then Cas said the furthest thing from what Dean had expected. "Alex saw your father in Heaven."

Dean almost did a double take, his glare falling away. "Uh, what?"

"When she first died, when she became aware of herself in Heaven... your father appeared," Cas explained levelly, not looking at Dean, just staring ahead of himself.

"What, like some kinda hallucination?" Dean asked, beside himself in surprise.

"No," Cas replied. "It was him. Contacting her from across the veil somehow."

Dean wet his lips and held out a finger. "Okay, wait, wait, wait. Hold on." He was getting exasperated. "How do you even know—and why the hell are you telling me this, not her?"

Cas, unaffected by Dean's rising temper and voice, remained matter-of-fact. "She asked me to tell you, in her stead."

"And why the hell would she do that?!" Dean demanded.
Cas finally looked up at him, his gaze sad almost. "Dean, consider it. Would you allow anyone else to speak to her the way that you have been?" Those words shocked Dean into stillness and absolute silence. Cas looked away, continued. "She's upset with you, I believe."

Dean stood there lamely. Cas's question and subsequent comment had left him dismayed. "That's beside the point," Cas said, oblivious to or ignoring Dean's shocked reaction. "He warned her, Dean. He was cut off before he could tell her everything, but he said... 'Tell Dean it's not over, that the danger isn't gone, that Azazel planned to use you and Sam to—'"

Dean was hanging onto every word in rising terror. "To what?" he asked anxiously, and Cas shook his head, looking disturbed at a deep level and no longer meeting Dean's gaze.

"That's the question," the angel said, frowning again into far distance.

This was nuts. "Okay, even if that was my dad, even if—I mean Azazel is dead!" Dean protested vehemently. "Haven't heard from the bastard in years, I'm pretty sure it's over with!"

"Can we really take that chance?" Cas looked up at Dean dubiously. His loud anger faded away at the quiet and reasonable question. Dean maintained a grim and thoughtful silence for a minute—could this have happened at a better frigging time? The threat of the apocalypse hounding him day and night, the angels after himself and Sam, finding out Alex had no heaven, catching her and Cas cuddling on the floor after he'd come back from Heaven—all of that plus having seen 2014… you know, maybe the apocalypse and saying yes to Michael was a pretty good alternative to that whole mess he'd witnessed.

Tired and defeated and short on answers, Dean found himself looking to Cas for a solution, even though it made him uncomfortable. He looked at Cas in hesitant hopefulness. "You always know about this stuff, Cas. Do you know what my dad could have been talking about?"

Cas shook his head dismally. "No. If there was some plan, it's been kept secret from Heaven."

"Well how do we find out?" Dean asked. "I mean, how the hell did Dad even manage to get a message through to begin with?"

"I don't know," Cas said. He sounded like he was taking it hard, personal even. "I don't know anything."

Dean set his jaw, thought of how disappointed Dad would be. The thought of his father still out there somewhere, suffering and worried about the family and possibly knowing about some danger Dean had overlooked—he almost felt choked. Dean shook his head in bitter disgust at himself and his circumstance. "I always told myself I'd keep them safe, Cas. Look at me. I let them both get shot to death two days ago."

"I should have been watching over the three of you more closely," Cas said. Then let out a heavy, guilty-sounding huff. "Or at all."

Dean suddenly recognized something in Cas that he carried, too: that deep, undying feeling of responsibility for everything bad that happened to the ones he was responsible for. And that fact alone made him feel sorry for the angel. Dean looked down at the concrete beneath his feet. He felt incredible, resistant sadness filling him up as he thought about the message Cas had relayed about Dad. "I just... I was always so happy because I thought we dodged a bullet," he said softly, hollowly. "That Al sidestepped the whole 'demon's got a plan for your life' tango. That was supposed to just be Sam."
Again, Cas gave him a hooded glance. "If what your father said is true, we can't be too careful."

He was right. The nerdy little angel dude was right. Dean shut his eyes for a second, felt his stress level skyrocket. But besides that, he felt such deep, intense regret. Cas shouldn't be the one telling him this. It should be Alex. And instead of infuriating him, it made him surprisingly emotional. He just wished she would have told him herself. Maybe he'd pushed her and Sam further away than he'd thought or noticed. And Cas was right—Dean would sure as hell beat up any asshole who said even half of the shit he'd said to her lately.

As if tuning into his thoughts, Cas looked at him emphatically. "You're under a lot of stress, Dean. I know."

Dean attempted a smirk, a chuckle, as he kept his eyes on the ground, walked forward toward the bench. "That's putting it pretty damn lightly, Cas."

He let out a deep breath, sat down beside Cas and leaned heavily on his knees. He got a slightly surprised look from the angel. "Ya know, at first I find out I'm Michael's vessel—okay, I can deal with that. But then I find out Sam's Lucifer's vessel... and friggin' see the future where he's being worn to the prom, where Alex is dead... you're some cynical bastard with no hope left... I mean, all because I wouldn't say yes."

Dean looked at Cas, full of doubt and uncertainty. "I need you to level with me Cas. Should I really keep trying to ditch out of it? If that's what happens?"

Cas thought about it deeply, his brows knit together closely. "I used to believe that it wasn't possible to change the future. But I think... I hope... that I was wrong about that." He paused. "Do I think you should say yes to Michael? No. There's too much at risk, too much to lose."

Not really what Dean wanted to hear. Well, he wasn't sure what he wanted to hear. All of it sucked, and he felt even more hopelessness settle over him. "Can I really just keep saying no forever?" he asked. He honestly didn't think so. "They're gonna start coming after everything I've got. It's only a matter of time."

Cas looked at him with a dark, concerned expression. "I know, Dean. I'll help in whatever way I can." He let out a tired sigh, looked out at the motel parking lot. "I know that your burden feels impossible," Cas said. "But you can't give up."

For some reason, that seemed pretty rich coming from Cas. In fact, it almost sounded like Cas had already given up. "Buddy, aren't you preachin' to the choir?" Dean asked. "You find out God doesn't care and you go off and drink a whole building full of booze and now you're sitting here with a hangover the size of Mongolia looking depressed as hell... doesn't take a genius to figure out you feel as shitty and hopeless as I do."

"It's the headache," Cas said in a distracted, bad-tempered tone, and Dean, muttering "sure" got up and went to the car, reached in and grabbed a bottle of aspirin.

"Heads up." He tossed the bottle to Cas, who caught it and looked at the label glumly.

"How many should I take?"

"You? You should probably just down the whole bottle."

"Thanks," Cas said stoically.

"Yeah, don't mention it." Dean looked at Cas from the corner of his eye, felt a surprising amount of empathy for the guy, was reminded of how much he had helped, already. He knew the reason Cas
was suffering from a hangover from hell. "Hey, I've been there," he told the angel. "I'm a big expert on deadbeat dads." He shook his head, again wondering about Alex seeing Dad in heaven, wondering how traumatic that had to be for her. He still didn't like that she'd told all of that to Cas and been seeking comfort from his arms—but maybe Dean's crappy attitude had pushed her there. He would get to the bottom of all of that, later. Right now just wasn't the time. He refocused on Cas, who looked miserable. "So... yeah, anyway. I get it. I know how you feel, and it sucks."

Cas looked up at him and suddenly seemed really young and helpless to Dean. "How do you manage?"

Dean smirked a little. "Well, on a good day, you get to kill a whore." At Cas's less-than-amused expression, Dean rolled his eyes, sighed. "Oh, loosen up, Cas. Live a little." He straightened. "I'll be back with the rest of the gang in a minute or two. Don't go anywhere." Even as he went inside, he passed Alex, who was coming out and shrugging a jacket on over her hoodie. Dean looked at her appraisingly, but she avoided looking at him. She shut the door behind herself, and it was just her and Cas out in the chilly night.

"You okay?" she asked him as she approached, hands in the pockets of her jacket. Seeing that it was her, he stood up, seeming startled to see her.

He looked down at the pill bottle that he held in his hand. "Dean told me to take the whole bottle."

She followed his gaze to the bottle. "Headache still?" she surmised.

"Unfortunately," he said, his eyes capturing hers completely. They hadn't spoken much all day, even though they'd been together most of the time. Sam had been there, or she'd been asleep. And even though they'd reached some kind of truce there on the trunk of the Impala, there was still a lot tension and unspoken things—for Alex, anyway.

"I told Dean," Cas said, slipping his hands into his trench coat pockets, his stance mirroring hers. "What you asked me about."

"What you asked me about." Her eyebrows raised a little. "How'd he take it?"

Cas thought a minute. "He's... overwhelmed."

"Yeah," Alex said, almost smirking to herself. _Overwhelmed_ came with the job description of hunter. And after last night and all of the confused, jumbled emotions it had come with... Alex was overwhelmed, too. "I get that," she said. And she knew she'd have to play question-answer later with Dean, but for now, she felt relieved that Cas had taken care of that for her. She looked at the angel carefully, tried to figure out how Cas was feeling—he seemed pretty down. "And you?" she prompted. "How are you—really?"

He looked unsure of how to answer, had to mentally search for the answer. After a minute, he seemed to decide. "I'm overwhelmed, too." He said. His eyes held unfathomable amounts of pain, conflict, emotion. And she found herself remembering when she first met him, how emotionless he'd seemed, how unreachable—there was such a startling difference between that Castiel and this one. Hell, she never would have guessed in a million years that this would happen. That the angel in the trench coat—the one she'd shot at the first time she laid eyes on him—would be the one she'd have her first time with. But no matter what she would have guessed or not guessed, it had happened. And there was no taking it back, ever.

"Listen," she said, voice lowering, her eyes searching his. "I've been thinking about, um, last night." His jaw tightened for a second at the mention of it. "And I just don't want you to regret it,"
Alex told him emphatically, raising her shoulders up bravely. "Because... I don't." His expression flickered, she couldn't tell if he was touched by her statement or bothered by it. Alex stepped a little closer to him, looking up into his eyes. "I'm gonna die someday Cas," she told him bluntly. "I accepted that a long time ago." She knew if she wanted a clear answer, she had to be clear about where she stood. But her heart hammered up into her throat, and she was almost afraid to lay it on the line. The risk of rejection was so very great. But she saw no other option. She was at the point of begging and didn't have enough pride to stop herself. And maybe it was selfish or naive but it was how she felt. "And I... I'd honestly rather live a few years more and be with you than anything else." She said it out loud and realized how much she meant it, felt her eyes sting with emotion.

"Alex..." he spoke her name softly, became agonized and looked away, unable to bear the talk about her dying, about her valuing a few years with him over a long life otherwise.

"I mean it," she told him, getting emotional.

He shut his eyes closed for a second, his brows knit together, his expression so mournful. "I know you do." And he opened his eyes back up.

Their eyes met silently and Alex hung all her hope on what she said next. "So that leaves it all up to you, Cas," Alex said, trying valiantly to smile through her shining eyes. "What do we do now?"

His eyes slid up to hers slowly, and he looked afraid. "I am not going to let you die, Alex," he said, his voice full of intention and promise. "In two-thousand thirteen or any other year." And she thought that meant he was going to leave her now, that he was going to walk away in order to save her—and her heart sank. But then he touched the side of her face, his eyes softened, locked on hers. "I'll find a way to change it," he said with no shortage of great emotion. "If it's the last thing that I do." And she was stunned when he reached for her decisively and pulled her close at the waist, when he leaned down and kissed her in an achingly gentle way, when held his hand against her face tenderly. Her eyes fell shut, she melted into his embrace.

Inside the motel, Dean shoved some bottled holy water into his duffel bag—never hurt to be on the safe side—then he promptly froze when he glanced up at the window and saw Cas and Alex. He could have fallen over from the shockwave the sight sent through him. He felt all the blood drain out of his face even as the air in the room seemed to disappear.

Son of a bitch!
Son of a bitch! Dean Winchester almost had a stroke right then and there. He vaguely heard something drop—whatever he'd been holding (he didn't remember). His internal alarm was blaring at a deafening volume, all he could hear was that and the sound of his own blood pounding in his ears. For a single moment, he could only stare at the sight before him. He was shocked, completely shocked.

Under the flickering neon light of the motel sign, Castiel was kissing Alex. The two of them were close, too close, it almost looked like Alex was inside the damn trench coat—the angel had a hand cupped against her face, his free arm was wrapped around her waist pulling her flush against him, she rested her hands on his chest as Cas pressed a gentle kiss to her lips. The most shocking part of the entire sight for Dean was how unspeakably intimate and loving the embrace was. He couldn't think of any instance in his life where he'd seen a kiss quite like that one, hell, he'd never kissed a woman like that—and there was just something so frightening about that somehow. And that's when Dean realized what he found so disturbing about it: they looked like two people in love.

"Don't let it happen. Trust me. They'll undo each other. Destroy each other." The words that Dean of 2014 had told him echoed through his head violently and loudly. The shock was fading fast into anger, but more than just anger there was a deep and clawing dread, a sudden horrified fear that it was too late, that all of his suspicions had been so much more true than he had dared to think. And Dean suddenly found himself remembering what that damn cupid had said to him. "Like it or not Dean, some things are just meant to be!" No. Not this! It couldn't happen—for a million and one reasons, but most of all because it got his baby sister killed in the end. And the frigging irony wasn't lost on Dean: that Alex's guardian angel—the dude who was supposed to protect her—was knowingly doing something that would land her six feet under. That mother fucker.

Dean felt like something snapped in him. How dare that angel bastard? Cas knew, he knew that them being together or involved or whatever was what got Alex killed in the end and he was still out there, kissing her in the most invested and romantic way Dean had ever seen anyone kiss anyone. His stomach turned. "Think about it, Dean," Cas had said to Dean recently. "I don't feel things the way you feel them. I'm not human. I'm incapable of... that."

Incapable my ass, you fucking liar. That damn angel had all but sworn to Dean that he wouldn't let himself and Alex end up together, that he'd 'do anything' to prevent it from happening. Righteous anger and something like hatred coursed through Dean's veins as he watched the angel and his sister part, watched Cas take both of her hands in his, watched them look at each other in silence with indescribable, soft expressions on their faces. How long had this been going on?

Dean's fists were clenched, his nostrils were flared, his blood was boiling, and he couldn't just stand there anymore. He stormed out of the motel, not even bothering to close the door behind him, just flinging it open in a fit of rage, startling his sister and the angel. Alex backpedaled toward the Impala, letting go of Cas's hands and looking at her brother in almost fear—Cas looked at him sternly—but Dean was too busy charging into the space between them to care or notice. Dean grabbed Alex roughly by her upper arm, forcefully propelling her toward the back door of the Impala. "Ouch, Dean!" she protested, sounding surprised as she tried to pull her arm away.
He only gripped harder. "Just get in the damn car!" he thundered, staring down at her with a murderous glare. She stared up at him in complete shock and fear, and maybe any other time knowing he'd made her afraid would have upset Dean, but today? Today he wanted her to be scared, he wanted her to wake up, because what she was doing with Cas, whatever the hell it was—was dangerous and she should be scared. He hadn't saved her ass all these times over the years and kept her safe to watch her throw her life away.

Behind him, he heard Cas take a step closer. "Dean, what are you doing?" the angel asked, his question a mixture of genuine uncertainty and warning.

Dean's skin crawled at the sound of that voice and he turned slowly, craning his neck over his shoulder to look the jackass in the face. Dean's expression was challenging, his voice was low and menacing. "Does this look like any of your business, Cas?"

Cas's face darkened, he stepped closer. There was no mistaking the threatening tone in his deep voice. "Let go of your sister, Dean."

Dean did just that, so that he could turn around to Cas and get in his face. He was shaking, barely containing his wrath. "You got some damn nerve, Cas..." he said, and the image of Cas kissing Alex flashed through his mind and he remembered 2014 and his voice raised to an unrestrained roar. "I thought I could trust you!" he shouted accusingly and grabbed Cas's lapels as hard as he could. Cas looked unperturbed at the physical assault—his face only registered guilt, which only made Dean want to pummel him into the ground more. Sam appeared in the doorway, just in time to witness what happened next.

Alex grabbed onto Dean sort of uselessly, trying to pull him away from Cas. "Stop it Dean!"

Angry and riled past the point of clear thought, her brother threw his arm out, pushing her away a little rougher than he meant to. Alex was sent stumbling back toward the Impala from the force of the push. Cas's face went cold when Alex thudded up against the side of the car, and Dean realized he probably shouldn't have done that—but he didn't have a chance to say or do anything else. He was picked up by the shoulders like he weighed nothing and sent flying into the side of the motel where he collided back-first and then fell forward onto all fours.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Dean heard Sam shouting. Dazed, he looked up to see that Cas had gone to Alex, was touching her on either arm like he was checking to see if she was okay or not, then sending Dean a scalding, shocked, revolted glare, as if to ask 'how dare you?'

"What the hell is going on here?!" Sam demanded, looking from Alex and Cas to Dean, his expression a cross between angry and shocked.

Dean, who was picking himself up off the ground and more pissed off than ever at Cas, looked at his brother with a venomous glare as he vigorously dusted off his arms. "That's what I wanna friggin' know!"

Dean noticed the pastor was standing just outside the motel door and looking at the four of them in shocked uncertainty, holding the stake idly. Sam seemed aware of it too, glanced at Alex and Cas, then looked at Dean, lowered his voice. "Dean, now is not the time for this."

Dean looked at his brother in disbelief, his eyes narrowing. "You knew about this, Sam?" he asked, because there was a certain knowing look in Sam's eye.

His younger brother's face registered both guilt and annoyance, and he sidestepped answering the question. "Dean—come on. We have a job to do right now."
Dean felt hot anger pumping through his veins. "Forget it," he spat in disgust, and then gave a facetious little smile, looking at his brother, sister, and the angel, barely able to contain how much rage he was feeling at the moment. "You know what. You're right. Let's go kill something—" the smile fell away coldly, "before I murder one of you instead." Dean's jacket snapped sharply with the force in which he straightened it, his face twisting into an acidic scowl, and he proceeded to avoid looking anyone in the eye. "Everyone just get in the damn car already so we can get this over with," Dean barked, already on his way over to the Impala, too angry to think straight.

"No," Cas said, startling everyone.

"No?" Dean repeated, frozen with his hand on the car door handle, an incredulous, angry look on his face. Cas's expression was every bit as rigid and angry as Dean's, and even Alex was looking at him with surprise.

"We'll meet you there," Cas said with a deep finality that didn't leave any room for argument, his eyes hard on Dean's.

And Dean opened his mouth to tell him he sure as hell better not even think about—but Cas put a hand on Alex's shoulder and suddenly the two of them vanished into thin air, leaving Dean to stare, shocked into silence—but only for about two seconds. "Son of a bitch!"

They arrived across from the tiny old church on the darkened sidewalk—the light in the church steeple cast a soft glow into the foggy night. A few street lamps dotted the road in either direction, misty halos floating in the air every twenty feet. Alex seemed a little disoriented as Cas took his hand off her shoulder and came to stand in front of her, peered at her intently, unable to believe how carelessly and roughly Dean had shoved her aside a minute ago. "Are you all right?" he asked her, trying to catch her gaze.

"I'm f—I'm fine," she said unsteadily, and she was looking down, her eyebrows were moved together—she seemed shaken up and he reached out to her and was shocked when she flinched a little, looked up at him with wide, uncertain, and unmistakably frightened eyes. And Cas ceased to move, shocked at her reaction—he took in her elevated breathing, the expression on her face, the tense way she held her body.

She was scared, and his protective instincts skyrocketed. "Did your brother frighten you?" he asked, trying to come closer to her, but again she looked at him with wide, afraid eyes, she seemed to think about stepping back from him—and his stomach felt like it dropped. "I frightened you," he said as he realized it, horrified—remembering this was how she'd looked at him in the beginning, when she hadn't trusted him. A dismal feeling settling over him at the realization that his impulsive, violent reaction to Dean's outburst had scared her. He thought hard, fast, trying to rationalize what he'd done, understand it, even. All he'd seen was Dean push Alex too hard and Cas had felt such impossibly large amounts of indignant anger. He struggled to understand, looking at Alex for an answer. "Did I... overreact?"

Her eyebrows raised up a little. "Maybe a little?" she replied, both a question and an answer, like she wasn't sure either. "He hit the motel so hard—" she trailed off and Cas felt a clear sense of mortification. He had overreacted. He shouldn't have thrown Dean so hard, he should have thought before he'd taken action. "You could've really hurt him."

"I'm sorry," he told Alex earnestly, struggling to understand his actions, her reaction, his feelings and motivation. "I thought he hurt you and I... I acted. Without thinking." He looked down, becoming miserable as he thought about the irony of what he was about to tell her—because it seemed so foolish to say when he was endangering her by choosing to be close to her. But it was
the truth, it was all he'd ever tried to do. "I was trying to protect you."

When he said that, Alex came closer to him, touched his forearm, and he looked up at her again, torn. "I know you were," she told him, then she looked at her hand, examining his arm, maybe thinking of how that arm she grasped wasn't his at all, or hadn't always been. She'd grown quieter. "I just… sometimes I forget. How strong you are." Her eyes raised to meet his, and he saw a quiet sadness there; an uncertain vulnerability. "How different you and I are from each other."

Cas felt as if the sadness in her eyes reached out and brushed against him, leaving an ache somewhere beneath his ribs. He had known that for a long time. How very different they were. He knew it better than she did. Still, hearing her say it, knowing that she realized it too… left him feeling closer to her somehow instead of further away.

He thought back to the time when he'd measured the distance between them in the space of his mind. He thought back to the time when he'd watched her for that silent year before he'd obtained his vessel. He'd always known, especially then, that they were from separate worlds and different realms. In the beginning he hadn't imagined or thought that would ever change—he had been incorporeal light and Grace, totally separate and removed from humanity—above it, watching with interest and fondness but no real connection to the people who inhabited the earth. And Castiel had viewed himself as just another guardian angel charged with watching over a human—only, he had discovered that this one wasn't quite like the others. He'd known, increasingly, that this one, this Alex Winchester, was different. He'd been drawn to her and protective of her by instinct—she'd always seemed worthy of safeguarding. Deserving of her voice. And even back then, when he had been nothing but a flash of light in her peripheral vision, when she'd been impossible for him to reach out and touch—even then she'd called forth reactions and instincts out of him that nothing else and no one else ever had.

Just like today. When he'd seen her oldest brother push her away roughly—it had triggered something in him and he'd lost his mind for the space of two seconds—it had made Cas remember the time Sam struck her and how he'd done nothing to stop it, remember how she flinched away from her father and how he was powerless to change that. Maybe it was because of those things, of those times he had let her get hurt, been unable to stop her from being hurt that Cas had felt so much protective rage well up. Maybe that was why he'd so readily thrown Dean against the motel without even thinking.

He reflected with a great amount of discomfort how emotional and unstable he had become—he was piloted by how he felt, he gave in to everything he felt good or bad, at the cost of the Winchester family, at the cost of Alex. Perhaps this was all a huge mistake—could he really take the chance on her life? What if he couldn't find a way to change her future?

"Cas? What is it?" Alex asked, and he came out of the fog of his thoughts, saw her looking up at him, her eyebrows pressing in together slightly, her eyes searching his. And as he thought of how beautiful she was, the same place hurt again beneath his ribs. He had no choice but to change her future—he wouldn't leave her, no, he couldn't leave her. He'd meant what he told her earlier: He would find a way to change the future, to save her, even if it took everything he had. He looked at her, the memory of her giving herself to him so overpowering and overwhelming, leaving him awash in disbelief that she had wanted him like that, had trusted him like that, had given that to him, had taken him to a place deserving of the name paradise.

Feeling too many emotions to bear, he took her hands again, speechless. And he thought of her thudding against the car again, he thought of John Winchester pushing her around when she was younger and he shook his head, feeling agonized. "Dean shouldn't be rough with you like that."
Her eyes lowered a little, there was no disguising that she was upset about it. "He never has been before," she said faintly. "I think… I think it was an accident." She paused, their eyes met. He hoped it was. "Listen," Alex said, her voice was soft and introspective. "Dean can be a huge douchebag sometimes. But he's my huge douchebag. At the end of the day, he's my big brother. He's not perfect. Not close." She paused, her lips curved up lopsidedly into something like a reluctant, if fond, smile. "Not even close. If I was strong enough I probably would have thrown him against a building, too." Her little smile faded, she thought hard. "Point is, he can be a pretty horrible person to be around sometimes but… his heart's in the right place." She sounded weary and grudging about what she said, like she accepted it but at the same time didn't like it. "He's just... trying in the only way he knows how to keep me safe."

Cas felt a surge of concern. The same could be said for him. That he was just attempting to keep her safe the only way he knew how. He looked down at their hands, saw how their fingers entwined. Her fingers tightened in Cas's. "He can't know Cas, about… what we did. Together. In the library."

Cas brushed a thumb over her knuckles, his eyes came up to hers slowly. "I know." She seemed physically affected by those two words, or maybe it was the touch—he saw her chest rise and fall faster than before, her eyes flickered back and forth between his.

"He wouldn't understand," she told him, her voice softening in volume but rising slightly in pitch as her expression grew more emotional.

"I know," Cas repeated.

"He's probably gonna try to kill you right now as it is," she said, then paused, the slightest amount of reluctant amusement flitting across her face. "Try being the operative word." She looked down at their hands, her fingers loosened a little, she seemed to grow somber and slightly distressed, deeply thoughtful. "I'm sorry Cas."

"For what?" He asked, and she looked up at him again, upset. He could see how much so by the way her forehead was tense and wrinkled, her brow furrowed, her mouth held tensely.

What she said stunned him. She shook her head, looked up and away, seeming guilty and troubled. "I got you kicked out of Heaven… got you shot today trying to protect me… got you in trouble for giving me my voice back..." her eyes came back to him. "You never did tell me much about that." She sounded like she was concerned and curious, hesitant to ask it directly. And Cas didn't want her to know what he had lost to give her the ability to speak. If she felt guilty for it now, without knowing, she couldn't know the full story. "Anyway," she said wearily, "I guess what I'm trying to say is that all I've ever done is mess you up. And I'm sorry. I just... I don't like seeing you in pain or having a hard time."

Cas was shocked to hear that she thought she was to blame for any of those things, and he quickly corrected her, feeling almost hurt that she could assume she bore any guilt in any of those circumstances. "Alex, those things happened because of my choices." He paused. "I don't regret them." He tightened his grip on her hands, thinking maybe he could convey how precious she was to him, how blameless she was in all of this. How he would do it all again without question or hesitation. "None of those things are your fault."

Her eyes were dark and full, catching the light off the church steeple. "You sure about that?" she asked him quietly.

"Yes," he replied without hesitation.
She stared at him with eyes that were soft and filled with some kind of disbelief or wonder. Every part of him responded to the sight of her so vulnerable and trusting there in front of him. And even as she was stepping forward to him, he was circling his arms around her in a gentle hug. He felt her arms around him, inside the trench coat, felt her head nestled against his shoulder. He could feel her breathe, could feel the warmth of her against him. His eyes closed without him meaning for them to.

And he thought of how he was of Heaven and she was of earth, how he was immortal and she was not, how they were not supposed to be pursuing each other the way they were. He thought of all the insurmountable things that stood against them. But however powerful the forces of fate and destiny were… the connection he shared with this woman, the incomparable and growing relationship between them, the things he felt for her and thought about her… these things were more powerful than anything else.

And he wanted to believe what he was thinking, what he had been considering ever since he had first kissed her, back in the panic room all those months ago. His eyes opened. "Maybe it doesn't matter," he told her in a slow, thoughtful way. He frowned to himself as he thought about it.

"What doesn't?" She asked, confused at his sudden statement, drawing back from the hug enough to be able to look up at him. Their hands rested on either side of the other's waist.

"That we're different from each other," he told her, feeling uncertain about how he was phrasing himself. The words felt clumsy and thick in his mouth. "I don't… it doesn't change anything. About how I..." he couldn't finish the sentence, he didn't really know how to say it or if he should. He suddenly felt unworthy, like telling her what he thought of her would be comparable to presenting dirty table scraps to a queen.

Alex waited anxiously, appearing breathless. "About how you what, Cas?"

Cas opened his mouth to reply—then paused when Alex turned, hearing something. He heard it too—the approaching roar of a car. Headlights sliced through the darkness, swinging around the closest street corner with a giant lurch. "Geez," Alex commented darkly under her breath, pulling out of Cas's arms as she muttered something about "speed demon." The Impala was streaking through the night toward them at record speed, and most assuredly with it came the wrath of Dean. Cas felt his mood darken measurably.

The car jerked to a halt across the street from them, right in front of a sign that said NO PARKING ANY TIME. Dean got out immediately, his expression screwed up in anger as he stared Cas down and slammed the car door closed vigorously. No doubt Dean was angry that Cas had transported Alex away so abruptly, but Cas didn't wither under the oldest Winchester's angry stare like he might have in the past. He only gazed back unwaveringly—he didn't require Dean's permission to remove Alex from volatile situations.

Dean looked at Alex and Cas standing there across the street on the sidewalk. They were standing close, shoulders touching, and they both looked at him mistrustfully—and Cas, okay, he could deal with getting that look from him, but Alex, too? What the hell! Why the fuck was Cas acting like Alex needed protection from him? He was her oldest brother for crying out loud! This was just ridiculous. Dean barely registered the sound of Sam and the pastor getting out of the Impala; all he could do was steam in incredulous anger. On the way over here as he'd run every single stop sign and the one red light, Dean had been trying to figure out what the hell to do, how to deal with this situation, how to knock some sense into his sister and get that friggin' angel to back off. He had no clue how to accomplish either of those things, he didn't know what to do—and when Dean Winchester didn't know what to do, he wasn't happy. And when he wasn't happy... no one was
"What, you two gonna stand there all day or are we gonna gank this bitch?" Dean demanded of the angel and his sister. He watched with rising blood pressure as they glanced at each other, as if checking in with one another, seeing what the other one wanted to do. And then Cas led the way over slowly, Alex trailing beside him and slightly behind—and Dean watched them with a slack-jawed expression, feeling something between horrified and scared shitless as he tried to figure out when this had happened, how long it had been going on.

"You okay, pastor?" Dean heard Sam ask behind him as two car doors shut one right after the other.

"Yeah just... a little carsick," the pastor said, sounding unwell.

"Yeah," Sam's voice replied, and Dean knew the sassy attitude was pointed directly at him. "Me too."

Dean turned and looked at his brother balefully. He wasn't apologizing for driving fast and crazy. "Shut up," he said. Sam gave him one of those faces he saved for when he thought Dean was being a tool and he disapproved. "Bite me," Dean retorted in reply to his brother's unspoken condemnation. The pastor looked at Dean in growing uncertainty.

Dean turned his attention back to Cas, who was standing a few feet off in front of him with Alex—she should be beside Dean, not Cas and he almost reached out and yanked her away from the angel, then thought twice about it—he'd gotten a pretty solid reminder of how strong Cas was a few minutes ago. So Dean decided it was better not to get thrown at something again. He gritted his teeth, willing himself to stay calm and just get this job finished. It was one of the hardest things he'd ever done, being civil to Cas when he wanted to punch him in the face. But still, Dean somehow managed. For now. "Alright, Cas, buddy," he said with a great amount of sarcasm and restraint. "Why don't you shazam yourself in there and do us some recon, huh? Find out where the Whore is?"

Cas appeared reluctant at Dean's suggestion… maybe because it wasn't actually a suggestion. The angel glanced over and down at Alex—who gave him a nod so subtle it was almost unnoticeable. Almost. And with one final terse glance at Dean, Cas disappeared from beside Alex. Dean was irate all over again. "Got the boyfriend trained pretty good, don't you?" he jeered, unable to bite back an angry, sarcastic comment. He was even angrier when his sister didn't respond to the bait, just ignored him except for clenching her jaw and crossing her arms. She wouldn't look at him.

"Uh, no one has even told me how exactly we're going to… to do this," the pastor said hesitantly, and Dean wheeled, realizing that in his rage he had sort of forgotten that little detail: the task at hand of killing the Whore of Babylon. He hadn't given it any thought at all, actually, not since… seeing what he'd seen. He didn't really want to have to think about how to deal with this whole Whore thing, he was too freaked out over this other crisis. He was at his limit, anything else would probably break his back completely.

Cas suddenly reappeared. "The Whore is in the fellowship hall with some others," he said. "They're… locking people into a small room inside the church."

"What?" Sam asked.

"What the hell for?" Dean demanded.

Cas's eyes slid sharply to Dean's. "I don't know. I suggest we hurry."
Dean made a face. "Yeah, great." He pulled together a plan out of thin air, too fed up to give it much thought. "Okay Trenchcoat, you go in there, stick with the Whore, wait for the signal." Dean looked at the padre at this point. "We get the jump on her, angel boy over there grabs her, holds her down, you stick the stake in her, we call it a day. Sound good?" He looked at everyone briefly in turn, daring them to ask him more questions or do something to further sour his mood. "Simple enough for all of you?"

Sam and Alex looked annoyed with him and his shitty attitude, Cas looked vaguely foreboding, the pastor looked physically ill and also doubtful, regarding Dean with disbelief, like he wasn't sure who put him in charge. "Great," Dean said without any enthusiasm, just more bad attitude. "Let's do this."

He started out toward the church, striding with purpose, propelled by anger, frustration—the usual. Everyone followed him except Cas, who just stood there. Dean paused, looked back, raised his eyebrows and jutted his chin out as Sam and the pastor continued. "What are you waiting for?" Dean prompted impatiently. "Did you forget what I told you to do? Inside. Wait for the signal." Cas held Dean's gaze, then his eyes flickered to Alex, who'd stopped a couple steps ahead of Dean. Cas then looked at Sam, who was right at the church door, turned back halfway, concerned. It looked to Dean like Cas was gauging how safe it was to leave Alex alone with him—and just when Dean was about to say something douchey to him again, Cas disappeared. "Give me a friggin' break," Dean muttered, turned back around toward the church, only to be confronted by the pissed off face of his sister right in front of him.

"You really need to stop that," Alex told him with a dark, quiet anger.

Dean stopped, looked at her pointedly. "Stop what?"

She gave him a look that clearly said 'you know what you asshole.' But she said nothing, visibly held back, trying her best not to detonate on him in the middle of the job. Still, if looks could kill...

"Guys, we gotta go now," Sam said, gesturing at the unopened church door.

The pastor's grip tightened on the stake, he looked sickened—and maybe on any other day, Dean would have felt for the guy, but today he was too overwhelmed with everything else, and he decided that he couldn't let another single minute go by without saying something to his sister. "We'll catch up," Dean told his brother, in a tone that suggested there was to be no arguing. But Sam looked doubtful and reluctant, his gaze darting to his twin and then back to his brother.

"Dean..." Sam started.

"I said we'll catch up Sam!" Dean exclaimed forcefully. At the outburst, Sam shook his head and let out an exasperated sigh, moved like he was about to come over there—but then Alex held up a hand, gave him a drawn, tight little smile.

"It's fine Sam," she told him.

Sam stopped, his brows furrowed deeply. He glanced at Dean skeptically before looking back at her. "You sure?"

Alex glanced at Dean darkly, then at Sam again. "Yeah. Just go."

Sam looked really unhappy about it, but he said nothing, just looked at them both for a minute and then turned, and with a final backward glance, disappeared into the church with the pastor following, leaving Dean and Alex alone.
Alex turned her head smoothly, looked at Dean coolly, her arms crossed. "What's your problem?" she asked in a soft low voice, and her cynical, rude tone was one he wasn't used to.

"I saw the two of you, okay? I saw him kissing you." She looked mildly caught-out, but held her ground when he went closer to her and lowered his voice. "How long has this been going on, huh?" he demanded. "And don't you dare tell me you don't know what I'm talking about."

She seemed irritated by his question, looked at him with a narrow-eyed scowl. "It's not that simple," she replied in a tense voice that suggested she was holding back.

"Like hell it isn't!" Dean raged, his blood pressure off the charts. "I will rip his fucking wings off, that lying bastard."

"You know what, screw you," Alex said, looking at him like he was scum. "I'm starting to get why Sam left for Stanford."

He soured defensively. "Oh please—"

"Stop bossing me around, Dean!" she all but exploded—he had never heard her scream like that at anyone, ever, and he was momentarily shocked into silence. She was breathless in her anger, she was flustered, her voice was raising in pitch, she sounded accusing when she spoke again. "What, you're only gonna be nice to me if I do exactly what you want all the time? You're only gonna respect me if I constantly walk on eggshells around you? Does that remind you of anybody, huh?"

Dean's jaw tightened because he knew, right away, that she meant Dad. "I have followed you my entire life," Alex said acidly, "I have always done what you said. But things changed. And you don't get to decide my shit anymore."

Oh hell no. It was Dean's turn to explode. "You don't get to make decisions if you're gonna be so goddamn stupid about them! I mean, come on!" He looked at her like she was nuts. "You got a death wish, Al? Cuz it sure looks that way from where I'm sitting!"

"You're the one thinking about saying yes to Michael, so don't even fucking start!" she retorted, voice bordering on a shout. She stopped, visibly forced herself to calm down—but it looked like she was struggling. "If I want to be with Cas, that's my decision, not yours. End of story."

Dean could have shaken her. "Oh no, no no—I am not letting you do that," he growled.

She made a face like she was disgusted with him. "Do what Dean."

"Lemme tell you something. I sacrificed too much, gave too much to this family and to you to let you throw it all away now," Dean said, his voice almost trembling with the mounting emotion. He was starting to get desperate, unsure how she couldn't see why he was so mad. Why couldn't she see that he was scared for her? "Use your brain for two seconds!" he begged. "The dude is an angel! He is not the same species as us. He doesn't know how to be human. What, you think your immortal boyfriend is just gonna stick around when you get old and saggy? That the two of you will just ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after like a normal little couple? Get your head out of the fucking clouds, Al!" She didn't respond to his pleas, only looked more and more exasperated and closed off. Dean's voice rose an octave in distress. "You saw the future, you saw your tombstone and you know he's the reason you end up that way—why the hell won't you listen to me?" And unable to stop himself, Dean threw out another intentionally cruel comment in an effort to get her to react, say something, anything. "What, he kisses you a couple times and you think you're in love with him? Grow up, dude!"
She didn't spit back an angry retort like he thought she would, in fact, her face fell. And Dean felt like the breath had been knocked out of him, like he'd been swallowed in shock as he realized why she'd reacted that way. "...You are, aren't you? You're in love with him." She said nothing, but her jaw worked oddly and Dean needed no further confirmation. He knew his sister's facial expressions well. "That is just the most fucked up—how could you be so..." he clenched his teeth and shut his mouth, holding back angry insults. Dammit, Alex. Dammit. He shut his eyes for a beat, grimaced, took a deep breath in through his nose, trying to control himself. He couldn't believe how suddenly sad he felt, realizing that she really was in love with Cas. What a mess.

He felt himself getting emotional as he tried again to tell her why he was upset and what was so wrong with the whole situation. If he could just get her to understand... "Look. I get it, Al, I—I do. Guardian angel shows up, saves the girl, takes a bullet for her, spews all this crap about protecting her forever... it's the setup to a damn romance novel. Except you are not in a book Alex, this is the real world and any future with this guy would destroy you." He looked at her, strained with desperation, hoping she would just listen to reason and come back to planet earth.

But she was in denial. "You don't know that for sure—that's just your excuse," she said, and there was no mistaking how angry and bitter she was at him. "You think I don't know why you're pulling this crap on me?" she asked accusingly. "You just don't want to see me happy."

"Screw happiness, I want you safe!" Dean exclaimed—the first response that had come to mind—and what he'd said because he cared about her more than almost anyone else in the world didn't seem to sit very well with her.

Alex's face fell, a single eyebrow moved up. She looked like she thought he was an idiot, like she couldn't believe the bullshit she was having to put up with. There was a glint of hurt, too. "Wow Dean. Okay. Yeah, thanks."

She turned to walk away and Dean reached out, grabbed her by the shoulder, refusing to leave the conversation there. "We are not done," he told her forcefully, and she jerked away, yelling "get off me!" and shocking him when she shoved him away, hard, with both of her hands.

"You get your head out of the clouds!" she shouted at him, and the expression on her face made Dean feel like she regarded him as an abomination. "You think I'm gonna stick around and be miserable with you the rest of my life?" she demanded, "that I'm just gonna stick around with you forever?" She jabbed a finger at the top of her head. "I have had it up to here with you and your self-righteous bullshit!"

"I'm trying to take care of you!" Dean protested in indignant anger.

Alex gave him a cold, malevolent look, hit him right where it hurt. "Well you're doing a crappy job, like always," she said, knowing exactly the effect it would have on Dean, who felt like he'd been slapped in the face. That was probably the most hurtful thing she'd ever said to him. Did she really think that? After all they had been through together, everything they had survived, everything he'd done for her, sacrificed for her? He literally felt his chest pang in a strong sense of betrayal.

"I-how can you say that?" he asked, stunned and wounded. He felt a shameful tightness in his throat, he could barely speak. "After everything I've ever done for you?"

She didn't seem to care one way or another that he was hurt. And he realized that he'd gotten it wrong. She said the most hurtful thing she'd ever said to him next when she shook her head, looked at him in almost hatred. "You're just like Dad."
Dean was left speechless, cut to the quick. And at his silence, Alex's expression changed, became a little uncertain, she blinked a couple times, opened her mouth to say something—and then the sound of a muffled gun shot rang through the night. In unison, the siblings looked toward the church, where it had come from, at each other, then took off at a run into the building.

They could hear people screaming and shouting as soon as they burst through the door, and Dean ran, leading the way toward the ruckus, Alex close behind, realizing she currently had nothing on herself in the way of a weapon. There was another gun shot as they burst into the fellowship hall, which was in complete chaos.

Sam struggled with Jane, who had a shotgun and was firing into the ceiling, trying to break away from his grip—there was pounding and screaming coming from a locked, closed door on the opposite side of the room—the pastor was shot in the chest and dead on the ground, the stake on the floor a few feet off from him—a few of the townspeople were rushing Sam, trying to pull Jane away or maybe bash Sam's brains in, it was hard to tell—but the thing that Alex zeroed in on right away through all the confusion in the room was the sight of Cas, on the ground, groaning loudly and squirming in intense pain. Leah stood over him—her back to the door, leaving her unaware of Dean and Alex's arrival—her hand was raised, fingers outstretched toward Cas, she was chanting in a strange language... and each strange word that fell from her mouth seemed to cause Cas more pain, and Alex didn't even think. She just charged forward and barreled into the Whore like a linebacker, tackling her away from Cas, knocking the air out of her lungs and ending the incantation completely when she slammed Leah's body down to the ground.

The Whore hadn't even finished hitting the ground before she was twisting her shoulders violently, throwing Alex off and to the side at surprising velocity, with much greater strength than someone of Leah's size should have had. Half sliding, half flying across the floor on her side, Alex slammed into a table leg painfully with her upper back, knocking the table a few feet back from where it had been. And as she looked up briefly, across the floor, she saw Cas, his face a twisted wreck of pain. He was looking at her. It was one of those slow motion moments, where all Alex could do was stare, hear her own heartbeat. Seeing him injured was equal parts horrifying and infuriating. Oh my god, if she ever lost him, if he ever died or disappeared forever… and then she saw the stake, between herself and Cas. And even as she heard the footsteps of the Whore coming toward her, Alex threw herself into a frenzied crawl, grabbing the stake, scrambled up to her feet as she held the stake up at shoulder level, standing between her and Cas.

"Don't make me laugh—you think you could kill me? You're nothing." Alex didn't have time for small talk. She lunged forward, brought the stake down, aiming it for the Whore's chest—but Leah's little hand shot out, stopping Alex's wrist in an iron grip, then bending Alex's arm back painfully. Yelping, Alex did the only thing she could think of—rearing back and head butting Leah hard and fast, sending the Whore stumbling backwards, a look of pure, unadulterated rage on her face. Determined in the worst way, Alex moved forward again, stake gripped tightly, head pounding—and then Leah's hands raised up, the palms flat and facing Alex—and suddenly Alex was sent flying clear across the room and into the doorframe where she hit her head and dropped to the ground, limp. The stake went skittering across the floor.

The entire thing had happened in the space of maybe ten or fifteen seconds—and Dean, who had rushed to Sam to tear two guys off of him, saw his sister hit the doorframe and snapped. Instantly leaving Sam to hold a struggling Jane, Dean charged forward and lunged mindlessly at the Whore—who knocked him down without even touching him, then leapt forward over Dean, closed her
hands around his throat. Struggling and turning red as air became short in supply—**she was a whole helluva lot stronger than she looked!**—Dean's arm reached out, fingers searching for the stake, which he knew was somewhere to his right. He could hear Cas somewhere nearby groaning, could hear Sam struggling with Jane still.

"**Please,**" Leah said harshly as she saw Dean trying to reach the stake his sister had dropped. "First your sister and now you? Like you're a servant of Heaven!" She pushed harder against his windpipe, leaned close, her voice menacing and vindictive. "**This is why my team's gonna win. You're the great vessel? You're pathetic, self-hating, faithless. It's the end of the world. And you're just gonna sit back and watch it happen, you're gonna let them all die like you always do.**"

And *that*? That was the moment that Dean Winchester decided he was *done.* Done fighting, done being the man who let everyone, including himself down. Done resisting day after day when he could *do* something that actually would change things. He was done standing by and seeing the future he'd seen in 2014 begin to unfold. Done believing that Sam could say no forever. Done trusting that Alex was smart enough to take care of herself. Done being a stupid, stubborn asshole. *Done.* And his fingers made contact with the stake. With all the brute force he could muster, Dean punched the Whore with his other hand, hard enough that she lost her grip on him

And with a guteral shout, Dean staked her through the chest. Her face reverberated with shock. "Don't be so sure about that, *bitch,*" he growled, and pushed her off of himself, hard, where she flopped around on her back. As he stood up and looked down at her, regaining his breath, her face distorted, the Whore's true form screamed through. The stake, sticking out of her chest, caught fire—the Whore screamed, her face jittering demonically—and the stake exploded, leaving a burning hole and a silent, shocked room.

Jane had stopped struggling in Sam's grip, her face registered horror. "What—who was that? That wasn't Leah?"

Dean looked at her with a glare, pulling at the collar of his shirt as if trying to get more air. "No. And the so called angels you been taking orders from? Fake. All of it." He didn't bother hiding how pissed he was. "You've been duped, lady."

"But… I don't understand. How are we supposed to get to paradise now?"

Dean looked at the dead pastor—damn, maybe if he hadn't been out there arguing with his sister, he could have prevented that from happening—guilt shimmered through him, but he looked back at Jane, whose face was sickened as she realized how manipulated she'd been, and the price two men had paid for it. "Sorry," Dean said cynically, shaking his head. "Pretty sure you're headed in a different direction."

"**Dean, Sam… Alex…**" Cas said on the floor, and both of the brothers looked, saw Cas propped up on his stomach, using one of his forearms as support, the other hand pressed to his stomach—he'd apparently dragged himself, in the chaos, to their sister, who was silent, still, unmoving, a collapsed heap on the floor—and a trail of blood streaked out of her mouth on one of the sides. The angel looked up at them, and the look of fear on his face was unmistakable. Sam rushed over, dropped to his knees, checked Alex's vitals, even as Dean stood there, not able to move, because *if she was dead…*

"She's fine, just unconscious… hit her head, looks like," Sam said. And Dean could breathe again. He turned to Jane and looked at Rob, who had a black eye.

Dean jabbed a finger at the locked closet. "Let those people out, you hear me?" Rob immediately nodded, went to do what Dean said. Dean looked at Jane with no shortage of disgust. "And next
time you decide you're righteous, do me a favor and remember the two men who have tombstones because of you."

He turned, saw Sam picking up Alex. She looked small in her twin's arms and Dean looked down at Cas reluctantly. The angel wasgrimacing deeply. Of course Dean got stuck helping him out. He yanked Cas up roughly and slipped an arm under the angel's, supporting him. Doubled over, seeming dazed completely, Cas could barely walk, his stumbling feet not keeping up well as Dean began to walk them back the way they'd come.

Slumped weakly against Dean, Cas groaned in pain. He could feel the angel craning his neck to look backwards. "Is she…?" Cas asked woozily, clearly barely able to even form a coherent thought, but still asking about Alex, voice thick with worry.

"She's fine," Dean said gruffly, if only to shut him up. He glanced back and saw his unconscious sister's head lolling weirdly as Sam carried her.

"Dean, how the hell did you even do that?" Sam asked tensely as they hurried out of the church.

"Do what?"

Sam was short on patience. "Kill her."

"With the stake," Dean replied with automatic sarcasm, then purposefully ran Cas into the fence they were walking beside, muttered "oops" without even trying to sound apologetic.

"That's not what I meant," Sam said, frustrated as he followed Dean across the wet lawn.

"Long run of luck held out, I guess," Dean answered evasively, wishing Sam would just shut up already. But, of course, he didn't.

"Yeah, sure…" Sam replied dubiously. "Last I checked, she could only be killed by a servant of Heaven."

"Well, what do you want me to tell you?" Dean asked, staring at Sam across the roof of the Impala. "I saw a shot and I went for it, now can we please get these two back to the motel?"

He yanked open the back door and sort of dumped Cas in, slamming the door behind him. Sam looked at Dean in clear disapproval, shook his head, then hunkered down, opening the back door on his side of the car. Sam gently maneuvered his unconscious sister into the back of the car—and Cas reached out, helping, holding her up.

And Dean, who had just gotten into the driver's seat and started the engine, glanced into the rearview, saw that, and once again almost had a stroke, seeing how Cas took Alex and held her up even though he was struggling himself. He heard Sam get into the car, close the door behind himself.

"Are you gonna do something stupid?" Sam demanded, to which Dean looked at him wrathfully.

"Like what?"

"Like Michael stupid," Sam said accusingly.

"Come on, Sam. Give me a fuckin' break!" he all but shouted, snapping, hating the fact that his brother could see through him like that.
Sam seemed to snap, too. "Give you a break, Dean? If you hadn't picked a fight with Alex back there, Pastor Gideon might still be alive!"

"Well you shouldn't have gone in without me!" Dean retorted.

Sam stared at Dean silently for a beat, looked away. "We saw a chance and went for it, okay?" He gave a fake little smile as he looked down into his lap. "And you know, funny thing is, with the way you've been lately, I sort of thought we might be better off taking her down without you."

Dean gave Sam a look that could kill—cuz Sam knew exactly what he was doing when he said crap like that. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Sammy," he retorted sarcastically. "That's real great."

Sam glanced into the back seat, apparently done talking with Dean. "You okay, Cas?"

"I'll be fine…" he replied slowly. Dean glanced in the rearview, saw Cas holding Alex's unconscious form, both of his arms wrapped around her holding her securely, his expression tense and worried. He refused to look away from Alex's face. Dean clenched the steering wheel tightly and the tires squealed as he slammed the gas pedal to the floor.

His brother was gonna be Lucifer's puppet and his sister was playing with fire and she apparently didn't care if she lived or died, so why should he care if he lived or died? The car flew through the dark night at illegal speeds.

"You're just like Dad."

No he wasn't, dammit! Deep sadness filled him. He was though, wasn't he? Just like their father. Stubborn, obsessed, angry, addicted, broken, destructive. And more than that, he was just as pathetic and miserable as he'd ever been. Every bit as useless and worthless as Dad had always made him feel. This—being used as the vessel of heaven—was his chance to show everyone, including himself, that he wasn't going to be a damn fool like his father had been, focusing his entire life on something that destroyed them in the end. Dean was tired of fighting the angels. He wasn't about to let the dismal future he'd visited come true. He was stopping it all, he was finally going to go against all of his deeply entrenched instincts—instincts to protect his family above everything else—and do the big-picture thing for once in his damn life.

And unbidden, Dean found himself remembering something that had happened to him a couple years back, during the year he'd been waiting to go to Hell to pay up on that soul deal. It had been a dream in which he was confronted by himself. He'd literally been standing in a room, facing another him.

"You don't even care if you live or die," the dream Dean had said. "Talk about low self-esteem, Dean. Then again, I guess it's not much of a life worth saving, now is it?"

"Wake up, Dean. Come on, wake up," he'd muttered to himself, not wanting to hear this, not wanting to face any of it. Nothing happened, and the image of himself before him kept talking, condescending, judgmental.

"I mean, after all, you've got nothing outside of your brother and sister. Your brother stays with you out of guilt. Your sister out of necessity. You are nothing, Dean. You're as mindless and obedient as an attack dog."

"That—that's not true."

"No? What are the things that you want? What are the things that you dream? I mean, your car? That's Dad's. Your favorite leather jacket? Dad's. Your music? Dad's." Each statement had driven
the feeling of despair of my God he's right even deeper. "Do you even have an original thought?"

Dean had scoffed, trying to look unaffected as his adversary continued.

"No, you don't. No, all there is is, 'Keep Sammy out of trouble, watch out for Al! Look out for your little brother! Keep your sister safe, boy!' You can still hear your Dad's voice in your head, can't you? Clear as a bell."

"Just shut up," Dean told the dream, and his fingers curled around the shotgun he carried.

"I mean, think about it... all he ever do is train you, boss you around, mistreat Alex who you tried so hard to protect in your own mind but really... you weren't brave enough to do what was right for her. You weren't selfless enough to get her out of the hellhole you called home life. You fucking coward. You're nothing but a hammer." Dean paused, smirked. "Funny huh about Sam? Sam he doted on. Sam, he loved. Why didn't he ever treat you that way, huh? You did everything he asked and more." Dream Dean chuckled sardonically. "Dad knew who you really were. A good soldier and nothing else. Daddy's blunt little instrument. Your own father didn't care whether you lived or died. Why should you?"

And his internal monologue had thrown him into a fit of rage. Dean snapped. "Son of a bitch!" he'd roared, then pushed himself hard, sent himself flying into the wall. "My father was an obsessed bastard!" He kicked himself down, pummeled himself and pinned himself to a wall using the shotgun. "All that crap he dumped on me, about protecting Sam, about keeping Alex safe!? That was his crap! He's the one who couldn't protect his family, who couldn't live up to his own standards!" Dean hit himself across the face with the shotgun, enraged. "He's the one who let Mom die!" He shoved himself into the wall. "Who wasn't there for Sam or Alex! I always was! He wasn't fair!" His voice rose an octave in heartbroken despair. "I didn't deserve what he put on me! And I don't deserve to go to hell!"

The sound of a shotgun blast echoed in Dean's mind and he felt his jaw clench involuntarily as he remembered shooting himself point-blank in the chest, watching the dream version of himself die. He didn't deserve any of what he'd been handed, none of it had been fair, but that didn't change a damn thing. He'd still been handed it, he'd still been shouldered with more responsibility and loss than most people could even handle hearing about, much less living through.

Just once, Dean wished he didn't have to be the one who had to make these soul-crushing, life or death decisions. But like he'd decided earlier, he was just done. He wasn't even sure if this were the right decision, to say yes to Michael. He just couldn't fight anymore, he was tired of putting off the inevitable. Maybe he should have known, all those months ago, that fighting the whole Michael-wants-your-body thing was a losing game. He should have at least realized that fighting it would only make it worse for the people he loved.

All he'd ever wanted was for his siblings to be happy and safe... but with him, close enough for him to keep an eye on them, watch out for them. He really had been Daddy's blunt little instrument, huh? He realized morosely that his entire life was built around those commands: Keep Sammy out of trouble, watch out for Al. Look out for your little brother; keep your sister safe, boy.

If he looked back over his thirty-one years, it became clear to him just how deeply ingrained those commands had become. Dean had forced Sam back into the life, he'd kept Alex in it and with him because there hadn't seemed to be any other option... but now Dean wondered if he should have somehow gotten her out of this life years ago, if he should have left Sam at college to be safe, happy, clueless. Maybe Jess would still be alive. Maybe Alex wouldn't be involved with an angel who was going to destroy her life. Maybe his baby sister, the one he'd taught how to count to ten and throw a punch and change a flat tire... maybe she wouldn't be about to lose one or both of her
brothers to the apocalypse. You know, maybe he couldn't entirely blame her for the torch she carried for Cas. Maybe it was her way of coping with so much pain and loss and screwed up situation after screwed up situation. He'd done some pretty crazy stuff to deal with the life, too.

Dean pulled the Impala up to the motel, glanced into the rearview again... saw Cas gently touching Alex's face, wiping the blood away from her mouth with his thumb, his face a mask of concern. And Dean could barely contain his anger. That was too much for him to handle.

In a fury, Dean got out of the car, yanked Cas's door open and grabbed Alex from him, taking her from him with a low growling mutter of, "give her to me."

And Dean marched inside without a backwards glance, taking his sister over to one of the beds and laying her down there. Her head flopped over to the side, face covered in long, dark strands of hair. And he stopped, wishing he hadn't fought with her. He reached down sadly, smoothing her hair out of her face. "You are so, so stupid Alex," he told her softly, anguished. Wondering if this were the last time he'd see her again. Trying to remember the time when she'd loved him and looked up to him and they'd been best friends. It seemed so far away. Impossible to get back to.

He heard Sam coming in and turned slightly, then tensed when he saw that Sam was helping a limping Cas in. Standing, Dean frowned. "I don't want him in here," Dean told his brother gruffly.

"I don't want him in here," Dean told his brother gruffly.

"Good!" Was Dean's reply as he stormed across the room. And surprising Sam and Cas both, Dean grabbed Cas by the lapels, ripping him out of Sam's supportive grip, slamming him up against the motel wall. "What the hell were you two doing out there tonight, huh? I saw you kissing my sister, you son of a bitch!"

"Dean, whoa!" Sam protested, grabbing Dean's shoulder.

Dean shoved Sam away hard, pointed a warning finger. "Back off Sam, I'm warning you!" He thundered, and Sam just stood there and looked at Dean in shock. Dean jerked his head back to Cas. "What the hell do you have to say for yourself, huh?"

The angel was woozy, his head held unevenly, his eyelids heavy. He was frowning and grimacing. "You're... upset," he managed, to which Dean's grip tightened and he shoved him against the wall harder.

"You promised me you wouldn't do anything to risk her life Cas, you're damn right I'm upset!"

Face filled with confusion and pain and hesitance, Cas looked Dean in the eye. "I want her safe just as much as you do. Perhaps more, in fact. Please believe me." His expression became pleading. "I tried to keep this from happening—I've tried to keep my distance."

"Well try harder!" Dean shouted.

"I'm sorry Dean," Cas replied, sounding genuine and unsure. "I don't know how to... I don't know how to not be with her."

Dean's blood went cold. "Be with her?" he repeated, then his voice raised to a roof-shaking shout. "I should rip your damn wings out, Cas!"

"That's literally not possible," Cas mumbled, sounding drunk again in his dazed state.

Even as he said that, Sam was back, putting a hand on Dean, and one on Cas, trying to separate the
two, successfully pushing Dean back a few steps. "Dean, stop, calm down!" Sam told him, holding out a hand as he stood between his brother and the angel.

"I can't calm down, Sam!" Dean exclaimed, voice rising in panic and emotion. "This is your sister's life on the line!"

"Dean, I'm going to find a way to change things," Cas said, struggling to speak through what was obviously a lot of pain. "Just like you're going to find a way to stop the apocalypse, I'll—"

"No, no—no!" Dean raged. "You wanna have your cake and eat it too? That is my sister you dick! She deserves a whole hell of a lot better than the likes of you!"

There was an intense, brief silence. And Cas looked down, voice low and filled with regret. "You're right. She does deserve better."

Cas turned and sat down—almost fell over—onto the bed he'd been standing beside. Sam steadied him by the shoulder as Dean stared at him silently, murderously. Cas looked at Dean sadly. "After all we've been through, Dean all I've done is help you…"

"You call this help!?" Dean cut him off incredulously. "Don't try and guilt-trip me into being your friend, I don't owe you a damn thing!"

"I raised you out of Hell," Cas said.

Dean glared. "Yeah, cuz you were told to!"

Cas's passive, puppy-dog eye expression was fading, into something more like anger. "I went against Heaven, I lost everything—"

Dean cut him off again, done with the bullshit. "Are you some kind of moron, Cas? I don't care what you lost, look at what you're doing! You're risking her life and you're a selfish bastard! If you cared about her at all you'd walk away right now!"

Cas looked conflicted as hell, his jaw going rigid and eyes going down, as if he were thinking something over very carefully. "I'm sorry Dean, I can't do that."

"Can't or won't?" Dean challenged with a rising voice.

Cas looked at him dead in the eye, and there was a lot of guilt in his gaze. "Both."

Dean shook his head slowly, barely able to see straight. "You son of a…"

Cas cut him off. "I left everything behind and was cast out of Heaven because I believed you were capable of changing the future. Can you extend the same trust to me?" Sam, who was standing back and listening intently, looked at Dean cautiously.

Dean threw his arms wide. "I did trust you! And then I find out you're sneaking around behind my back, seducing my sister telling her God knows what! You're taking advantage of her! She's naive, she's practically a kid, Cas! How can you think any of this is okay?" Dean stopped, looked at Cas in cold, judgmental disgust. "Look at you. I can see the wheels in your head turning, trying to rationalize what you're doing to her, to my family—" he stopped, then looked at Cas with almost a smile. "Well I guess what, halo? I'm putting an end to it once and for all."

And Dean gave him a final glare for good measure and stormed out of the motel, hearing Sam yell his name as he followed.
"Dean, stop!" Sam said, catching up to Dean on the motel sidewalk. Turning around slowly, Dean looked at his brother acidly. "Dean what the hell is going on with you?" Sam demanded angrily. "How could you say that stuff to Cas after everything he's done for us?"

"Don't act like you don't know why," Dean said coldly.

Sam's jaw tightened perceptibly. "Look, I get that you're upset but I've never seen you touch Alex like that before—I mean you scared her Dean."

"Well she should be scared!" Dean retorted emphatically.

"What, of Cas? Or of you?" Sam asked, and his low voice began to raise in anger. "Last time I checked, he's the one who took a fucking bullet for her—Cas would never in a million years lay a finger on her in the wrong way!"

Dean looked at his brother in baleful disbelief. "You don't know that Sam!"

"Get your head out of your ass, Dean!" Sam shouted back, and Dean let out a heavy huff of air, wet his lips, set his brother with a you're-an-idiot look.

"So what, you're cool with this dude, this thousands and thousands of years old dude cozying up to your sister? The same sister who has never, Sam, ever, had a lasting relationship outside of you, me, Dad, and maybe Bobby? She falls in love with the first guy who comes along and makes moon eyes at her—and as our long string of shit luck would have it, the guy just so happens to be a creepy old special-ED angel! That's all okay with you? Dean didn't give him a chance to reply, continued to rant. "I mean why the hell am I the only one with enough brains to see that this is the worst idea ever? And as if the creepy To Catch a Predator vibe wasn't enough, I've seen the frigging future where he's the reason she's dead and buried underground! Where them being together—together, Sam—gets her killed! You're cool with her waltzing into her own coffin? You wanna hand her some nails while you're at it, drive some in yourself, huh?"

Sam waited a second, his expression bitchy and cool. "I didn't think you believed in destiny Dean. I thought you said we could change things. Isn't that one of those things? What makes you so sure that she's as good as dead?" He raised his eyebrows, looked at Dean searchingly. "Is it really that you believe Cas gets her killed, or you just not wanting her happy?" Dean's face fell as Sam continued. "Because she really likes him, Dean. And he really, really cares about her."

Dean shook his head, disappointed and let down as hell. "I can't believe you, Sam."

"And I can't believe you, Dean," Sam said. "You're acting crazy about this!"

"Sam, our baby sister doesn't have a heaven and is messing around with the guy who gets her killed in the future, a guy who is kissing up on her in a body that's not even his, a guy who will outlive her by a million years—no exaggeration! Of course I'm gonna act crazy, why the hell aren't you!?" Dean's righteous anger faded into a cynical, little smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I guess I forgot. All the times you abandoned this family because you were too selfish to accept your responsibilities, too self interested to give a crap either way what happened to her or me. Same thing now, huh."

Sam made a face like he didn't even get why Dean would say that. "That's not fair, Dean. I have always cared about what happened to you, both of you!"

Dean was cold now, unaffected. "Nah. I don't believe you Sam, cuz actions speak louder than words, and I can guarantee one thing about you. You always give up, you always walk away."
"Oh, and that's not what you're doing right now?" Sam accused.

"What are you talking about, huh Sammy?"

"Dean, I'm not the idiot that you think I am. You think I haven't noticed how depressed you are? How off you've been? You think I don't know why?"

Dean tilted his head to the side, made a mock-concerned face. "What, you wanna have some girl time Sam? Talk about all my bad feelings and sad thoughts?"

Sam's nostrils flared, a muscle jerked in his jaw, he shook his head as his mouth worked oddly. "You know, you are making it really hard for me right now."

"To do what, Sam?" Dean asked carelessly.

"To hold it together, to have faith in you!" Sam replied intensely.

Dean rolled his eyes. "Oh cry me a river, Sammy."

"I am trying Dean, trying really hard to do this," Sam told him angrily. "But I can't do it if you're gonna keep being such a dick."

"Well you'll be relieved then," Dean told him with another facetious little smile. "Cuz you don't have to do it anymore."

Sam swallowed, his face fell. "Don't do this Dean."

"Lemme tell you something. I am not the bad guy here Sam, and I don't get why the hell you and Alex think I am. All I've ever done was look out for you two. I gave you everything! And it never was enough, was it?" Dean shrugged, threw his hands up. "Well I'm done. I am done being the guy you stick around with cuz you feel sorry for me. I am done giving and giving and giving and getting nothing but shit in return. I am gonna change the future, I am gonna stop being a stupid, stubborn asshole and let those angelic bastards upstairs have their way with me."

Sam's eyebrows slammed together. "You can't be serious."

"Oh, I am."

"After all the time we've spent fighting this, Dean?" His brother demanded, then became intense, drew himself up to his full height. "No, I won't let you give up."

Dean smirked to himself. "I'm sorry, Sam." And he was. "But it's too late for all that."

And before Sam could react, Dean drew back and socked him in the face hard, hard enough to send Sam stumbling back, stunned and falling to the ground. And while Sam floundered, Dean jumped into the Impala, started it up, backed it up fast—and Sam slammed onto the hood, shouting Dean's name even as he cut the wheel—and his little brother went flying sideways into the parking lot as Dean slammed the car into drive and squealed tires out of there.

And wavering to his feet, Sam shouted uselessly. "Damn it! Dean! DEAN!" he stood there in shock, watching the Impala disappear around the bend in the road. Sam wiped at his nose with the back of his hand, looked at the bright red blood there. He looked back at the road that Dean had raced down a second ago, and Sam Winchester suddenly felt lost completely.

What the hell was he supposed to do now?!
Inside the motel, Cas had edged himself along the bed he'd sat on, had then lurched across the space between it and the bed Alex was on, desperate to reach her. He'd barely kept from falling, catching himself with the palms of his hands on the mattress near Alex's feet. He'd let himself collapse forward on his stomach, and had dragged himself up alongside of her, trying to make sure she was all right, groaning from the effort of moving. He was in so much pain from the incantation the Whore had cast over him, weakened immensely.

But his pain was nothing to him, he was only frustrated at how incapable of movement he was, how he had been unable to stop the Whore from hurting Alex. He looked down at her now, watched the steady rise and fall of her chest. A small reassurance that she was all right. And everything Dean had said to him raced through his mind, inspiring vast amounts of guilt and internal pain. He looked down at her. He was clumsily arranged on his side, and one of his hands rested on the arm at her side closest to him. His fingers tightened slightly, as if he thought she might slip from his grasp. He knew she wouldn't, but still. He didn't want to let go.
"You were looking down on me, lost in outer space. We laid underneath the stars, strung out and feeling brave."
- Our Lady Peace

What happened?

That was Alex's first coherent thought as she came to, not entirely sure where she was. She last remembered seeing Cas laying on the floor of the church in obvious pain, which had made her mad as shit—so when she'd seen the stake just laying there, she remembered thinking what the hell, right? Worth a shot. Well, apparently not. She recalled trying to kill the Whore and then being sent flying clear across the room where she'd hit a wall. She didn't remember anything after that. Shit, is that why her head hurt so bad? She blinked a couple times, eyes adjusting to a dark room. She was laying on her back, on what felt like a shitty motel mattress. And that's when she realized that there was the substantial weight and warmth of someone beside her—laying beside her.

Even as she was turning her head and trying to see who it was, he spoke. "You're awake." Cas's face was really close, so close that they were practically nose to nose.

Alex jerked her head back in surprise, then regretted the decision, cringing and shutting her eyes tightly against the sudden ripple of pain in her temple. "Ow."

His relief was replaced with worry. "Are you all right? Is the pain very bad?"

"I'm fine, I—" she stopped mid-sentence when she saw the blood trickling out of his nose. Without even doing it consciously, she pushed herself up so that she could see him better, reacting in alarm as she looked down at him and took in how weak and woozy he looked. "Are you okay?"

Her question seemed to strike him as odd. "I'm fine," he said, not seeming concerned about himself either way.

She automatically went to wipe the blood away from underneath his nose. "You don't look fine," she said almost accusingly, her thumb dashing away streak of red. Her eyes darted up to his, which were already looking at her. Her thumb froze in place, her breath caught. And that's when Alex heard a familiar sound—Sam clearing his throat.

A little startled, realizing that she and Castiel were not alone—Alex looked up in the direction the noise had come from, using her elbow and forearm to push herself up a little. Sam stood a few steps off, his arms crossed and a sullen expression on his face... and a bloody nose. "Crap, Sam!" Alex exclaimed in confused surprise. "What happened to you?"

Her brother grew even more brooding at the question. "Dean happened to me," Sam said brusquely, only confusing his sister further.

"...What?" she asked and sat up, looking around for her oldest brother. She didn't see Dean anywhere, and automatically opened her mouth to ask where he was, then went silent before she'd even asked a thing. Something was wrong, very wrong. She could tell from Sam's face. She looked at Cas silently, whose expression only furthered her realization that something had happened.
Fearing the worst, Alex looked back at Sam in dawning horror. Her voice dropped in volume and trembled. "W-where is he, Sam? Where's Dean?"

Sam's eyes fell away from hers and his jaw clenched. "Gone."

Her stomach dropped completely. "What do you mean 'gone'?" Alex asked, her tone becoming intense and demanding—did Sam mean that Dean was dead? Her heartbeat was jabbering in her chest painfully, she looked at Sam in blank terror, remembering what she'd said to Dean last, how she'd left things with him. And it was like every worst nightmare she'd ever had was closing in on her, every horror she could imagine coming true… and then, behind her, still reclining on the bed, Cas's deep rumbling voice explained what Sam meant.

"We believe he's gone to… say yes to Michael."

That was not what she had expected to hear. It should have been a relief after what she'd assumed a few seconds ago, but it wasn't. In fact, this was almost worse. Alex looked back at Cas in confused denial—no—no way, Dean wouldn't have done that. But Cas looked grim and resigned, like he saw no other explanation, and totally flabbergasted, Alex whipped her head back at Sam, who nodded heavily, wordless. And Alex looked at him in sudden, misplaced anger. "Why didn't you stop him?!"

"I tried—can't you tell?" Sam asked derisively, and his crappy attitude wasn't exactly helpful.

Reacting, not really thinking, Alex swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Her head was pounding. "We have to go after him!" she said, standing up fast and experiencing a painful rush of blood to the head.

Sam saw her wobble on her feet and grabbed either shoulder gently, steadying her, keeping her from falling. "Whoa. Easy."

"And why the hell would you say it to me like that, Sam?!" Alex demanded shakily, losing her temper in a mild outburst. "That he's 'gone'? " Her voice raised an octave. "I thought you meant he was dead!" The words hit the air in the room and left a heavy silence in which Sam looked at her sadly, earnestly.

"I mean, Alex…" her twin started, as if he was trying to break bad news to her gently, "he might as well be." He looked at her in increasing distress. "You get that, right?"

She shut her mouth, looked at him angrily, even though she knew he was right. "Don't say that," she whispered. "Don't you fucking say that." She was suddenly so overcome with grief. "Dammit, Sam," she muttered and tried to pull away from her brother's grip. He didn't let go, and Alex shut her eyes, growled through gritted teeth, repeating more emphatically this time, to herself more than anyone else, "dammit!"

"What?" Sam asked, frowning at her.

"He told me, okay?" she said, deeply upset and staring at her brother helplessly, sickened. Realizing what an idiot she'd been. "A couple days ago," she said, staring into her twin's right shoulder uneasily. "He told me he was thinking about saying yes." She looked up at her brother, who looked shocked. Glancing guiltily over in Cas's direction, Alex was struggling to maintain her composure. All of her previous anger was morphing into the most wretched sense of self-hatred and guilt. "I should have told one of you," she muttered, and Sam let go, looking deeply angry.

"Yeah, you should have," he said darkly, sending another wave of regret coursing through Alex.
"It wouldn't have changed anything," Cas said, slowly pushing himself up into a sitting position on the bed. "If Dean's mind was made up..." Cas paused. "I doubt any of us could have stopped him." He looked at Alex meaningfully, and she realized he was trying to tell her it wasn't her fault. There was a heavy pause.

"Maybe not," Alex conceded hesitantly, not fully convinced. She grew intense again, determined to make it right. "But we're stopping him now."

Sam gave a short, dark laugh. "Oh good, yeah, so do you know where he went? Cuz I don't." Exasperated, he ran a hand through his hair. "I mean I don't get it, I just—" Sam's face looked gaunt at this point, he was so tense. "I can't believe he did this to us."

"Are you sure about this?" Alex asked. She didn't want to believe Dean would really do what Sam and Castiel were saying he'd done. "I mean what happened? What did he say? Maybe it's not what you think."

"Sorry, but it is," he told her, and shrugged, spread his hands out vacantly, seeming to be at a loss. "First of all: He's the one who killed the Whore." He paused, let that little factoid sink in—Alex had all but forgotten about her for a minute. She felt her hope fade a little bit. Sam continued. "We came back here, he picked a fight with Cas, stormed outside, said he was gonna change the future. Then he hit me in the face and took off."

Alex fell into tense, unsettled silence, trying to swallow reality, trying to stomach it. All of her anger seemed to dissipate into confused feelings of how could he? After all the time they'd spent fighting this, all the times Dean had promised her he wouldn't say yes—he was just going to run off in the middle of the night? Abandon them? It made no sense the more she thought about it, and she tried again to figure it out. Maybe Sam was wrong. "But if he was gonna say yes, why not just do it? Why drive off and do it?"

"Alex," Sam said her name in a lecturing, correcting tone. "Dean straight up told me he was gonna do it. Okay? I can tell you don't want to believe me but... I'm not making it up or jumping to conclusions. He's saying yes to Michael." Sam looked at her, his expression clearly stating and that's that—end of story.

"And what, you're okay with that?" She asked, hurt and disillusioned at his reaction.

He softened, seemed to realize how he'd come off. "No. Of course not." He sighed raggedly, went back to the original question she'd asked, his voice gentler now. "I, uh, I dunno why he'd drive off to do it. I guess he's not gonna do it right away."

"What, you mean like bars, girls, Van Halen live?" Alex asked, tone bordering on sarcastic because she felt so powerless and couldn't believe that it had come to this. Her head felt like it was splitting in half, not just from physical pain but from mental, too.

Sam was quiet, thoughtful. Then looked at her in epiphany. "Lisa?"

Alex had to think a minute. "Lisa...? Lisa Braeden?" she asked, not sure if she followed Sam's line of logic. "He hasn't even seen her in like two years."

Sam shrugged slightly. "It's where he's went last time he thought his number was up," he said plaintively, and Alex remembered how they had driven halfway across the country to visit her when Dean had been dying and headed straight for Hell. She thought hard about it. Maybe Sam was right. "Look, it's a long shot," Sam said slowly, "but it's the only idea I have."
Alex wasn't so sure. But at this point, all she could think about was why Dean would do this. She felt hollow. Betrayed at a base level. "He told me he wouldn't," she said faintly, more to herself than anyone else. Alex just put her face in a hand and rubbed her forehead with her fingertips, trying to massage away the headache and the stress, the sense of being abandoned, the urge to sit down and scream and cry and throw a tantrum like a kid would. How could Dean do this to them? "That stupid, selfish asshole," she muttered in a miserable, wavering voice. She felt someone touch her arm gently. Surprised, she looked up and over. Cas had gotten up at some point and was standing beside her, looking at her in tense worry. He looked like he was having a hard time standing, and Alex attempted to push down her upset, tried to look more collected than she felt, wondered if she should help him stand.

Sam was looking at Cas hopefully. "Cas, are you okay enough to zap us around?"

In response to the question, Cas's frown became a touch guilty. "No, not yet. The Whore cast some kind of weakening spell on me." He looked down grimly, his voice lowering in a morose quality. "I'm all but useless. I'm deeply sorry." He cringed a little and sat down, seeming too tired or weak to keep standing.

Sam and Alex both looked at Cas silently, uncomfortable at his comment about uselessness. Sam attempted to smooth it over. "It's, uh, it's fine Cas. I'll… jack us some wheels." He glanced at Alex cryptically. "Either way, we're leaving, now."

Alex took his cue and began picking up their bags off the floor, as he was hurriedly throwing his books back into his backpack. "And if this whole Lisa thing turns out to be a bust?" she asked, not sure if she was on board with the theory or not.

"It won't," he told her emphatically.

"It better not," she muttered, and grabbed a wire hanger out of her duffel, tossed it to Sam, who caught it deftly.

"What's that for?" Cas asked. He sat on the bed with a hand on either knee, giving the appearance of exhaustion and discomfort.

"You'll see," Sam said, and went over, hauled Cas to his feet, looped one of the angel's arms around his shoulders. "Come on Cas, you're gonna have to walk a little bit."

They exited the motel, Alex weighed down with all of their bags, Sam helping Cas along. The angel shuffled sort of pathetically.

"Sam what the hell do you keep in these bags, bricks?" Alex complained. Her twin wasn't too interested in her question, instead stood there and looked at their two options in the parking lot. A beat up old Ford pickup or a minivan.

"Truck," Sam said decisively—it was closer, anyway—and Alex looked around furtively, tossing their bags into the bed of the pickup, then took Cas from Sam, helping him around to the other side of the truck. Sam jimmied the lock using the hangar in about five seconds, then jumped into the truck, reached across and unlocked the passenger door. Alex opened the door, which groaned loudly. Helping Cas in, Alex got in after him and shut the door. It was a little cramped, the three of them all in one seat.

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Sam was fumbling underneath the steering wheel, yanking some wires out and brushing them up against each other repeatedly. "Feels sort of weird, stealing a car with an angel watching," he said, glancing up and over at Cas, who just looked chagrined at the comment. The truck roared to life
loudly as the wires sparked together, and Sam glanced at his sister as he straightened up and shifted the truck into gear. "Battle Creek is like nine hours drive," he told them, looking behind as he backed the truck up. "Strap in for the long haul, guys."

And so they headed East, not sure if they would find Dean, not sure if they were right about where he was going, not sure if they could stop him if they did find him at all.

"Who is Lisa?" Cas asked a couple minutes down the road, breaking the silence and reminding both of the Winchesters that Cas didn't know who Lisa was.

Sam glanced at his sister, who didn't look like she was in the talkative mood. So he explained, instead. "She's… an old flame of Dean's. They met way back in the day, maybe ninety-eight or ninety-nine." His face wrinkled in thought. "We went to see in her, when was that, two-thousand seven?" he looked at Alex for confirmation.

"Yeah, I guess," she mumbled.

Cas looked at her appraisingly for a minute before turning back to Sam. "Why would he go and see this woman?" he asked, to which Sam had to think for a minute, giving the impression that he wasn't quite sure about Dean's motivations.

"There haven't been a lot of girls who Dean's actually cared about seeing again. But Lisa… I dunno." Sam was quiet for a minute. "I think he kind of loves her."

Alex looked at Sam in silent surprise. She hadn't expected him to say that. She looked away again, and the truck became silent. Cas watched Alex sidelong. She remained tense and distressed, quiet, staring down at her knees.

He looked down at Alex's hand which rested on top of her leg, just inches away from his hand. He moved just a little and gingerly brushed the back of his hand up against the back of hers.

Her eyes jumped to his hand, and then up to his eyes. For a minute, she didn't do anything, just looked at him with eyes full of an emotion he couldn't name. And then her fingers moved just slightly toward his hand, the backs of them brushing against the backs of his. That simple reciprocation made something in his chest swell. And when she gave him the smallest beginnings of a smile, a smile she obviously had to work to give him, a smile that was tinged with pain and fear—the swelling feeling almost felt impossible, like something inside of him would burst. He looked at the scrape across her cheekbone, the dark bruise just above her temple from her fight with the Whore… and the sight of those injuries, small as they were, inspired such a deep sense of failure. He couldn't seem to keep her safe, no matter how hard he tried. Underneath his gaze, Alex's flickered and she looked away, back down into her knees. But their hands stayed close, and after a couple seconds, she turned her hand, slowly and falteringly closing her fingers around his, glanced at him from the corners of her eyes. And even though he felt weaker than he had in a long time, Castiel felt like that—the simple action of her putting her hand into his—could give him the strength to do anything.

A mere hour and a half into the drive, as Sam sped down a deserted country road, the car suddenly lurched, there was a loud explosion somewhere in the engine area that shook the entire truck.

"What the hell!" Sam exclaimed, steering the suddenly powerless truck over to the side of the road, coasting on momentum. Alex realized Cas's arm had shot out in front of her as if to shield her or keep her from flying forward.

"Great, just great," Sam was muttering as he got out of the truck and slammed the door, hollered
something about "get a flashlight, would you?"

Sam yanked the hood of the truck open and smoke poured out and he coughed, grimacing. Alex dug through her duffel, finding a flashlight and then going to join Sam. "What's wrong with it?" Alex asked, squinting down into the haze of smoke, trying to see what had exploded.

"Radiator maybe?" Sam said, waving a hand in front of his face in an attempt to clear the air. Alex beamed the flashlight down at the engine, eyes sweeping over the smoky jumble of parts as she waved a hand to clear the smoke.

"Uh, that would be a no," she said as she peered down at the engine and saw what had happened. She looked at her twin with a huge, fake smile on her face. He gave her a look like she was crazy before he leaned closer over the engine, squinting into the clearing smoke. His face fell when he saw what she had seen. A huge, gaping hole in the engine.

"Are you friggin' kidding me?" he exclaimed, aghast at their bad luck.

"You would pick the truck that was fifty miles from throwing a rod," Alex said.

Sam made a supremely irritated face at her, huffed, threw a hand up, obviously wracking his brain. "Okay so… what, I guess we should walk back to that gas station we just passed back there."

"No, let's sit here in the dark and do nothing," Alex countered wryly, annoyed at her sibling, the situation, and life in general. She got an exasperated glare from her twin, who commented "ha ha" snidely, and went to the passenger side door, where Cas was attempting to get out, one arm braced against the door, the other against the doorframe.

"Can you walk, Cas?" Sam asked, to which Castiel shot him a glance that could only be called cranky.

"Yes, of course I can walk," he said, and promptly stumbled forward, nearly faceplanting onto the side of the road. Sam managed to catch him before that could happen, and then push him back where he could lean against the truck. Sam turned and looked at Alex, who was standing there watching, unable to believe how wrong every little thing was going for them right now.

"...he can't walk," Sam said, clearly sharing her exasperation with the situation.

"I can see that," Alex retorted, and Sam looked around, like he was casting for ideas on what to do. And for a moment, Alex had a twinge of empathy, realizing how stressed Sam must be, how he was probably feeling just as bad as she was.

"Listen, I'll go back there, get another ride, come back and pick you guys up," he said, sounding as though he was just too tired to come up with anything else.

Upset at the holdup even though she did understand, Alex folded her arms, muttered, "yeah, great." And Sam glanced at Cas, then Alex, seeming to realize that he was leaving them alone, out in the middle of the night, unprotected. His hand moved back, took something out of the waistband of his jeans.

"Just in case you need it," he told Alex, holding his pistol out to her. She looked like she was going to argue, not accept the gun, but Sam's expression was deadly serious. "Take it," he told her in a low, sober voice.

Alex stared at him, conflicted and suddenly worried, but did what he said after a couple seconds of unwillingness. She took the gun and tucked it down into the waistband of her jeans at the small
of her back, wishing she hadn't left her pistol in the back of the Impala.

Sam nodded tersely, satisfied that he'd left her with a weapon and he turned to go, but Alex said his name, stopping him. "Sam." He turned back, eyebrows raised in expectancy. She had maybe lost one brother tonight, after parting on shit terms. She wasn't gonna let that happen again.

She hesitated, then went to her twin and hugged her arms around him tightly, surprising him with the suddenness and intensity of her actions. He reacted slowly, hugged her back uncertainty. And when she drew back to look him in the eye, she was tense. Didn't tell him what she really wanted to say. Settled on, "Be careful, okay?"

And God bless her twin Sam, who saw right through her bullshit fears and her silent worries. His face softened and squeezed her arm gently, looked her in the eye, got that knowing look in his eye. He held her gaze earnestly and told her in no uncertain terms, "Alex… don't worry. I'll be back. I'm not going anywhere, okay?"

"Okay," she said, face crumpling with emotion, eyes filling with tears. And Sam hugged her, tightly this time. Alex fought to keep from breaking down, struggled to regulate her breathing. Sam pulled back after a few seconds, looked at her intently, appraising her, waiting for her to be okay.

She nodded, forced a thin smile. "Go on, time's wasting," she told him, trying to sound light. Sam glanced back at Cas, who was watching silently about ten feet away.

"Hey Cas, take care of her, all right?" Cas looked as though Sam had insulted him, but Sam was looking back at his sister and didn't notice. "I won't be long."

"All right." She nodded, and Sam shoved his hands into his pockets and headed down the road at a brisk stride, his hulking form becoming an inky silhouette as he got further and further away.

Alex watched him go, feeling more and more like this was the future she was going to be living in—one where both of her brothers were gone. She almost couldn't turn around and face Cas, because she felt so emotionally spent and raw. So much had happened in the past twenty-four hours, and it all left her completely overwhelmed. She'd been intimate with Castiel—that was enough to shake up her world forever, but then in quick succession, she'd fought with Dean and then woken up to find out that he'd run away and given up on them. Alex wondered if this was how blindsided and upset she'd made Dean feel last year when she ran away.

She swallowed the lump in her throat, took in a deep breath and turned around to look at Cas, who was standing at where the cab of the truck began. He was holding onto the edge of the truck bed, looking at her in what was obvious concern. She wasn't sure what to do at all. She wandered over to the end of the truck, near the tailgate, but didn't go any closer to him. She couldn't meet his eyes now, couldn't think of a single damn thing to say. She just wanted to destroy something, smash something to pieces, wanted to punch Dean in the face and shake him until he came to his senses. And even though part of her needed nothing more than to go to Cas and be held, she felt herself reverting back to the way she'd always dealt with pain before. Like old times, she found herself wanting to be left alone in silence. It was easier there, where no one pried in and pressed at breakable things like her thoughts and feelings.

"This has been an eventful evening," Cas finally said, breaking the silence hesitantly. Alex frowned slightly, looked up from where she'd been staring at the ground—was he trying to joke? Was he trying to get her to talk to him? She wasn't sure. She just looked at him silently, unable to respond. His expression clouded a little. "I'm sorry Alex." Her eyebrows moved together questioningly and he let out an unhappy sigh, looked down. And she could already tell he was going to start beating himself up again before he even opened his mouth. "I failed to protect y—"
She felt so much sudden anger and she snapped, because one person having a pity party was more than enough for her. "Stop, Cas! Just don't." He seemed surprised by her loud outburst, and his surprise turned to hurt as she flat-out ranted at him in misguided anger. "You're always whining about how you didn't protect me this time and how you failed me that time, and just..." her fiery anger was fading and she felt herself teetering on the edge of such great and weary sadness. "I can't..." she attempted, and shook her head, quiet now. "Can you just not?" She stopped, shut her eyes, trying to get a handle on herself, miserable because now she'd gone and been rude and coarse to Cas, who didn't deserve it.

She opened her aching eyes, and he might as well have been a wounded puppy with the way he was looking at her in confused misunderstanding. "Why are you upset with me?" he asked, which only increased Alex's guilt and regret a hundredfold.

"I'm not... I'm not upset with you," she managed weakly, wanting to hide.

He came toward her, using the edge of the truck bed as support as he shakily covered the distance between them. "But you just said—" he started, then stumbled badly, only staying on his feet because of how tightly he held onto the truck and because she'd lunged forward, caught him by pressing both palms into his chest. He seemed ashamed of himself.

"Jesus, Cas, you can barely stand," Alex said, realizing just how drained and weak he must be feeling. "Sit down, okay? Come here." She guided him to the truck bed and yanked the handle up, letting the tail gate down with a loud, creaking thud.

She helped him sit there, and he looked down at his feet, which dangled in the air, a few inches above the ground. "I seem to be more and more useless these days," he commented blandly, setting her off again.

"You're not useless, will you stop saying that?" she asked intensely, not bothering to disguise how mad his self-loathing comments made her. He only looked at her sadly, as if he didn't understand how she could see him as anything other than useless. She wondered if he'd be this weakened or weakened at all if he hadn't been cut off from Heaven. She felt so cynical and guarded, so to blame for what he had become—someone who thought he was useless to her, who felt less than worthy, when she was the one who was useless and unworthy and stupid. "Is it worth it?" She asked him in a decidedly bitter tone. "Being cut off from Heaven, stuck down here with us in the middle of all this hopeless bullshit?"

"Yes," he replied. His eyebrows moved toward each other just slightly in earnest, as if he didn't know how she could even ask him that. "I'm with you."

His honest and clearly heartfelt response touched a raw nerve and the emotion she'd been struggling to hold down broke free, angry tears springing to her eyes. "Why the hell would you want that?" she asked harshly, and turned away, walked to the tail light on the opposite end of the truck, hating herself and feeling like it was her fault Dean had left, her fault Sam hadn't wanted to stay with the family back when they'd been teenagers, her fault she hadn't been good enough for Dad to love more than he had—but mostly she felt that it was her fault that she had compromised Castiel and her fault that the were in so deep now, too deep to walk away from, tangled up in this complicated, uncharted territory.

So when she heard the tailgate groaning and his feet hitting the ground, when she felt his hands on either side of her arms, when she heard him say her name with a voice so full of caring and worry... she couldn't help herself and couldn't fight him off or turn him away, didn't want to. She couldn't refuse her relentless need for him. She surrendered, turned around, went into his arms, let him hold her as the tears came, even though she was ashamed of herself. "How could he?" she asked
brokenly. "Why would he just leave? Why would he abandon us, me?" She truly didn't understand, and her heart felt destroyed. "He said he would never do that. He promised me he wouldn't say yes."

She felt his hand resting against the back of her head, the warm and scruffy skin of his cheek and lower jaw pressed against the side of her temple. Against her back, his hand pulled her a little closer, soothingly, whether he intended it that way or not. And she shut her eyes, the tension she'd been overwrought with fading as she focused on the feeling of his chest rising and falling. How would things be, she wondered, if they were just two people? Not an angel of Heaven and a girl with a thousand unresolved issues and all these inner demons? But they weren't normal. They were Castiel, the outcast angel who had fallen into her family and Alex, the girl whose brothers were main players in the apocalypse, the end of days. She wondered, sadly if she'd been the straw that broke the camel's back. The thing that had tipped the scales for Dean, had made him decide to say "yes."

It made sense now. Alex drew back, looked up into Cas's eyes. "If he hadn't seen us, Cas, he wouldn't have gone," she told him softly, feeling so guilty, but also upset because she shouldn't have to choose between her brother and the one she loved. He pressed his hand against the side of her face.

"Why do you think that?" he asked, his thumb brushing a tear streak away.

"Because of what Lucifer said to us when we were in two-thousand fourteen. He told Dean that he wouldn't say yes to Michael, that he wouldn't kill Sam, that he wouldn't be able to save me from my own foolish choices..." she trailed off, unable to say more.

"Me," Cas said heavily, understanding the unspoken implication of 'foolish choices' and hearing him say that broke something inside of her. He fell into deep and troubled thought. "I'm tearing your family apart, Alex."

She almost smiled at that comment, and it was a jaded, sad little smile. "This family's been on the rocks a long time before you came into the picture, Cas," she told him honestly, her voice carrying heavy notes of sadness as she thought of how true that was. However, she was wondering now what Sam meant by Dean 'picking a fight' with Cas, and she looked at him carefully, suddenly suspicious of what kind of insane things her brother might have said to Cas. "What exactly did Dean say to you?"

Cas didn't have to think back—he answered her immediately, like it was all he'd been thinking about. "That I'm risking your life. That I'm selfish and if I wanted to keep you safe I'd walk away."

"He would say that crap," Alex muttered angrily.

Castiel just looked at her sadly. "It's not 'crap' though, is it?" the question, so gently said, caught her off guard and she looked at him wordlessly. Cas looked down, his expression twisting in anxiety and guilt. "He implied that I'm... taking advantage of you."

Her eyebrows slammed together in an angry frown. "Now that is shit," she told him, leaving no room for argument. But he didn't look convinced and Alex's felt her emotions running high. She could literally pummel her older brother. "You're not taking advantage of me, Cas, and I am not some kid!" She felt breathless from anger at this point, and had to take a few deep breaths. "He acts like I don't know how to think for myself but do. And I know what I'm doing with you."

"And what is that, exactly?" Cas asked her, startling her, not only because of the earnest, anxious way he sounded when he asked—but because she realized she didn't quite know how to answer.
What was she doing with him? Who was he to her? He just wasn't something you could just put into earth terms—boyfriend? Lover? Friend? None of those seemed right. The only word that came to mind for her, when she thought of him, was everything. He was everything. He was so unlike what she had expected to encounter, maybe because she had always believed, deep down, that she was meant to be alone. Castiel was nothing she could have dreamt up in a thousand years. He was a sum of stark contrasts, as intense and as fierce as a volcanic eruption, and yet at the same time as quiet and as gentle as a stream cutting through the heart of a forest. She glimpsed, sometimes, how otherworldly and magnificent he was, how divine. And she wondered why such a creature such as him would look at her the way that he did, would vow himself to her and kiss her in a way that made her feel like she was his very world.

At her silence Cas seemed to grow even more downtrodden and he looked away. "He's right," he said softly. "You deserve far, far better than me."

Shock wasn't a strong enough word for what Alex felt when Cas said that. "Dean said that?" she asked, flabbergasted, and then quickly furious. "I am gonna strangle him," she said, then paused, anger fading as she thought about what she'd just said. "If he's not dead already." She heaved a charged, weary sigh, looked at Castiel tense sadness. Didn't he know how, even though he wasn't technically a man, he was the best one she'd ever met? How could he really think so little of himself? "Cas—there's no one better than you."

His face registered uncertain confusion. "I don't understand how you can think that," he told her, and fell into deep thought, giving the appearance of careful and measured deliberation. "Every minute I spend with you is something I value beyond compare, but… I'm not worthy. I feel very guilty."

His words were like shocking, painful barbs to her. "D-don't feel guilty," she managed, and the way she said it was almost pleading.

"I do, though," he told her, and his morose state only increased as his eyes traveled her face and took in her distressed features. "And now I've upset you."

"I just don't want you to feel guilty," she told him, overwhelmed with how hard this was. She looked up at him imploringly, gathering her courage, trying to tell him all she felt. "You said to me, earlier tonight, that you thought maybe it didn't matter that we're different from each other. And I agree, it doesn't matter, or it doesn't have to matter." His eyes looked back and forth between hers as she forged ahead, laid herself bare in front of him. Her voice lowered because of how vulnerable she felt—she remembered how he'd said their differences didn't change how he felt about her. She needed for him to know it was the same for her. "It doesn't change anything about how I feel, either," she said, and she saw how deeply the words affected him—like he couldn't believe it, like hearing it filled him with wonder and worry all at the same time. She swallowed, continued. "But… we need to face the facts, Cas. The things that make us different make this hard. Hard as hell. There's like a thousand things standing against us." She took his hands in hers gently, hesitantly looking up to him. This was one of the scariest things she'd ever done, telling him her innermost thoughts. "But I… I still want it. I still want this."

"Do you truly mean that?" he asked, appearing to dread her answer, as if he thought at a moment's notice she might change her mind.

"Yes."

"I… I feel the same," he told her earnestly yet falteringly, seeming to be fumbling with the heavy emotional content of the conversation. And she felt exhausted and drained by it, too, but like they were getting somewhere. She couldn't stop now.

His gaze was steady on hers. "You're what matters," he replied, and Alex's face crumpled. He looked stricken and upset, at the end of his rope, afraid almost. "I don't know how to be what you need," he said and it was nearly a protest. "I'm not right for you."

She looked at him through swimming vision. "But Cas... there's no one else. For me, it's you." She said it and swallowed, tried to think of what else to say and could only shrug and turn her hands up, struggling to keep her face from twisting up in all of the emotion she felt in those words. "And that's it." End of story. No one else, ever. That's how deep in she was, how in love she felt.

His expression was so affected that he could have been close to tears. She suddenly found herself being pulled close into an unexpected kiss that was charged with great amounts of soulfulness. She was stunned and set on fire, feeling like sparks were raining down over her. And responding urgently, trying to pour all of the things she felt for him into the kiss, she pressed him forward. He backed up against the truck's side and she thought maybe his knees buckled because his entire body seemed to stagger—and breathless, they broke the kiss, looking at each other in mutual surprise. She was gripping his arms tightly.

He stared at her in dawning wonder, breathing a little heavier than usual. "How do you make me feel so much?" he asked slowly, as if he were in awe all over again at how kissing her made him feel. His question seemed to remind him of something or trigger another question, because his voice lowered, his expression began to border on anxious. "Is it wrong? To want..." he trailed off into silence, giving the impression that he was slightly embarrassed.

"To want what?" she asked. In response, his hand moved down from where it had rested against her waist—and his thumb grazed against her hip bone through the fabric of her hoodie and tank top. She didn't miss his meaning, especially when his dark eyes met hers.

Oh.

She suddenly felt very aware of herself and of him and of how air was in short supply. Her mouth had gone dry, her pulse was like butterfly wings. He wanted to know if it was wrong of himself to want her, and realizing that was what he was asking made her completely flustered and heated in the most pleasant, aching way. "N-no," she stuttered breathlessly, trying to focus on answering his question, instead of how near she was to him. "It's not wrong to want to be close to someone," she told him, and he listened to her intently. She moved her hand from his arm up to the side of his face, brushing the backs of her fingers along the side of his face, touching him tenderly.

He covered her hand with his own, grasping it gently as he leaned in to kiss her again—and then headlights swept over them, startling them, and maybe by instinct, they stepped apart, looked into the light from the approaching car—and then were left realizing it wasn't Sam when the car passed them by, leaving them in silence and darkness once again. And feeling suddenly bashful, Alex backed up a little.

"You, uh, you should sit down," she told him, indicating the tail gate again—she wasn't actually sure how he'd managed to stand all this time, he still looked really drained. He looked at her in faintly perplexed bewilderment, then did as she'd said—sat down in the dead center, and settled himself there... and then surprised her when he very awkwardly patted the spot beside himself. When she looked at him blankly, surprised, he seemed to think it was because she didn't understand the gesture.

"It means I'd like you to sit beside me," he explained, and she was immediately rendered helpless at the cute comment, grinning crookedly and looking down. She knew what it meant—but it always surprised her a little bit when he implemented the things he saw her do.
Should she really be that surprised or amused about the things he was learning and doing these days? He was learning at an amazing fast rate, becoming human in so many ways—and she knew that best of all. After all, he'd had sex with her just a day ago…and apparently, he wanted her again that way. The thought alone could have turned her into jello, and a little uneasy at how fast she was becoming distracted and physically roused, she sat beside him, glancing at him furtively. He wasn't the only one who wanted it again. And she wondered if she laid down right there and pulled him to her, if he'd make love to her right then and there under the starry night sky. She squeezed her legs together tightly, suddenly more than just a little flustered, and cleared her throat self-consciously. She looked up at the night sky, rubbing the back of her neck with her hand, mortified. "So, uh, you been out there?" she asked him, trying to think of anything to say to fill the awkward feeling silence. "To the stars?"

"I've been everywhere," he told her, looking from the sky to her, seeming to be unaware of her more illicit thoughts. "But I like being here." With you. He didn't say it out loud, but he didn't have to. They looked at each other for a long moment, and then he looked back up. "There," he said and pointed. She followed his gaze. "That's the constellation Lyra," he told her. She smiled to herself, because she recognized it. For the moment, she forgot her physical discomfort.

She leaned a little closer to him, indicated either side of Lyra. "And that's Hercules there... and Cygnus on the other side," she said, to which he looked mildly surprised. "What?" she asked in mock defensive surprise, smiling. She shrugged a shoulder up toward her ear humbly. "I once had a study guide to constellations and a twelve hour car ride, what else was I gonna do?"

His expression was fond and his lips were upturned. He looked back to the stars, his face soft and open. She liked when he looked like that. "The star Vega, there at the top right of the Lyra constellation... do you see it?" he asked.

It was kind of hard to miss—it was the brightest one in the constellation. "Yes..." she confirmed slowly, not sure where he was going with this. And for a minute he said nothing and she thought he'd had no greater point to make, that was just showing her a star.

And then he spoke, his husky voice full of years and experiences and memories. "There's a story that the angels tell," he said, and those seven words, the way he said them, rendered Alex into a state of breathless, rapt attention, because whatever he was about to say was important—she could tell. "They say that every star in the galaxy belongs to a person who has lived, is living, or will live. Every star is..." he thought about it for a moment, "an echo of a soul, I suppose you could say." He looked at Vega again, his eyes soft as they reflected the starry host. His mouth lifted up almost imperceptibly into the ghost of a smile, and he looked down. His eyes crinkled a little at the edges. "I always thought that one would be yours."

Totally caught off guard, she couldn't look away from him. "Always?" Strange he would say always, since he was as old as time and she, well, wasn't.

He seemed to realize, and corrected himself. "Ever since I first saw you."

"When you started watching me," she surmised, kind of curious. He'd never told her much about that.

"Yes," he replied, and he seemed distantly reminiscent. "I wasn't even in this vessel yet."

She thought about that. He would have just been an invisible, benevolent spirit, a flash of light at the corner of her eyes... and suddenly, Alex went still as she had a sudden idea, an unexpected epiphany. She thought out loud, not sure why she hadn't realized before. Her voice rose as she spoke in emphatic conviction. "You know... I think I saw you sometimes, Cas."
"What?" he asked, looking at her intently and she was nodding, thinking hard and off in her own little world for the moment, recalling what she'd forgotten.

"I remember sometimes, random times, seeing these bright lights at the edge of my vision, especially after Dean died... but when I looked... there was nothing there." She looked at him in complete awe. "That was you, wasn't it?"

He seemed absolutely stunned by what she was saying. "That's not supposed to be possible..." he became deeply thoughtful and even a little troubled. "How could you have been able to see me?"

"I don't know, you tell me," she said, shaking her head and shrugging, because she had no clue. "I remember thinking I needed glasses or had eye cancer or was just losing my mind."

He took the information in and pondered it, then looked at her questioningly. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I don't think I actually thought about it or put it together until right now," she said, still pretty stunned by the revelation, herself. She made a face that was colored by chagrin. "And hey. Let's be honest. You and I haven't always have that much time for long heart to hearts."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

He was stuck on the fact that she could see him, in however small of a way. "I didn't know you could see me..." Cas said, almost to himself.

"And I didn't know an angel was watching over me and comparing me to stars in the sky," Alex countered playfully, lightly. But what he said next wiped her coy little smile right off her face.

"There is no compare," he stated factually. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." He looked at her simply, unassumingly, like he expected her to say yes, I know that I am, proceed! or something like that.

But she sat there with her mouth hanging open and entire body steeped in a stunned, gorgeous buzz by what he'd just said. Still, she felt like she must have misheard or something. "Me?"

He looked mildly perplexed at her reaction. "You don't think so?"

She took a second to reply, not even sure how to talk about this very awkward, uncomfortable subject matter. "Uh... I... no one's ever really called me beautiful before, except Ellen, but I mean... that was different."

"I don't understand," Cas said, looking at her with one of those squinty frowns of his. "What do you think you are, if not beautiful?"

She felt extremely put on the spot. She thought of her long face and plain features and unremarkable figure and mousy brown hair and total lack of fashion sense. She shrugged self-consciously. "I mean no one's ever really paid much attention to me," she tried to explain. "No one's ever..." her gaze faltered, "looked at me the way you do."

He seemed interested in what she'd just said, studying her closely. "How is it that I look at you?"

Cas seemed perplexed, like he didn't even know.

Alex wasn't even sure how to put it into words. "Like..." she looked off into middle distance, thinking about it. She felt shy all of the sudden, and couldn't look at him. But for him, she always soldiered through her discomfort in favor of helping him understand things. "Like you see me.
Really see me. Like you look at me and see something…” she trailed off, realizing. That the way he looked at her could be compared to someone taking in a starry night sky, a glorious sunrise, a firework show. Like he was beholding something beautiful and awe inspiring. "I, um, I don't think I know how to put it into words," she hedged.

"Why are you flushed?" he asked her, furthering her discomfort. "Have I embarrassed you?"

It was hard to know how to answer. "I just don't understand why an angel would… think I'm… would want to… with me." And she didn't. She'd thought it a million times and believed it: she was unremarkable and not important, forgettable and strange, not even that pretty. But Castiel seemed to think otherwise. He reached over and covered her hand with his, gingerly, and she looked up at him, surprised at the emotion filling his eyes.

He looked deeply vulnerable, which scared Alex, made her go entirely still. He spoke very slowly and stiltedly, but purposefully, like he'd thought his words over for a long time. "Nothing ever meant anything to me until you," he told her, every soft word said with purpose and intention and deep meaningfulness, despite the audible fear he harbored about speaking it aloud. Speechless, completely out of words, she stared at him, unable to believe he'd just said that to her, feeling outside of herself almost. Cas looked down to their hands, his expression intense. "I existed for millennia in this crowded universe, and I was alone." He seemed to have thought about it a lot. His eyes slid back up to hers. "I don't feel that way when I'm with you."

She felt such a deep sense of connection when he said that, because what he said was an echo of what her soul felt—she'd never been alone per say, but she'd always been lonely, out on the edge and knowing that she was missing something… and she'd come to realize that it was him. When he was there at her side, when they were together, she felt part of something, felt like she belonged completely. It was intense and overwhelming and she was suddenly terrified to lose it completely—all she ever did was lose things, people, relationships—it was her curse. She felt like she could cry again, her emotions were in such a sudden whipped up frenzy. "I don't want you to leave me," she blurted out, filled to the brim with fear that he, too, would walk away and desert her.

Castiel was taken aback by the unexplained pleading statement—he sat back a few inches, looking at her with what he was sure was a stunned expression. And he saw how helpless and alone and scared she looked, and it worried him that she was felt that way. He couldn't let her feel that way, he felt almost alarmed that she did. "I won't," he told her in no uncertain terms, trying to convey himself and his devotion in the way he spoke the words, but Alex just became more upset—however, it was in that unsettling, quiet way she had.

"You don't understand. I lose everyone," she said miserably. Her eyes were becoming distant, like she was fading away from him. "Everyone."

His hand still rested on hers and he tightened his fingers through hers, jolting her back from wherever her mind was going. "No. Not everyone," he told her, wishing he knew a way to really reassure her that he wouldn't leave her—not now, and not ever. She didn't look convinced, she just looked fearful—and Cas felt abysmal. He didn't know how to comfort her or show her that he meant it: he wasn't going to leave. How could he prove it? How could he show her? He moved his hand from hers to put his arm around her shoulder, hesitating, because he wasn't sure if she would accept or reject the gesture. He didn't have to wonder long, because even before his arm stopped moving, she responded as if that was what she'd been waiting for—she leaned into him, hugging her arms around his middle, putting her head against the front of his shoulder, nestling against him. Cas could feel how tensely she held herself, and he knew that she was deeply distressed and distracted, unsure.
He realized with a sinking feeling of sadness that maybe he never could fully convince her that he would stay, that he had decided, that it didn't matter to him what the future brought, as long as he could remain at her side, protecting her. He supposed he could understand how she was so hesitant to believe him. She'd lived a life where she'd been told so many things and let down countless times. And now, what Dean had done… Castiel's blood felt hot and angry underneath his skin, and he tightened his hold on her. He realized that she felt so beautiful there against him, and he wasn't sure how something could feel beautiful… but she did. He remembered how she'd felt beautiful from the inside out, when he'd been with her at the Vatican. At the unbidden memories of her like that, Castiel felt as though the night had become ten degrees warmer, and like the collar of his shirt was too tight against his neck.

He thought of what she had made him feel, the place she'd taken him to, the complete dependence he'd felt on her in that moment. And he wondered how that could have really been them, how it had happened. Because he wondered if it could happen again, and if it did happen again, would it happen differently? Was he supposed to initiate it? And if he was, how was he supposed to go about doing that? If it happened again, would it feel the same? Would it comfort her like it had comforted him? Because in the Vatican, being with her, letting her have him like that had brought him relief from an ailment he hadn't realized he'd had. He wondered that if tonight, if he laid them down there in the bed of this truck, if she'd let him have her again, let him give her the only thing he knew how to: himself. And growing uncomfortable and embarrassed at himself, Castiel felt his jaw tighten.

Was it wrong to have these thoughts about her?

He felt her shift slightly in his arms and he tilted his head down toward hers, his lips brushing against the hair at the crown of her head. He didn't know what else to do but to tell her. "I won't leave you," he said, and her arms tightened around him.

How could either have known that what he'd just said, even though he meant it, wouldn't turn out to be true?

A few minutes later, Sam would return to find them like that—feet dangling over the end of the truck tailgate, arms wrapped around each other. He would always remember the sight of them like that as the headlights of the stolen car he was driving washed over them. Sam Winchester realized that night, after seeing them like that together, that Castiel loved his sister. There was just no other way to say it or put it, there was no going back from that conclusion for Sam. It was almost frightening to him to see the angel hold his sister like that, and he wasn't sure why, only that the intensity and quiet fierceness that Cas exuded and held Alex with was staggering to look at.

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The Next Morning
Battle Creek, Michigan

Sam let out a heavy, stressed out sigh, kept one hand on the steering wheel of the stolen Jeep while he rubbed the back of his neck, trying to work out a sore knot that had built up there overnight. He glanced into the rear view and saw Alex looking out the window, Cas beside her. They had been driving around Battle Creek for a couple hours now, looking for Dean the old fashioned way: trying to spot the Impala. He'd called Bobby and let him know what was going on, asked him to keep an ear out for any leads. But truthfully, Sam felt almost hopeless. He was so devastated that Dean would do this. Even if they did find him, what if it was too late? And if it wasn't too late, what if Dean refused to get down off the proverbial ledge?

Sam felt so foul at the thought of Dean. This was just unfair to everyone, this was the definition of
fucked up. He didn't understand why Dean thought saying yes to Michael would do anyone any 
good. Didn't he remember about how Lucifer was supposed to be present for the angelic boxing 
match, too? Didn't he remember that Sam was under no circumstances saying yes, especially not 
now? He'd made his mind up a long time ago to fight tooth and nail not to let the devil have him, 
ever.

Sam scanned the parking lot of another motel they cruised by, hopeful to see the familiar sleek 
black shape of his brother's car—but, nothing. In the back seat, Alex was looking at the side and 
back of Sam's head anxiously, and he saw it when he glanced into the rear view mirror again. 
Jesus, Dean, how could you do this to us?

Sam wasn't used to being the one in charge. Not that he wasn't a take-charge kind of guy, but with 
Dean, there was only room for one leader. Sam had basically never been in charge of the family or 
in charge of taking care of his twin—not like Dean had. So today he was trying not to crack under 
the pressure he was putting on himself to find his brother, save the world, and keep his family safe. 
He'd been trying to focus on one small step at a time. Steal a car. Get to Battle Creek. Track down 
Lisa. Make sure Alex didn't fall apart, make sure Cas rested up and got better as fast as possible. 
He'd actually told Sam a few hours ago he thought he was well enough to start shazaming around 
again, but Sam told him to save it for when they found Dean, just in case it weakened him again.

Sam felt his stress tripling as they passed a bar. No Impala. They'd gone to see Lisa as soon as they 
got into town and found out Dean had told her goodbye, basically. Sam was close to panicking. 
Where the hell was Dean? There were only so many bars and motels and gas stations in this town, 
and they'd driven by most of them twice now.

Seeing Lisa again had been weird, brought back a lot of memories for Sam. She'd been shocked to 
see them, and then maybe a little affronted and weirded out when Cas had asked within her earshot, 
"this is the woman who Dean loves?"

It was weird how Cas could be so innocent and childlike in his cluelessness one minute, then 
intense at frightening levels at other times. Maybe that's why Sam felt the beginnings of worry 
when it came to Cas and Alex. Because he wasn't entirely sure what the guy was capable of. But, if 
Cas loved Alex—and Sam knew he did—he knew that the angel would never hurt her. Sam wished 
Dean could see the two of them right now, actually. Alex distracted and worried, Cas watchful and 
attentive, worried about her. As they'd driven all night, the two of them hadn't said much, had just 
stayed close to each other. Alex had fallen asleep for about four hours, and Cas's shoulder had been 
her pillow.

Even if it was probably the oddest pairing on the planet, Sam could appreciate the fact that 
someone obviously cared so much about his baby sister's wellbeing. He didn't understand why 
Dean couldn't. If Dean was going to flip his shit over seeing a kiss or whatever, Sam didn't even 
want to know what Dean would have done if he'd seen what Sam had, in the kitchen of that 
restaurant—ugh. Sam got embarrassed fast, remembering Cas and Alex making out against the 
wall. Dean would probably have murdered Castiel point blank if he'd seen that.

Sam thought about how protective Dean was, how overprotective… and how it made zero sense 
how he thought walking away and leaving them right now was the right thing to do. Had Dean lost 
his mind? Had he literally gone insane? Sam was so harrowed by the entire thing. His only hope 
was that he could talk some sense into his brother when… if… they found him.

He slowed down as they drove by another motel parking lot. He scanned the cars parked there, 
desperate to see the familiar sight of the Impala.
Dean folded up his beloved, worn out leather jacket and set it down into the brown box. He drew his keys out of his back pocket, looked down at them, feeling an unexpected twinge—Alex's old silver whistle dangled from the silver loop, next to the couple of keys he owned. His chest clenched in pain, and he closed his fingers around the whistle and keys, taking a moment, and then tossing them down on top of the jacket. He took his gun out of his waistband and removed the magazine, checked it for bullets, snapped it back in and set the pistol in there beside the keys. And that was it. These things were what he would leave behind.

Dean wondered how the hell these three little things were all that would be left of him when he was gone—and only one of them was actually his. The gun. The jacket? That was Dad's. The whistle? That was Alex's.

If Dean had been an optimist, he wouldn't be doing this, packing his things and preparing to leave a letter for the people he loved. But he wasn't an optimist, he was a realist. Yeah, Michael had said he'd spare Dean and maybe he would. But Dean wasn't banking on it—he didn't exactly trust angels or take them at their word. Basically, he didn't foresee himself coming back from what he was about to do. And it sucked a lot, but in his mind, he was taking one for the team and saving the people that he could.

Dean poured himself some dark whiskey and took a sip of the familiar amber liquid. It burned good. If nothing else, he was gonna make sure Michael agreed to some specific things. Guarantees of safety. For Lisa and Ben, Bobby. And for his sister, who needed someone to look after her more than almost anyone. He thought of how stupid she was, how shortsighted. There was a painful feeling in the bottom of his throat when he thought about leaving her alone. He'd promised he never would.

Forcing himself to focus, Dean pulled a chair up to the little motel table, took a pen up in his hand and pulled a sheet of motel letterhead to himself. He paused, the reality of what he was doing coming over him all over again.

He began to write.

Sam, Alex, and Bobby—

Given what's about to happen, I'll be surprised if this package ever finds you. But if it does, I want you three to know that what I'm doing isn't about giving up. John taught us better than that. This is about time. We've run out of it.

Left the Impala in Cicero. Where I'm going, we don't need roads. I know you'll look after her for me. Bobby—you've taken more for the team than anyone could ever ask. That makes you an honorary Winchester in my book.

Sam. You told me once that you pray every day. Not sure if that's still true. Probably isn't, but if it is, give it one last try for me. And Sammy—one Winchester lost to this fight is enough. When it's over, after you've said yes and given in to Lucifer, I want you to know I'm gonna make good on what we talked about. You won't be alone at the end. I love you and I'm sorry it had to end this way, but at least it'll be the two of us together, right?

Alex. Words can't say how much I love you. Please believe me when I say that everything I ever did was me trying to protect you. Hopefully what I'm about to do will make up for all the times I failed. I know it's hard to understand, but I'm not just doing this for the greater good—I'm also doing it for you. I know you don't believe me but I just want what's best for you. I mean that. Like I always told
you, kiddo: keep your chin up, your head down, your aim straight. Know that I'm proud of you.

If I come back from this, I don't expect any of you to forgive me, and that's okay. I'm doing this because it's the right thing to do. You all know what a stubborn son of a bitch I am, so I hope you believe me when I say I didn't want to do this, and honestly, as I write this letter, I still don't. I'd rather stay here, with you crazy ole bastards. But that's not an option anymore. I know that me saying 'no' to Michael is what causes all that crap in 2014. I've decided I can't let that version of tomorrow happen. So, here's to a brighter future.

Give 'em hell, kids, and pour a cold one for me sometime.

— Dean

It wasn't the best letter in the world, it left miles of things unsaid, but it would have to do. He folded it up, put it in an envelope and set it on top of everything he'd packed up in the box of his personal effects. He sealed the box slowly, taking his time. Like he'd said in the letter, he wasn't eager to do this. Not at all. And he kept catching sight of himself in the mirror above the dresser and feeling despicable. No letter would ever make Sam or Alex understand. Especially Alex. He knew how abandoned she'd feel, and it caused him so much pain that he had to stop and bring a hand to his face. He'd promised Dad he'd always take care of Sammy and Al, and look at him. He was leaving them to the mercy of the world, he was accepting the fact that Sam would be Lucifer's vessel, he was leaving Alex without even saying goodbye—taking off after one of the worst, if not the worst fight they'd ever had. And he thought of the three of them playing army men in the back of the car on long road trips and shoving Legos into the crevices of the Impala and racing each other up and down motel hallways and sharing candy late at night when Dad wasn't there and Alex blowing him smoochy kisses when she'd been really little and Sam screaming with victorious glee the one time he beat Dean at arm wrestling. And Dean lost it for a minute, crying shamefully, quietly, hating the sound of his shuddering breaths. He tightened his hand on his face. He was overwhelmed with knowledge of what he was losing, walking away from. The family that he loved with everything he had.

After a minute, Dean forcefully composed himself, finished taping the box shut, addressed it to Bobby, and decided to pour himself some more whiskey. He wasn't too affected by the stuff anymore, but it was worth a shot to try and dull the pain. And then heard a sound behind himself.

"What, are you sending someone a candy-gram?" Sam asked, and Dean turned to face his siblings —Sam looked grim and disappointed, Alex like she might literally kill him. And the sight of them —he thought he'd laid eyes on them for the last time—almost broke him.

"How'd you find me?" he asked hollowly, not letting them see how deeply affected he was. And then without warning Alex went apeshit, lunged at him across the dividing space and socked him across the face with so much vicious force that he stumbled backwards and subsequently knocked everything off the little motel table.

Shocked at the wallop the punch had packed, Dean reeled, just barely remaining on his feet, automatically clutching at his face—he could taste blood, somehow he'd bitten the inside of his mouth or something. "Holy shit, Alex!" Dean exclaimed, looking at his fuming little sister in a mixture of indignant anger and slightly impressed surprise at how good of a swing she could throw. "Jesus!" he gingerly touched his jaw.

"Don't act like you don't deserve that," she spat at him, livid and trembling, madder than he'd seen her in a long, long time. "What the hell are you doing?"
Dean glanced at Sam, who stood off, looking chagrined. And he was so overwhelmed with grief, because he realized there just wasn't a way for him to explain it. Not really. And he couldn't afford to let them in, or see how he was really feeling. If he was gonna do this, he had to make them think he was an asshole. It'd make it easier on all of them, in the end. "I'm doing what I have to do," Dean told her, reverting to his cold demeanor.

"No one makes Dean Winchester do anything," she challenged him, and he looked down. She would have been right about that up until recently.

"You're gonna kill yourself, right?" Sam asked quietly, and Dean let out an jaded breath.

"I'm not gonna kill myself."

"No? You told me you're gonna let Michael make you his Muppet... that's basically kissing your life goodbye, Dean." Sam shook his head, disgusted. "What the hell, man? This is how it ends? You just... walk out on us?"

"Yeah, I guess," Dean said apathetically, and then saw Alex's jaw clench, her fists curl in, and he leaned away from her, eyeing her closely. "Easy, tiger, not the face," he told her, and got a dirty look as she crossed her arms and stalked a few steps off, as if to contain herself.

Sam came closer, his expression full of accusing anger. "How could you do that, Dean? Leave us like that?"

And all the tender things Dean had been feeling for his siblings a minute ago were forgotten in favor of indignant anger. "How could I?" Dean asked, unable to believe Sam of all people would ask him that. It sparked sudden anger in him, because Sam wasn't the one who knew what it felt like to be abandoned—that was Dean. "All you've ever done is run away!" he said loudly, and Sam's face fell guiltily.

"Oh so that makes it okay?" Alex asked him, and her bitchy tone really pushed some of Dean's buttons, because no, oh no, he had not forgotten about their little talk outside the church or the sight of her kissing Cas. He looked at her bitterly, feeling ganged up on, hopeless, angry, helpless.

"You know, you're a lot of big talk Al, but you're not in my shoes. If I remember right, you've run away too, remember? Where was all your self-righteous crap then?" He almost sneered at this point. "And by the way, where's your precious boyfriend? Left like usual, didn't he?"

"Maybe we don't," Alex said. "But we will."

Her fighting spirit was admirable but unfortunately wasted on him. "No... we won't," he told her unpleasantly, then set them both with an immovable, decided look. "Guys—my mind's made up. I'm doing this, like it or not."

"Not gonna happen," Sam said quietly, and his eyes jumped up to Dean's. "You know we have to
stop you."

Dean nodded, accepting that this was where it was gonna have to go. "Yeah, well, you can try," he told them, and there was a great, weighty sadness on his shoulders as he looked between the two of them. He didn't want to have to do this. Trying to dissuade them, he looked at Sam pointedly. "Just remember: You're not all hopped up on demon blood this time, Sam. And Barbie over there—yeah, she got the jump on me a minute ago, but she isn't exactly a heavyweight."

"We're not gonna fight you Dean," his sister said, to which he shrugged, his mouth pressing into a hard line.

"You're gonna have to," he told her.

"No. We're not," Sam said. "You're gonna come nice and quiet."

Dean chuckled just barely, a short and airy sound. They had another thing coming if they really thought that he was gonna just go with them. "Says who?" he asked.

And then behind him, a familiar, deep voice. "Says me."

Dean whipped around to find Castiel standing behind him, and before Dean could even open his mouth, he felt Cas's fingers touching to his forehead—and then the world went pitch black.

Chapter End Notes

Something I noticed while writing this chap/watching the episode for reference: In Point of No Return, in the scene where Dean is packing his belongings? THERE IS A FRIGGING SILVER WHISTLE ON HIS KEYCHAIN.
Bobby Singer wasn't having what you'd call the best day. Hell, he wasn't having what you'd call the best year. He'd lost movement in both of his legs, was stuck in a wheelchair for the rest of his life, and had been forced to kill his wife all over again last month—something a man should never have to do once, let alone twice—and now? Now Sam had called to let him know that Dean was being a damn fool—running off to say yes to Michael. Of all the things Bobby had been expecting to hear Sam say… that hadn't been it.

What the hell was the kid thinking?

It had been a few hours since Sam had called and Bobby would be pacing if his damn legs worked. He'd resigned himself instead to neurotically shuffling through some notes and newspaper clippings he was compiling. It sure felt good to be so damn useless, he thought cynically. He thought of Dean, Sam, Alex. Those poor, crazy kids. As it if weren't bad enough to be them, add to it the mess they were in these days. They'd had such a shit excuse for a childhood and a sorry excuse for a father in John Winchester.

Like father, like son, Bobby thought somberly. Both of them tough as nails and twice as sharp, both of them stubborn as a mule. Both of them running off on the family at the worst time possible. What bothered Bobby is that he had expected a hell of a lot more from Dean. 'Course, he didn't know the full story of why in the sam hill Dean would think saying yes to Michael was a good idea, unless he'd given up hope on other options, but that was the thing… that just didn't seem like Dean to give up. Ever. Bobby hoped Dean had some other explanation for what he was doing.

Morning light streamed in through the window and Bobby leaned over his desk and the clutter on it, fighting a massive headache. Time was just running short, he felt it in his bones. He'd been feeling it for awhile now, this looming feeling that the grand finale was coming closer and closer. But he pushed past the urge to give up ever day, refusing to throw in the towel.

At that very moment, three people suddenly appeared out of the naked air. Sam—supporting an unconscious, slumped over Dean—and Castiel, a hand on Sam's shoulder.

Startled, Bobby sat back in his wheelchair. "Dammit, boys!" he exclaimed. "A little heads up woulda been nice," he said, to which Sam mumbled "sorry, Bobby," while he set Dean down onto the pullout cot Bobby had set up in the office to sleep in. Bobby paused, frowned. "Wait, where's Alex?"

"On her way," Cas said, and disappeared without further explanation. Bobby stared at the empty space the angel had just been standing in. Well that was just plain disconcerting, no matter how many times he saw it.

"Still in Battle Creek, getting the rest of Dean's crap together and into the Impala," Sam explained wearily, standing over his brother and running a hand through his hair.

Bobby wheeled himself from behind his desk, looking Dean over. "So you found him," he said, stating the blessed obvious.
"Yeah. We did." Sam rubbed his palm down over his mouth, crossed his arms, sighed grimly. "This isn't good, Bobby," he said, and Bobby could tell Sam was deeply, deeply worried and afraid. "Not good at all." Sam shrugged off his jacket and tossed it over a chair. He seemed beaten and drained.

"Sit down, kid," Bobby said, gesturing to an empty chair, wishing he could take some of the load for Sam, help him somehow. "Tell me what happened."

Sam dragged the chair over and proceeded to give him the quick three-minute summary of how Dean had been acting strange for the past few weeks, how he'd been uncharacteristically hopeless and depressed and run off after spouting craziness about the angels and Michael and changing the future. Sam said that their confrontation with the Whore of Babylon had seemed to send him over the edge. "Well that and Cas and Alex," Sam was saying.

"Cas and Alex?" Bobby repeated. "What about 'em?"

Sam grew pensive. "Their, uh… relationship."

Bobby squinted. "Come again?"

Sam looked unsure of what to say. "It's—" he stopped talking when they heard the front door open. Speak of the devils. Alex stormed around the corner and into the office, looking about as mad as a wet hen. Cas followed after her.

"Hey, did you guys abracadabra the car over?" Sam asked, but his sister stopped dead center of the room and ignored his question completely.

"He left a fucking *suicide* note," she raged, waving a letter angrily at her side for emphasis. "I found it in that box of stuff he had at the motel."

Sam, who had stood up, held his hand out. "Hey. Calm down, all right?" he looked at her meaningfully. "It's okay now."

"Yeah sure it is," she muttered sullenly. Sam said nothing, but took the letter from her and read it over.

Bobby looked at Alex closely, noticing how when she and Cas exchanged a glance, her anger seemed to lessen, her shoulders seemed to relax, she visibly calmed down. What *relationship*? He was plain stumped at what Sam had said. That was the thing about the word *relationship*, it could carry a million and one definitions. Alex maybe felt Bobby's frowning stare and looked at him, seemed to remember her manners, finally. "Hi, Bobby," she said, sounding a little abashed at her outburst.

He gave her a wan little smile as hello and then looked at Cas, gave him a single nod. The angel seemed to realize he hadn't made a greeting, either. "Hello, Bobby," he intoned deeply, his eyes squinted into little slits. Hmm. *Hello yourself,* Bobby thought, looking at the angel carefully, then wheeling himself back over to behind his desk, realizing today was about to get real interesting.

He picked up a newspaper clipping off of his desk, pretended to be reading it, but was really looking at Alex and Cas from underneath the brim of his ball cap, Cas especially. Bobby hadn't really noticed before because he'd always just glanced at Cas, not really looked at him good and long. The angel was taller and bigger than Bobby remembered him being—and as the angel stood at the edge of the room, watchful and frowning as usual, Bobby realized he really wasn't that much shorter than Sam, maybe a few inches, and that the angel was built much more solidly than Bobby
Alex wasn't a small girl by any means, she was Bobby's height, just three proud inches under six feet tall—but her petite build made her look pretty unsubstantial at the moment as she stood between Cas and Sam. Bobby looked at his girl sadly. *His girl*—he thought that without even meaning to. He had a special place for all of the Winchester kids in his heart. Karen had always wanted kids, had told Bobby she could see him with a little girl of his own. Bobby hadn't really agreed with her at the time, had been sure he'd be a failure as a dad, would end up being too much like *his* old man. But these days, he looked at the Winchester bunch and felt like if he were ever to have kids… these three would be them.

Bobby recalled the months Alex had been with him after Dean died, remembered how beyond sad she'd been and how hard she'd tried to hide it from him. But how she hadn't been able. They'd never talked about it, but one night he'd found her with a gun out in the tool shed, and the way she'd been contemplating that thing… he'd taken it from her, told her "don't you dare." And that had been it. He'd never mentioned it or brought it up again. All her life, well, the entire time he'd known the family, he'd worried about her more than Sam and Dean, period, and these days weren't no different. So if Sam meant that this angel guy was *interested* in her, Bobby was immediately concerned and was going to make it his business to find out more as soon as he could. Cuz no man, angel, demon, whatever gonna even think about touching that girl or being with her unless he had good—no, the *best*—intentions.

Sam paced slowly, reading over the letter as Alex took her hooded jacket off and set it over where Sam's was. Predictably, she wore a flannel shirt underneath, sleeves rolled halfway up her arms. As usual, Cas didn't remove his jacket—he just stood there, hovering awkwardly at the edge of the room while Alex waited in the middle of the study with folded arms for Sam to finish reading. Bobby wondered offhandedly why Cas wore that damn trench coat twenty-four-seven. He really didn't know too much about the guy, had only seen him a few times. Unlike Sam and Dean, Bobby hadn't met any other angel than Cas—but from what the boys told him, Cas was the only one worth his weight. The only one that they could trust.

"Wow," Sam said, finishing the letter and shrugging his eyebrows up briefly, then coming over and handing the letter over the desk.

Bobby took it and scanned it fast—and as he digested the words written in Dean's bold, strong hand, his heart sank. The kid had really been about to do it, hadn't he? Bobby shook his head, fighting his feelings. But not one to foul up the mood, not one to let his inner despair show, he looked up, keeping his voice and face neutral. "So what's the plan, kids?" he asked, setting the letter down when he'd finished it. "What are we gonna do with this idjit when he rises and shines?"

Sam and Alex looked at each other, then they both looked at Cas—his stern glare rested on Dean, who still was laid out on the cot, dead to the world for now. The halo usually looked stern, and such was the case today, but upon closer inspection, Bobby realized he was *angry*, but at a deeper and quieter level than the rest of them. It was a little unsettling, actually.

"I dunno," Sam finally said, his eyebrows pressing in toward each other as he threw his hands up briefly, seeming to have no real ideas. "Try and talk him out of it, I guess."

"You ever been able to talk him outta *anything*?" Bobby asked, sarcastically commenting on Dean's stubborn streak.

Sam's shoulders squared in frustration. "So we change his mind," Sam said, spreading his hands out for emphasis. "We find another way for us to kill the devil or stop the angels," Sam paused looked at Bobby hopefully. "Say you got something, Bobby. Anything."
Bobby looked at him grimly. He may have been a considerate man, but he wasn't a liar, and he wasn't about to give Sam false hope. "Son, I hate it but I ain't. I been runnin' ragged over here trying to find something—hell, anything—but I got jack squat."

His words visibly hit both of the Winchesters hard, and Bobby could tell they hadn't wanted to hear that. "So you're saying Dean's right—that we don't have any options?" Sam asked in crushed disbelief.

Bobby paused, then tried the optimist's approach. "I'm sayin' I ain't found it yet." He gestured at his cluttered desk. "I got a few books in today that we can look through, some print outs from the internet... who's up for a read through of the Apocrypha?"

Sam didn't look thrilled, but he came over, dragging the chair he'd sat in before over to the side of Bobby's desk and there he took a seat, pulled a book off the top of a pile and studied the cover. Just then, a low, rumbling groan came from the cot and everyone in the room turned to look at Dean, who was opening his eyes and coming to. "The hell?" he mumbled, looking around. He pushed himself up, his face already twisting from groggy confusion into an angry glare.

"Mornin', sunshine," Bobby commented gruffly, testing the waters. Dean shot him an unhappy look and then looked around at the occupants of the room suspiciously. While Castiel and Alex seemed decidedly hostile, Sam just looked at him sidelong, a little guiltily.

"What, we having an intervention?" Dean asked snidely.

"Do we need to?" Bobby countered, getting an evil side eye.

"Dean, we brought you here because we're gonna find a solution, okay?" Sam said, setting down the book he'd been holding and drawing Dean's sullen attention. The brothers locked gazes, and there was a great amount of animosity there.

"A solution." Dean repeated churlishly.

Sam's jaw tensed and lofty sarcasm filled his voice. "Yeah. Something besides losing your friggin' mind, abandoning your family, and becoming the angel's newest show puppet." Sam was deeply unhappy with Dean and it showed.

Dean's jaw worked overtime in frustrated tension and he looked at his brother balefully. "Time's running out," he said emphatically, voice rising. "Don't you get that?"

"Yeah Dean, I do," Sam retorted with surprising intensity and great amounts of barely withheld anger. "Which is why we need to hold it together and figure out another way."

For a second, Bobby wondered if the two brothers would leap across the distance separating them and start rolling around on the ground, trading punches. That's how intense the glares were. But then Dean sat back, rolled his eyes and sighed in sickened annoyance, apparently so disgusted that he couldn't speak any more to Sam. He stood up, made as if to walk out of the room—and Castiel moved, blocked the way out of the room.

Dean leveled the angel with a challenging, narrow-eyed stare. "What, I can't go get a beer out of the fridge?"

Cas's chin raised a fraction of an inch and his eyes further narrowed into slits. "No."

Bobby wondered if this was about to get physical as he watched the two guys stare each other down—Sam and Alex seemed to be wondering the same thing, looking tense and ready to jump
forward at a second's notice. And then Dean looked over at Alex, who stood a little further off, in front of the other desk Bobby had against the far wall opposite of the window. "You wanna call your attack dog off?" he asked her darkly.

Bobby frowned at the way Dean said that, the way he looked at his sister so contemptuously—something was off. Alex said nothing—her eyes bored back into Dean's stormily, her mouth was set in a firm line. And when she made no reply, Dean rolled his eyes and turned away, paced back over across the room, back toward the window.

"Yeah, no, this is good," Dean commented disingenuously. "This is great. Really. Let's just sit here and read books." He gave a humorless chuckle and it was an almost angry sound. "Listen, you guys want to gank el Diablo, right? This is how we do it. Me."

Sam sat back in his chair, looked up at Dean thoroughly. "Aren't you forgetting that I'd need to say yes too for that to happen?" He asked testily, to which his brother again chuckled.

"Oh no," Dean said, a bitter smile playing on his lips. "I haven't forgotten."

Sam's face twisted into hurt confusion. Dean ignored it. "Dean, this isn't you," Alex said, both angry and at a loss at his behavior. "Why are you being like this?"

He looked at her with eyes that seemed dead, cold. "Trust me, sweetheart. This is me," he said flippantly, without feeling. "Get used to it."

Clearly having to control her temper, Alex looked down and shook her head, a plastered, pursed expression like a sickened smile stretched across her lips. She looked a lot like Sam at that moment. Beside her, Castiel was looking at her with a frown—his expression grew stormier when his eyes flickered over to Dean, who was folding his arms now, jutting his chin into the air. "I don't care what any of you say. I've made up my mind. It's been eight long-ass months of turned pages and screwed pooches and total bullshit. I'm done, man." He spread his arms and grinned humorlessly. "Bring on the apocalypse."

Bobby was starting to get tired of Dean's attitude. "You wanna take it down a notch there, Ghandi?" He flipped a page of the book in front of him unseeingly. "You ain't helpin'."

Dean gave him a disrespectful little smile. "Yeah, well, why don't you let me get out of your hair, then?"

Bobby looked up and at Dean, square in the eye, studying him for a minute, disappointed and disillusioned at the way the kid was acting. "What the hell happened to you?" he asked. Dean seemed to have expected the question.

"Reality happened," he said forcefully, coming forward to stare at Bobby across the desk. He was becoming intensely angry. "Nuclear's the only option we have left—I'm trying to tell you—Michael can ice the devil, save a boatload of people!"

"But not all of 'em," Bobby replied evenly, firmly, not rising to Dean's level of confrontational rage. "We gotta think of something else."

Dean nodded shallowly, unhappy, looking from Bobby to Sam a few times, then in Castiel and Alex's direction, clearly pissed. He retreated back toward the wall he'd been standing against. "You guys sound like a broken record—there is no Plan B or opt out, and the longer we stall, the worse it gets!"

"Worse what gets?"
"What they do to my family!" Dean all by shouted, and Bobby didn't really get what Dean was hedging at. He sounded pretty far gone, to be honest. "And besides that, if Lucifer burns this mother down, and I coulda done something about it, guess what?" He gestured angrily at himself. "That's on me!"

Bobby saw the anger, but more than that, he saw fear. Lots of it. And gently now, he regarded Dean. "You can't give up, son."

Dean's head rolled forward as he looked down, a cynical smile on his face and a soft little laugh escaping his lips. Bobby felt himself frowning a little, unsure what was so funny. And then Dean looked back up, his expression becoming cold with anger and something almost like loathing. "You're not my father," he told Bobby, and the entire room seemed to grow unnaturally quiet. Dean stared at Bobby bitterly. "And you ain't in my shoes."

Bobby felt like he'd been slapped in the face—Dean's words to him burning a very raw nerve, just like Dean had intended them to. And Alex's arms fell to her sides as she stared at her brother with a slack jaw, horrified at what he'd just said. "Dean! What the fuck?" she demanded, her features overwrought with severe disbelief, and then righteous anger. "Don't talk to him like that!"

In response, her brother's angry seemed to triple and he looked at her almost hatefully. "You know what, just can it, princess," he retorted, staring down his nose at her with an accusing glare. "I've had it with all your little moral superiority bullshit lately—last time I checked, screwing around with an angel doesn't make you a saint."

Her mouth had dropped open at what he'd said—Sam was wide-eyed and looking at his brother in disbelief, Castiel's brows were knit together in deep confusion, Dean looked almost sick with anger, Bobby felt confused as all get out at the implication.

"What the hell is your problem?" Alex asked her brother, voice trembling with quiet rage.

"My problem?" Dean asked in severe surprise, then he gestured at Cas, threw an arm in his direction. "He isn't a man, Alex!"

Her eyebrows shot up in momentary shock, and then she became chillingly calm. "He's more of one than you've ever been," she said, shocking everyone with the cold and hateful way she said it.

Dean's expression was filled with quiet, rising fury. "You shut your mouth," he said lowly, voice trembling, as if he were holding back.

"No, you shut your mouth!" she all but roared, suddenly at full volume again and angry as hell—Sam was standing up, appearing to be thinking about intervening—and Cas, who stood about five feet back from Alex looked uncertain about what to do, his concerned expression becoming more and more tension-filled—but Dean and Alex were oblivious to everything but each other.

"You act like you can just do whatever the hell you want to and tear this family apart and screw over everyone you supposedly love?!" Alex looked at him like she absolutely despised him. "You're fucking heartless!"

Maybe it was a gut reaction, maybe it was an accident fueled by blind rage, maybe he didn't mean to do it exactly how he did. All Bobby knew is that the second she accused him of being heartless, Dean seemed to snap—his face became almost animalistic with violent fury, and in the space of a second, he grabbed his sister by the front of her shirt and with an enraged shout of "That's not true!" he blindly shoved her as hard as he could—she let out a cry of surprise and went hurtling back into the low bookshelf against the wall, back-first—there was a loud, heavy thud as she hit it,
books went tumbling to the floor, and Alex would have fallen forward onto the ground from the shock of the impact, but Cas had moved startlingly fast and was in front of her, breaking her fall before she was even halfway down, catching her by grabbing her waist and letting her fall into him—her palms hit against his shoulders, and she instinctually clutched onto him. Startled and breathless, she looked at the angel, wide-eyed, and then at the same time, the two of them looked at Dean, whose face had fallen—he stood there, shocked, breathless, arms hanging at his sides limply.

"Dean, what the hell?!" Sam demanded, striding over to his brother and shoving him back toward the cot. Dean didn't react, just kept staring at his sister in abject horror, like he was in physical shock.

Bobby stared at Dean, so angry he could barely form a coherent thought. "Have you lost your damn mind, boy?!" If his legs weren't currently on layaway, Bobby would have slapped that damn kid so hard, his clothes would be out of style when he quit rolling.

Cas was holding Alex with what looked like utmost gentleness and worry, standing her up slowly from the strange forward-lean she'd been in against him, looking her over as if to assess any injuries, his expression shockingly concerned, hands now gently holding either of her arms. Dazed, Alex looked up at Cas, nodded silently, telling him she was okay to stand, Bobby guessed. Because Cas looked away from her at that point, and to Dean. And his expression was absolutely, undeniably murderous.

"Al, I'm sorry, I—" Dean started, trying to look at his sister, trying to make Sam move away from in front of him—and then suddenly Sam was knocked aside and Dean was lifted off his feet—Cas had him by the front of his shirt in one hand and he whirled him, slammed him painfully into the wall of the office, and there was a loud sound from the impact—then cracking and crumbling.

Dean was groaning loudly, disoriented from the brutal attack—his shoulders had broken through the drywall completely from the force Castiel used. His feet dangled off the ground as Cas's fists tightened into his shirt. The angel's face was twisted, almost a snarl. "How dare you lay a hand on her—" Castiel demanded in a low, furious growl.

"Cas, whoa, whoa," Sam said, approaching them and attempting to get Cas to calm down, holding his hands out appeasingly, maybe about to try and break the two apart—but Cas looked at Sam and Sam froze, a shocked look on his face as he suddenly slid back several inches across the floor without moving his feet at all, as if he'd been invisibly pushed. Bobby watched, wide-eyed, unsure what the hell was happening.

"Ungh, Christ," Dean groaned in pain, and then uselessly grabbed Cas's wrists, trying to pry the angel off himself. Cas's expression just darkened and he pulled Dean out of the wall and then slammed him back in.

"Cas stop!" Alex shouted and the angel froze, seeming to come out of some sort of trance. She looked from him to Dean, who looked back at his sister, shamefaced and hurt. Her face became less fearful and more contemptuous, sad even. "He's not worth it," she said bitterly, and Dean looked heartbroken. Cas hadn't moved a muscle, and Alex looked back at him. "Please."

The angel held her gaze, a muscle jerked in his jaw, he looked back at Dean…and then let go, allowing Dean to drop to the ground at his feet. Dean caught himself on his hands, looking up from all fours at Cas, out of breath, expression distorted by pain. "The next time you touch her like that... I won't stop," Castiel told him in no uncertain terms, a bold, open threat. His voice lowered. "Do you understand me?" Dean must have taken too long to reply, because he was suddenly dragged to his feet. "Answer me," Castiel demanded, and Dean stared at him, breathing hard.
"Yeah I understand you," Dean spat after staring at Cas hard for a couple beats. Cas looked back and forth between his eyes and then roughly let go. The two of them stared at each other, full of animosity, and Bobby felt like he was starting to get what Sam meant about relationship. He sat there, looking at the hole in his damn wall and the way that everyone in the damn room was at each other's throats and got mad, mad as hell.

"Okay, look, someone wanna tell me what the sam hill—" Bobby started, and then was cut short when Cas suddenly hunched over, grabbing his head as if in pain, a horrible, sharp groan of pain breaking through his gritted teeth.

"What's wrong?" Alex asked him, her face full of fear and shock—she'd immediately grabbed one of his arms with both of her hands when he bent over, maybe trying to help him stand. He was grimacing painfully, and looked at her speechlessly, a hand still on his head.

"Cas, you okay?" Sam asked cautiously.

The angel looked at him with a rigid expression, his hand falling away from his face. "No." He gave no further explanation.

"What is it?" Alex asked him intensely.

He frowned deeply, staring at the space ahead of himself gravely. "Something's happening."

"What? What's happening?" she pressed in rising panic. He looked at her finally.

"I'll find out." He looked at Dean darkly, then at her, then at Sam, who gave a subtle little nod at Cas. "Stay with Sam," Castiel told her and then with a blast of wind, he disappeared completely, leaving a very shocked Alex standing there. Papers fluttered wildly.

Dean, who was now sitting on the cot, leaning heavily over his knees and clearly in a good amount of pain, looked at the twins in disbelief, getting what Cas had meant when he said that to Sam. That Sam needed to protect Alex from Dean. "The hell does he think he is?" he muttered angrily, to which Sam gave his brother one of those are-you-fucking-kidding-me glares.

"The hell do you think you are?" Sam challenged, and then turned to his sister, looking her over. "You okay?" he asked her meaningfully and she didn't say anything to him, just looked up at him with unreadable eyes.

Alex eyed Dean sidelong, appearing to be betrayed and not so much angry as heartbroken. Dean's face was filled with regret and shame at that point, and he dropped the tough guy act. "I'm sorry, I just—I got mad..." he said pathetically, and he repeated himself, softer. "I got mad." His voice broke, he looked up at his sister pleadingly, like he wanted her to forgive him and comfort him even. But she shook her head, looked at him with eyes that shone with unshed tears.

"Like father like son, right?" she asked him in a soft, cynical voice, a certain note of sad, embittered accusation in her voice.

Dean's face fell completely. "Don't say that," he said, voice trembling, but this time with horrified denial. He stood up, and he looked close to tears almost. "Don't you say that," he begged.

When he stood up, she shrank back just a little, and he saw that she reacted to him that way—he stopped short, stricken. Sam looked unsure as to what his siblings were talking about—but from the way they were looking at each other, it was clear that there were volumes of meaning behind what Alex had just said to Dean, and that he understood her meaning perfectly, and it devastated him.
"It wasn’t—I didn't mean to—" Dean tried, fumblingly, and Alex looked almost insulted.

"Isn't that what he would always say?" she asked, and Dean looked sickened. His gaze went to the floor.

"What are you two talking about?" Sam asked, looking between the two of them in confusion.

And Bobby, who had a pretty good idea of what they were talking about—he knew how John got when he was drunk. He knew how John was, period: angry, bitter, obsessed to the point of moral blindness. But it made him sick to hear his long-standing theory confirmed. He shook his head as helpless, righteous anger surged forth inside and he thought about how Sam had violently assaulted his sister a few months ago, how Dean had just shoved her brutally, how John apparently had done something similar. "You Winchester men are somethin' else, you know that?" Bobby muttered.

Sam stood there staring at his twin as his mind raced, trying to figure out what the hell she and Dean were going on about, what Bobby was saying. Because it almost sounded like they were saying Dad had… wait. Sam suddenly stopped, feeling like his blood went cold. He looked at his twin in dawning horror. He would have known about this though, right? "You don't mean…" he started.

She was abruptly stony. "Just leave me alone," she said, and went into the kitchen, leaving Sam to stare after her wordlessly then look at Dean for an explanation.

There was a long, tense silence, and Dean looked older than he was, heavy with thoughts of the past. "Why do you think I never left her alone, ever, huh Sammy?" Dean asked, and his voice was layered with sadness, guilt, anger. "Why do you think that one road trip in ninety-nine I took by myself was the only one? The last one?" He sat down on the cot and looked down, leaned his arms onto his knees and put his head in his hands. Sam just stared, open mouthed, remembering. Realizing.

"Man, I'm telling you, she was all bendy like Gumby, this chick," Dean was saying to sixteen-year-old Sam, who laughed a little awkwardly at how Dean was describing this Lisa girl. "She was seriously an eleven, dude," Dean said, throwing his bag down on the motel bed. He'd just gotten back from a weeklong solo road trip and was clearly on cloud nine. Dad was still out on an ammo run.

Behind them, they heard the door open, and Dean turned around, knowing it'd be his sister walking in. "Hey tiger, did ya miss m—" his grin froze and then fell when he saw that she had a huge bruise on the side of her face. He looked horrified and shocked and he went to her immediately, dropping what he'd been doing to take her face in his hands and examine the bruise. "What the hell?" he asked, sounding quiet and scared. "You okay?" he asked her gently, and she seemed embarrassed by his question, just rolled her eyes goodnaturedly, pushed his hands away, silently saying 'yes Dean, I'm fine…' but Dean was getting riled, looked back at Sam in disbelief and anger. "I told you not to leave her alone, Sam! You promised!"

It had been all of a minute and Dean was already mad at him, as usual, and Sam became defensive. "I went to the movies with some friends I met at school—she didn't wanna go and I didn't see a reason to stay and be bored when I could be out having fun…" Dean looked positively pissed and Sam got angry at how unreasonable his brother was being. "Come on Dean. Dad was with her when she fell down the stairs… I couldn't have stopped it from happening if I were here if he couldn't have."

"Yeah sure," Dean said darkly, implying that Sam could have and didn't and was the scum of the
earth. Sam shrugged his hands up and stared at his brother, frustrated and wondering why he could never please anyone in this family. Dean turned away from him and gave his attention to his sister, who, as always, remained silent. She looked like she was feeling guilty about something and Dean pulled her into a hug—Sam watched them with the beginning pangs of jealousy. Dean always did that, treated her like a princess and then treated him like he was a stupid screw up. "I'm not gonna leave you alone again, okay?" Dean told her.

Sam rolled his eyes, completely fed up with his older brother's ridiculously overprotective nature. "She's not made of glass, Dean, come on, it's just a little bruise!" He rolled his eyes at this point, over it. "She'll be fine." Dean had just given him a furious glare.

And now… now Sam was beginning to understand.

Bobby was staring at Dean, who hadn't moved, whose head was in his hands as he stared down at the floor. "What, so you really done, kid? You just gonna walk out on us? On them?" He gestured at Sam, and then in the direction of the kitchen, where Alex had gone to.

Dean looked up at Bobby grimly. "It's not walking out, it's owning up. To what I gotta do." Bobby was quiet a minute, then pulled a gun out of his desk, set it on the table. Dean watched out of the corner of his eye as Bobby took out the shining bullet he kept in his pocket, looking at it thoughtfully. "What is that?" Dean asked cautiously.

Bobby didn't look at him, just kept his eyes on the bullet. "This is the round that I mean to put through my skull." He set the bullet down on the desk in front of him. He had the boys rapt attention. "Every morning, I look at it. I think... 'maybe today's the day I flip the lights out.' But I don't do it. I never do it. You know why?" He looked at Dean and all the anger he felt was suddenly hurtling to the surface and he was shouting at full volume, letting loose in his rage. "Because I promised you I wouldn't give up!" Dean was silent, attempting to look like he wasn't surprised at the outburst, but he very clearly was. "So stow your selfish, hateful attitude and get with the program, junior!" Bobby continued, leaning over the desk and jabbing a finger at Dean. "Cuz there's a helluva lot more at stake here than how you feel! Look at that boy and girl in there—you really gonna give up now? You gonna leave them again after what happened last time you up and died?!"

Dean stood up, shaking his head in disgust, unable to listen to the things Bobby was saying to him. He exited the study, Sam hot on his heels. In the kitchen, Alex was standing by the window, biting her thumbnail and staring out of the glass panes vapidly. She glanced Dean's way, then turned to put her back to him more. Sam followed Dean closely, who went to the refrigerator, tried to open it, and then found Sam in front of him, shutting the refrigerator with the weight of his body. "Why wouldn't you tell me that about Dad?" Sam demanded. "I mean, shit, Dean! Don't you think I should have known?"

Dean just looked at Sam, unruffled. "It was none of your concern."

Sam grew angrier. "Like hell it wasn't!"

Dean was impatient and annoyed. "Listen, Dad got drunk sometimes, liked to smack me and Al around, whatever. It's in the past," he said pointedly, apparently wanting to leave it there. "You happy?" He asked churlishly, and pointed to the refrigerator, raised his eyebrows in a foul, frustrated expression. "I'm gonna get a beer, do you mind?"
"Yeah, that's *exactly* what you need," Sam said harshly, moving to further block the refrigerator. "How could you never tell me about this?"

"Cuz I wanted to keep you *safe*!" Dean exploded. "Cuz I wanted you to be able to look up to Dad how I wanted to be able to look up to him. He was... he was a lot of things, Dad. You didn't know who he really was, Sam."

"What, *abusive*?"

Dean looked sick, like he couldn't believe Sam would use that term, and he grew defensive. "Come on man, we weren't his punching bags, we were his *kids*." He stopped for a minute, seemed to realize he needed to make a concession. "He just... just sometimes lost his temper. I tried to always make sure if he needed someone to shove around, I was first in line. But sometimes... sometimes, I just couldn't be." He glanced Alex's way—she hadn't moved from the window. Dean's expression saddened, his voice grew quieter. "It was my job to protect you and Alex." He seemed to get really upset and looked away from Sam at that point. "That's always been my job." And the way he said it, the look on his face—it was clear that Dean felt like he'd utterly failed in every way.

He clenched his jaw, looked at the fridge, sad but trying to joke now, which was strange given the conversation. "Quit screwing around, Sam, lemme have a beer."

Sam just looked at his brother disapprovingly, troubled and sympathetic despite his anger. "Dean..."

Alex listened to the entire exchange without saying a thing, only feeling sicker and sicker. What had happened with Dean was bothering her, deeply. What he had done wasn't the absolute end of the world—yeah her back did hurt a little and there would probably be a bruise from where she'd hit up against the bookshelves, but she'd had bruises before and would get over the physical pain. But maybe not the emotional pain.

Maybe she shouldn't have shouted at him like she had or basically insinuated that he wasn't a man, but after all the crazy crap he'd said to her, did he really expect her not to get righteously pissed?

She thought of the absolute rage that had been on his face when he'd shoved her so hard with the intention of hurting her, and it broke her heart, because that was the *exact* kind of thing Dean refused to let happen to her when she'd been younger. She didn't understand why he would do the very thing that had always made him sick in the past. The very thing he'd *protected* her from all those years. For a second, she wondered if she deserved what Dean had done—she'd grown up to believe she was a screw-up and a disgrace, even though her brothers had always told her the opposite—her father's rough ways and absence and lack of involvement with her when he was around (unless it was an angry outburst, usually) had silently drilled into her brain, year after year, that she was nothing special and that she didn't deserve the kind of love she wanted.

Now, Dean had done the same thing to her that he'd *seen* Dad do to to her. She felt her chest constrict painfully. *How the hell could you do that, Dean?* Him pushing her like that was all the convincing she needed that somehow, her oldest brother didn't love her anymore. That explained why he'd been able to leave so easily—he didn't care anymore. And that frigging *suicide letter*, talking about how much he loved her and was proud of her? Lies. Complete crap. If he really loved her or Sam, he wouldn't *leave*. He *wasn't* proud of her, that much was obvious from how much he hated her involvement with Cas. And she wanted to scream, because she shouldn't have to choose between Dean and Castiel, and she resented her brother so deeply for trying to make her do exactly that.

Whatever. Just, whatever. She couldn't afford to think about that or him right now. Honestly now that they had found him and brought him here, she wanted to just shut him away and not speak to
him ever again. She decided to stop thinking about him completely, not to waste her time on the
guy who was clearly far gone, past hope at this point.

Her thoughts turned to Cas and quickly became wracked with worry. He'd just suddenly doubled
over and groaned in a horrible sound of pain then disappeared. Where had he gone? What was
wrong? Who or what had made him hurt like that? The sound he'd made had freaked her out more
than anything had in awhile. Her mind spun with unanswered questions. Would he be back at all?
Was it some sort of trap he'd been lured into? Heaven was after him, apparently—and the thought
that maybe they had caught up to him and taken him away for good or something—she forced
herself to breathe in and out deeply, not get upset without good cause. She let out a heavy breath.
She didn't use to care when he disappeared, and she couldn't remember what it felt like to not
care. Every time he left it got harder and harder. Because she never knew when he'd be back. And
every time he was there, she just wanted to cling onto him tighter. It scared her, honestly.

She thought back to last night, underneath the stars, how he'd looked at her and essentially implied
that he wanted her again. How he'd told her nothing had meant anything to him until her. How he'd
said she was beautiful. She was still reeling from everything he'd told her. She didn't think she
deserved everything he felt for her and said to her.

After Sam had come back and picked them up, they'd driven all night and Alex had spent the
whole time wishing she'd been brave enough to just turn to Cas on that tailgate and tell him she
wanted him, too. She imagined them together in the back of the truck, making each other feel alive,
discovering each other again. The thought of being with him again like that was both exhilarating
and terrifying—she could still barely believe that they had actually done what they had in the
Vatican just a couple days ago.

And to think, Dean was that bent out of shape after just seeing them kiss. He'd probably fall over
dead from a stroke if he knew what she and Cas had done against a bookshelf in the dead of night...
she heard her oldest brother grumbling at Sam somewhere behind her and felt her stomach twist
again unhappily.

There was an audible gust of wind in the study and Bobby suddenly called out "hey, shake tail!!

Just a little bit behind her brothers, Alex hurried back into the study, pulse hammering wildly in
anxious anticipation when she caught a flash of beige. Relieved wasn't a big enough word for when
she saw that Castiel was back.

He was laying a dirty, unconscious person down onto the cot as Bobby wheeled himself around to
get a better look. "Who is it?" he asked, looking at the siblings in confusion. Alex looked at Cas,
simultaneously trying to see if he were all right and wondering what explanation he would offer.
He only looked at her breathlessly as he stood back, allowing Sam, Dean, and Bobby to crowd
around the cot. Curiosity winning out, Alex craned her neck around Sam, trying to get a better view
of the guy laying on the cot. The face and hair were caked in dark dirt, his clothes were filthy. He
did look sort of familiar. And then it hit her. Wait, was that…?

"That's our brother," Sam breathed, and Dean moved forward, checking the kid's pulse—muttered
"alive," even as Bobby was looking at Sam like he was nuts.

"Wait a minute," Bobby said. "Your brother...? Adam?"

"Cas, what the hell?" Dean demanded, and Alex, similarly caught off guard, asked "how?" Adam
was dead. Or at least, he had been.

Castiel shook his head and set down two gleaming angel blades onto Bobby's desk. "Angels," he
said simply. Everyone's eyes went to the blades. Had he just faced down two angels? His eyes glanced up into Alex's, and she felt like her stomach dropped out from underneath her when she realized he must have just killed two angels. Even though he was obviously fine, she felt sick at the thought that he'd been in danger.

"Angels?" Sam repeated. "Why?"

Castiel seemed unsure and grim, shaking his head just slightly. He didn't seem to like this newest development. "I know one thing for sure," he said, and strode over from the desk to where Adam laid. "We need to hide him now."

He put his hand over Adam's chest and light shone underneath his palm as he branded him with Enochian warding symbols—Adam's body convulsed and writhed underneath Cas's hand and Adam's eyes shot open, he gasped, floundering backwards, struggling to sit up, looking at them all without any trace recognition in his eyes, only panic and confusion.

"Where am I?" he demanded, and Sam went forward a little even as Cas fell back, his arm brushing against Alex's as he stood near her. They looked at each other briefly, each wondering what had happened in the absence of the other, concerned and not bothering to hide it.

"It's okay. Just relax, you're safe," Sam told Adam, who looked at him blankly.

"Who the hell are you?" the kid asked, rude and stirred up, probably a little freaked at what was happening.

Dean took the cue. "You're going to find this a little…" he changed his mind, "okay, a lot crazy, but we're actually your family," Dean said. "Your siblings."

"It's the truth," Sam said, trying to speak softly to calm the kid down. "John Winchester was our father, too. See, I'm Sam—"

"Yeah, and I'm sure that's Dean," Adam said, eyes flicking to Dean, then Alex, "and that must be Alex." How did he know who they were? The real Adam Milligan had died before meeting them at all. But his eyes switched between the three of them and he said, "I know who you are."

Sam's uncertain frown deepened. "How?"

"They warned me about you," was Adam's curt reply.

"Who did?" Dean asked doubtfully.

"The angels," Adam answered impatiently, and there was a shocked silence at the information. Adam didn't seem to care about their confusion, just looking at them demandingly. "Now where the hell is Zachariah?"

His name sent a stunned wave over the group. "What business do you have with Zachariah?" Cas asked suspiciously.

Adam looked up at him blankly. "And who the hell are you, huh?"

Cas narrowed his eyes. "Castiel." He paused heavily, seeming ashamed almost when he continued, his eyes flickering downward. "I'm... an angel of the Lord."

"Great, you can take me to them," Adam said, and made to stand up—but Cas put a hand on his shoulder, keeping the kid seated against his will.
"I'll do no such thing." Cas replied. "Zachariah—what would he want with you?"

Adam shoved Cas's hand away defiantly, appearing to realize he wasn't going to be able to just leave. "If you're not taking me," he said, "then it's none of your damn business."

"We just wanna help, kid," Bobby told him, and Adam finally looked at Bobby solidly, frowning and appearing to be less than impressed with him.

"And who're you, grandpa?"

"That's Bobby," Dean said. "And he ain't no grandpa. He's one of the best damn hunters out there."

"Yeah, sure. Whatever," Adam said, and looked down at himself and how dirty he was. "Can someone get me a towel or something?" he asked, then looked at Alex pointedly, who just stared right back, disliking his attitude.

Just because she was the only female present, that didn't make her a housemaid. She looked him up and down and gave him one of her more unpleasant facial expressions, deciding he was a jackass right then and there. "You don't need a towel, you need a hose down."

He stared back at her seeming to feel exactly the same about her as she did about him. Sam, ever the peacemaker, cleared his throat. "Yeah, good idea," he said, and motioned for Adam to get up. "Look, uh, you can probably fit Dean's size. I'll uh, show you where you can take a shower, get cleaned up."

Adam stood up. "I need to get to the angels," he insisted, but Dean clapped a hand onto his shoulders, squeezing tight.

"First things first," Dean said. "Get cleaned up. Then we talk."

Sullen, Adam looked at Dean a minute longer, then went with Sam. The sound of their footsteps going up the stairs thudded overhead and Dean turned, making a face like he wasn't sure what to think. "Well, this is an interesting plot twist," he commented, trying to be funny maybe, but Alex, who had put some distance between herself and him when Sam left, just looked at him untrustingly. His attempt at a smile faded away. "Look, Al—" he tried.

She shook her head and, as she exited the room, threw a crabby "no," over her shoulder.

Dean went to follow her, but Cas stood in his way with a grim expression.

There was a pause, and Dean didn't react like he normally would have. He didn't get angry or explode. He just looked defeated. Taking a couple steps backwards and visibly fighting great amounts of sorrow and frustration and loathing, Dean nodded, looking down at the ground. "Yeah. All right. I see how it is." He turned away then made a get lost motion with his hand, as if he didn't care. He muttered something ugly under his breath that sounded like "screw you very much." But Cas didn't seem to care. He left Bobby and Dean to themselves, and followed Alex, who had gone out onto the front porch.

She had paced down the porch halfway, and she seemed to be waiting for him, holding herself anxiously, drumming her fingers against her arm absently. When she saw him walk through the screen door, her arms dropped to her sides, she came to him quickly, grabbing him by both arms. "Are you okay?" she asked intensely. "I saw the angel blades—they tried to kill you, didn't they?"

"Yes, but—" he started.
"God, Cas." She put a hand to her face, fingertips on her forehead, highly distressed at a level that left Cas feeling something intense in his chest. She seemed to be having a difficult time figuring out how to word herself. "I just... you can't die, okay?" she asked. "Not again."

He looked at her hesitatingly, knowing he couldn't promise that he would never die, especially not now that he was essentially a fugitive of Heaven. He'd come close to death just a few minutes ago when two of his angel brothers had attempted to blindside him before he could rescue Adam. He'd fought them off, even as in the back of his mind he'd panicked, wondering what would happen to Alex if he died, disappearing from her life without a word or an explanation. "I'll try not to," he told her, an honest statement—when he said that, it brought a surprised, half-smile half confused expression to her face, as if he'd said something funny and she was trying to figure out if it were okay to be amused or not.

Cas stepped closer to her, searching her face carefully, touching one of her arms gingerly, not caring about discussing his wellbeing any further, because that wasn't what was most important to him. "Are you all right?" he asked, thinking of how horrible it was to see Dean shove her like he had, how slow Castiel felt he reacted, how horrified he still was that Dean could even think of doing that to his sister. How he'd been almost unable to leave her side at all when he'd heard the angels voices clamoring in his head.

Her face was still now, unreadable almost. "I'm not hurt," Alex finally answered.

Castiel recognized that she didn't give him a clear-cut answer. He studied her carefully. It was strange how his concern and care physically riled him, making him feel anxious both in mind and body. "Alex—has Dean ever done something like that to you before?"

She shook her head, looking down and to the right. "No, never." She smiled then, but it was pretend. She acted light, but it wasn't real. "Still. What a dick, right?" she said it in a joking, carefree way. Cas felt his head tilting to the side in puzzlement.

He didn't understand why she would be false with him, unless she maybe didn't want him to worry. He looked at her steadily. "Don't pretend you're not upset," he told her gently. He knew she was upset. Her eyes snapped up to his in surprise. Her state of upset was in the details—he recognized the signs well now: the tense way her features would sit on her face, the slight movement in her cheek when she bit and chewed on the inside of her mouth. The way she squeezed her hands tightly into little balls, the way she blinked more than usual, even the tone of her voice was different.

She seemed startled at what he'd said. Startled, and unable to deny that he was right. "I am upset," she conceded quietly. "It's not that it like hurt a lot or something, it's... he was never supposed to do something like that to me."

It was as though her words were what he felt: Dean was never supposed to do something like that to her. It was a heavy, sad reality. Castiel wasn't sure if he could allow himself to let her stay with Dean after this. She was looking at him from under her lashes, seeming hesitant now. "Cas, honestly, you... kinda scared me in there," she said, swallowed and looked at him nervously. "What were you going to do to him?"

Castiel met her gaze slowly. "Hurt him very badly." He realized that perhaps again, he had gone too far. He felt frustrated, unable to put himself into words. "I only want to protect you."

She looked at him fully and she seemed open to him right then, not hiding anything. "I know," she said softly, and then touched his hand that hung at his side. Grasped it gently. Her thumb slid up underneath the cuff of his shirt, brushing the bare skin of his wrist bone. And the simple touch felt electric to Castiel. Her eyes met his and it felt to him as though she were calling to him, beckoning
him. He could find no words to say—they all seemed to disappear, float out of his mind. It was a spell she had over him, a trance she put him in, and he felt like he had last night, when he'd asked her if it were wrong to desire her the way he did, when he'd touched the soft curving angle of her hip bone through her clothes. He was once again consumed with what he felt for her. His eyes bored into hers, and her lips parted softly as she stared back. He wondered why he suddenly felt so frustrated by how far apart he felt from her, how wide the distance seemed, how much he wanted...

The screen door squeaked noisily, and Sam poked his head out of the door. "Hey, you guys wanna come in? Adam's done."

Alex looked at her twin in veiled irritation. "Already?" she asked.

Sam shrugged. " Took the fastest shower in the history of the world. Seems pretty eager to get going."

With a brief and reluctant glance at each other, the youngest Winchester and the angel went back inside, finding a restless Adam in the study. He looked different—his hair had been wet and obviously hurriedly scrubbed with a towel. His face was clean now and he wore some of Dean's old clothes that had been stashed at Bobby's. He was pacing like a caged animal.

"Sit down, would you? You're making me nervous," Dean grumbled. He sat backwards in the chair Sam had claimed earlier.

Adam did so grudgingly, and his fingers tapped nervously on his knee as Bobby poured a glass of whiskey and handed it over silently. Adam didn't look thrilled, but sampled it, looking at Cas and Alex as they came in. Alex stood in front of the desk at the far wall, opposite of Adam, and Cas stood beside her. Sam sat on Bobby's desk, folding his arms and studying Adam.

"So why don't you just tell us everything?" Dean prompted. "Start from the beginning."

Adam looked like he'd rather eat moldy cheese, but he looked around the room and seemed to mentally note that he was outnumbered. Unhappy about it, he started, seeming to be bored as hell from the way he spoke. "Well, I was dead and in Heaven." He paused, and he almost smiled. "'Cept it—it uh, kinda looked like my prom and I was making out with this girl, her name was Kristin McGee—" he had a little bit of a smile on his face now, and Dean, ever the classy one, was nodding.

"Yeah, that sounds like Heaven. You get to third base?"

Sam cleared his throat noisily, "Shut up, Dean," he said, then forced an encouraging smile. "Just uh, just keep going, Adam."

Moody, Dean rolled his eyes. Sam pointedly didn't look at him. Adam didn't miss the fact that the brothers were at odds, he looked between them suspiciously for a second, then continued. "Well, these… these angels, they popped out of nowhere, and they tell me that I'm chosen."

"For?" Alex asked, when he said nothing else.

He looked at her, his eyes dull and aloft, superior. "To save the world."

"How you gonna do that?" Dean asked.

"Me and some archangel are gonna kill the devil," Adam said, growing smug now.

"What archangel?" Dean asked, sounding more and more confused.
"Michael," Adam said, shocking his listeners. "I'm his uh, sword or vessel or something, I dunno." Adam sounded bored again, even though everyone else in the room had gone still.

"Well, that's insane," Dean said, scoffing.

Beside Alex, Cas was in deep thought. "Not necessarily," he said, drawing everyone's surprised stares.

Dean turned around in his chair, looking at Cas carefully. "How do you mean?"

"Maybe they're moving on from you, Dean," Cas said, which struck Alex as extremely odd—they could do that? Why hadn't they known that before?

Dean appeared to be having trouble with the idea, too. "Well that doesn't make sense," he said neutrally.

"He is John Winchester's bloodline, Sam's brother," Cas said. "It's not perfect, but it's possible."

"Well you gotta be kidding me," Dean muttered, then was struck by an epiphany. "Wait, hold on. If it's bloodline..." he stared at Cas accusingly, looked at Alex for the first time since she'd re-entered the room and swept a hand toward her. "Could she be a vessel?" He sounded genuinely concerned, and his question sent a ripple of shock through Alex.

She looked at Cas, who was looking down, frowning deeply. "I... don't think so."

"Well find out!" Dean thundered.

Castiel's arms, which had been folded, fell to his sides, his gaze darkened, his tone became almost brazen. "If your sister were a vessel, don't you think we would know that by now?"

"Hell if I know, Cas," Dean retorted, looking at the angel as if he were a moron.

Cas's jaw squared. "Michael seeks a male vessel," Cas told him. "Alex is a female."

"Oh, really. I hadn't noticed," Dean snarked, then turned back around, rolling his eyes.

Cas tried one more time. "I doubt Michael would be after Adam if Alex were a vessel."

Dean ignored Castiel.

"Why would the angels decide to do this?" Sam asked, upset by and stuck on the fact that Dean was being passed over in favor of Adam, how little sense it made.

"Maybe they're desperate," Cas answered, then stared at the back of Dean's head, his arms folding again. "Maybe they wrongly assumed Dean would be brave enough to withstand them." Was that superiority in Cas's voice? Alex looked at him sidelong, feeling sort of proud of him for speaking up and giving Dean some attitude right back.

Dean turned around again, gave the angel a death glare. "Alright, you know what? Blow me, Cas."

Castiel frowned, looked uncertain as to Dean's meaning. Alex just looked at Dean cooly, saw how Cas's comment really had gotten to him.

Adam looked at the occupants of the room with a seriously doubtful expression on his face, picking up on the tension and discord. "Look, no way," Sam was saying. "After everything that's happened? All that crap about destiny?" He sounded intense and heated. "Suddenly the angels have
a Plan B? Does that smell right to anybody?" He looked around for someone, anyone, to back him up, and Adam seemed to lose patience.

"You know this has been a really moving family reunion, but uh, I got a thing, so—" he stood up, and when he did, so did Sam.


Adam looked at Dean, who'd sat back in the chair, tensed and ready to stand up and stop him—at Cas, who had come forward a couple steps, ready to stop him—at Alex, who'd unfolded her arms and stopped leaning against the desk, ready to stop him.

Shaking his head and giving up on the idea of leaving, Adam backed down. "This is unbelievable," he muttered, sitting back down sullenly.

Sam settled back down onto the desk, but he wasn't as relaxed as before. "Now, Adam… the angels are lying to you," he said emphatically, his words salted with bitter first-hand knowledge. He'd apparently given up on the gentle approach, and was using a sharp tone of voice now. "They're full of crap."

Adam smirked and looked down. "Yeah, I don't think so."

"Really. Why not?" Sam said.

"Um, 'cause they're angels," Adam retorted.

"And did they tell you that half the planet is gonna get fried in the process?" Alex cut in and asked him. He looked at her without any trace of emotion. "Did they tell you they're at civil war up there? Buddy, you have no clue what you're into right now."

"Okay, first of all? I ain't your buddy," Adam said brusquely. "Second, I don't need to know all that stuff, not my area. It's the devil, right? It's gonna get bad. They said the fight might get a little into the moral gray area. But you know, as long as I'm putting Satan in cement shoes?" He shrugged carelessly, gave a little cold smile, looking just like Dean for a second. "I'm okay with a little collateral."

Wow. What a hero.

Alex stared him down balefully. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, and you do, princess?" he asked, baiting her, the corner of his mouth lifting up further into an insulting little smirk.

"I'm not the one who was dead in the ground half an hour ago, dickhead," she fired back. His smile fell.

"Guys." Sam looked at Alex angrily. "Stop." He looked back at their half-brother, increasingly frustrated. "Listen, Adam, there's another way here for us to kill the devil, okay?" At that, Dean looked at Sam contentiously, clearly done with his brother's attempts.

"Great," Adam said, obviously not caring in the least, sounding more and more peevish. "What is it?"

"We're working on 'the power of love,'" Dean cut in sarcastically, drawing a scowl from Sam.

"How's that going?" Adam asked cynically.
"Mm," Dean smiled facetiously. "Not good." At this point, he was acting almost entertained by Sam's attempts to convince Adam.

Sam didn't let Dean's shitty attitude or goading little smirks and overly expectant expressions affect him. He focused on Adam, tried the heartfelt gentle approach again. "Look, Adam... you don't know me from a hole in the wall, I know. But I'm begging you. Please, just trust me." He paused, desperate. "Give me some time."

Adam looked at him grudgingly. "Give me one good reason."

Sam took a couple seconds, seeming to grasp at straws in his mind. "Because we're blood."

Dean seemed to think that was funny, looking down at his lap, smiling bitterly. Adam seemed to be insulted. "You got no right to say that to me," he said softly, dangerously.

"You're still John's boy," Bobby pointed out, and Adam looked at him sharply.

"No, John Winchester was some guy who took me to a baseball game once a year. I don't have a dad." He looked at each Winchester in turn now angrily. "So we may be blood, but we are not family. My mom is my family. And if I do my job, I get to see her again. So no offense, but she's the one I give a rat's ass about, not any of you."

"Fair enough," Sam said quietly. "But if you have one good memory of Dad, just one, then you'll give us a little more time. Please."

Adam looked around the room again, at how outnumbered he was. "Yeah, fine," Adam said, looking at Sam sullenly. "Not like I have a choice."

"He took you to baseball games, huh?" Dean asked, and Adam looked at him fleetingly.

"Yeah." He frowned at Dean, giving him a weird look. "What? Why are you all looking at me like that?"

Dean made a face, shrugged casually. "The old man never really did that kind of stuff for us," Dean said, as if it weren't a big deal, but Adam's eyebrows raised.

"So what, you're jealous of me?" Adam laughed scornfully. "Wow, that's rich. Yeah you had it real bad seeing him all year long, didn't you? How sad for you."

Alex almost laughed at this point, at how obvious it was that Adam was a Winchester from his foul attitude and smart mouth. "This guy is an asshole, he fits right in," she muttered to no one in particular, but with a pointed look at Dean.

Adam looked at her spitefully. "Says the ugliest Winchester in the room," he retorted.

Sam stood up, pointed a finger each in turn at Adam and Alex. "Hey, there's no need for that," he said firmly.

"She started it," Adam muttered, and Alex just crossed her arms again, looked away, not regretting what she'd said. Cas looked displeased overall, glaring at Adam openly.

"What's your problem, Columbo?" Adam sneered. Cas frowned, clearly not getting the reference.

"Well isn't this just the best family reunion you ever been to," Bobby commented sarcastically.

Dean stood up. "I really need a beer," he said, sounding sullen, but then Sam grasped him by the
arm, gently.

Dean looked at Sam's hand, then Sam, frowning. "Yeah, I uh… I'm gonna have to ask you to come downstairs with me." Sam looked at Dean meaningfully.

"Come again?" Dean asked, then wet his lips, preparing a grand speech and pulling himself backwards out of Sam's grip, taking with one of his hands, the bad attitude levels hitting an all-time high. "If you think I'm gonna just go down there and sit on my ass and let this stupid kid over here do my job for me, you—" he fell forward, unconscious mid-sentence thanks to Cas, who stood behind him.

Sam caught him easily, and looked at Cas with a thin attempt at a smile. "Thanks, Cas."

Adam's mouth was open and he appeared to be a little disconcerted by what had just happened. Sam hefted Dean up into his arms, then nodded in Adam's direction. "Can you uh, stay with him until I get back?" he asked Castiel, whose reply was, "of course."

"Need help?" Alex asked her twin, but Sam shook his head, already halfway out of the room.

"Nah, I got him."

Adam looked at Cas appraisingly as the sound of Sam's footsteps faded away. "What, you think I'm gonna run?" he asked irritably.

"If you're anything like your brother Dean, yes," Cas said factually, to which Adam's expression darkened.

"That guy isn't my brother. I don't know him. I don't wanna know him." Adam's jaw tightened, he looked around cagily. "This is bullshit."

Alex resisted the urge to roll her eyes, because if there was one more thing she needed in her life right now, it was Adam, who might as well be Dean Junior. "I gotta get some stuff outta the car," she said, pausing at the door frame on her way out, a hand on it as she looked back at Cas, who nodded. Their eyes lingered on the others. Adam's face wrinkled in confusion, catching the long, meaningful way they looked at each other.

Alex had good intentions of getting all of their bags, doing some laundry, straightening up the trunk of the Impala since it was a mess... but when she'd seen the keys on the front seat where she'd tossed them earlier, she stopped, forgetting her plans. She reached in through the car's open window and picked them up, looking at her old silver whistle hanging alongside Dean's keys. She'd been about to toss it awhile ago when cleaning out her things. He'd told her she was nuts, that she should keep it, that she might want it someday. She thought he was being stupid and sentimental, but knowing he wasn't long for the world at the time—this was when he'd had the Hellhounds coming soon—he'd said okay and had given it to him to keep until she wanted it back. At the time, she thought she wouldn't want it again.

She unhooked it from the key chain and left the keys sitting on the seat. She leaned back against the Impala and looked at the whistle for a long moment, held it up to study. In the mid-morning sun, it gleamed brightly up at her from the palm of her hand. It reminded her of what Castiel had done for her. Would do for her. She wasn't sure if anyone else had ever loved her so fiercely and protectively. She thought about the girl who'd worn this whistle for all those years—sad, lonely, frustrated at how she could never say what was on her mind at the right time, left out of everything... she wasn't that girl anymore. Because of him.
She heard footsteps crunching against the gravel toward her, and she looked up, already knowing who it was. Still, looking up and seeing him there in the flesh set her stomach fluttering all over again. The mere sight of him was growing increasingly staggering to her. She thought, faintly: shouldn't he seem more and more commonplace to her, the more that she saw him? Instead, every new time her eyes beheld him, she was struck by even deeper feelings and emotions.

Cas stood a few paces away, silently looking at what she held in her hand, then up at her. He knew what it was. Her mouth curved into a soft smile, she looked down at her hand, closed her fingers around the whistle, looked back at Cas. She wished he would come closer, and as if he could read her thoughts, he did. He cupped her closed fist in his hand and she opened her hand back up, watching him as he studied the small silver object.

His eyes met hers silently, and she turned her hand down over his, setting the whistle into his palm, closing his fingers over it gently with her other hand. He looked down at his closed fist, then at her, distantly puzzled. She shrugged her shoulders up a bare fraction of an inch, her face soft. His eyes flickered from hers down to her lips, back again a couple of times, then stayed on her lips as he leaned down. Reading his mind with a heart that was doing thrilled loops in her chest, she tilted her head up to meet his lips with hers in a soft, sweet kiss that lingered. When they came apart, it wasn't far, and they didn't stay apart long. She couldn't help herself. That first taste had her needing more, and she kissed him again, a little less gently, a little less slowly as she longed for his endless touches and kisses.

He pocketed the whistle even as she took his lapels in her hands and pulled him deeper into her embrace, unable to stop herself. Readily, Castiel circled his arms around her, wrapping her up gently but tightly, enveloping her, a hand tangling in her hair, and the way he touched her like that made her more anxious—she pulled harder on his lapels, growing breathless, and after a moment, their mouths came apart again, their foreheads touching as they breathed raggedly, his hand moved from her hair to her face, his eyes half closed.

Cas appeared to be troubled about something, and Alex gazed at him in sudden rising concern. "What is it?" she asked quietly, her eyes flickering over his face.

He seemed to be trying to think of how to say something. His eyes rose up to hers, dark and full of an earnest anxiety, but he said nothing, just shook his head and carefully kissed her again, sending electric warmth over her entire body. An angel is kissing me. Alex was left reveling in how it felt, the soft pressure of his two lips pressing against hers... the feeling of his mouth parting open to move slowly and tenderly in exploration of hers. In growing desire, she pressed into him full force and kissed him more deeply, coming to life in his arms, losing her mind. It was like a language only the two of them spoke when their lips and mouths came together in this way. She never wanted it to end, she wanted to feel him like this forever... she wanted him again, so badly. And exactly when she thought that, he broke the kiss but barely withdrew at all. When he spoke she felt his mouth moving against hers to form the words he said next.

"Alex, let me have you again," he begged her in a soft, tight murmur and she could have died from the way those words made her feel—his pleading tone was like a lightning bolt straight down her center and she was floored by the question, the way he said it, the great yearning there.

"N-now?" she asked breathily, barely believing him, choking on her question almost, wondering if he was going to just push her up against the Impala right in the middle of the salvage yard.

He seemed to be despairing, his breathing quickening markedly. "Yes, now," he said, and he sounded like if she said no, he would die—but of course she wouldn't say no—she didn't even care what he did to her or where, she just nodded frantically because she would die too if she couldn't
have him again. And then his lips were on hers again, sending currents of warmth racing through her.

She was vaguely startled when a deep groan sounded from the bottom of Castiel's throat and he suddenly lifted her up into his arms, setting her around his waist. She was further caught off guard when there was an abrupt pull in the vicinity of her stomach, a feeling of wind rushing past her, and she suddenly felt herself falling backwards then hitting something soft and flat. Her eyes had flown open in surprised confusion to look at Cas who was suddenly above her—and above him were exposed wood beams of a roof. They were no longer in the salvage yard at all—she realized he'd taken them into Bobby's attic, onto the spare bed that was kept up there.

Alex stared at him motionlessly, shocked and spurred on at the same time by how bold of a move that was on Castiel's part, at how he was being so assertive and clear about what he wanted—her. His coat was pooled around them, he had his palms pressed down on either side of her, he looked down at her with an uncertain expression, gauging her reaction to what he'd done, maybe wondering if he'd been too forward or too quick—but Alex had recovered from the initial surprise and reached up, pulling him down to her by the tie, arching herself up to meet his lips with hers again in a sloppy, impassioned kiss they both let out soft, relieved sounds at.

His hands slid around her back to encircle her again and hold her close to him. Fumblingly, Alex reached up with both hands into the tight space between their bodies, loosening his tie and pulling it up and over his head, breaking the kiss as she did so. Cas looked down at her breathlessly in rapt attention and Alex tossed his tie aside without looking to see where it went. She wondered if Cas were nervous like she was, because she almost thought he was from the look on his face. She brushed her fingers against one of his cheeks affectionately, overcome by how this moment was real, how he was real. How the way they felt about each other was undeniably real. How he wanted her in the same way that she wanted him. She looked into those eyes... such a brilliant blue and patterned in little zinging lightning bolts throughout. Those azure orbs were like entire galaxies and they were astounding to look at—but maybe the most amazing thing was how those stunning eyes looked at her. Alex held his face in both hands now, brushing her thumbs back over his stubble, forgetting everything for a second except how beautiful he was to her and how stunning it was that he would look at her the way he did.

His face came down toward hers, nose brushing against the side of hers as he kissed her softly, tenderly now. Her eyes fell closed by instinct as his lips kissed hers as if she were the most precious and breakable thing to him. With the backs of her legs, she pulled his torso closer to hers so that there was no space between them. She whimpered against his mouth when she felt him pressing up against her between her legs. He breathed out shudderingly at the sound she made and the sudden increase in the pressure.

She shoved at his jacket and coat awkwardly as they struggled to kiss even while shedding the trench coat and suit jacket. Somehow they managed, Cas holding an arm out while she yanked roughly on one sleeve until his arm was free, and then the same with the other. Carelessly, the coat and jacket were tossed aside. The second he was free of his outer layers his arms hugged around her with renewed vigor as if he couldn't stand to be any further away from her. His mouth surged down onto hers passionately and one of his hands swept to her lower back, pressing flat-palmed into the contours of her spine and pulling her against him until they both gave a surprised, strangled gasp at the pleasure the friction created.

Alex was unbuttoning his shirt with stumbling fingers, desperate to feel the warmth of his skin, desperate for more of him even as she simultaneously dragged the heels of her shoes across the bed to kick her shoes off haphazardly. She felt Cas pushing himself up onto his elbows, felt him begin to unbutton her outer shirt even as they continued to make out full force—her heart jumped into her
throat as she felt the whisper-soft movements and inexperienced pulling of his fingers against her shirt as he undid the buttons in a way that was clumsy, endearing, and completely arousing to her. As a result of what he was doing she whimpered in pleasured torture. She'd never been so turned on in all of her life. His shirt was finally unbuttoned and she pulled back breathing raggedly to look at his toned chest and smooth, tanned skin that she could see in the gap of the open shirt. She suddenly felt intimidated by the sight of him and the way he was *looking* at her. He was breathless too and his eyes were hungry, curious, attentive.

Beneath Castiel with her dark hair fanning out across the faded bedspread, Alex was breathing heavily and looking up at him with dark, unguarded eyes. Her mouth was open, her chest heaving up and down. Her shirt was unbuttoned and had fallen open, there was a thin gray tank top underneath, and Cas looked at the soft fair skin stretching over her collarbone—and he felt the need to touch her there, test the feeling beneath his hand, trace the shape of what laid beneath her skin. He did, he touched her there, fingertips light on the end of her collarbone near her shoulder. She watched him like he was the most entrancing thing she'd ever seen and he could feel how she breathed, how her pulse fluttered underneath his fingertips. What kind of magic was this? The sensation of touch. Of touching *her*. Her skin against his skin was like he imagined a drug must be. He couldn't stop, he didn't want to, ever. He just wanted to keep feeling her, all of the dips and hollows and textures and shapes that were hers. He wanted to know every part of her, see everything. He wanted to know what she loved, what she wanted, what she felt.

Alex froze when she felt Castiel's hand sweep across the bare skin below her collarbone, his fingers leaving a trail of electricity across her upper chest as they traced downward hesitatingly. His palm brushed over the curve of her still-clad breast and she shuddered at the feeling of being touched there. Helplessly, she looked up at him, overwhelmed. In the Vatican it had been dark and sudden and unintentional and a little easier thanks to alcohol taking away inhibitions, but this was different, this was so much more intimate and frightening somehow... and even though they'd already been together, Alex was suddenly aware of how she still felt completely virginal and shy, unsure of herself, scared of this and of not being good enough.

His fingers rested on the skin above where her tank top began, just over where her heart thumped fast and hard. He looked at her like he was amazed all over again, then down at his hand, fascinated and adoring. "I can feel your heart beating," he murmured as he looked back up at her. She thought maybe it skipped a beat then, she forgot her nerves temporarily. Castiel was unguarded, looking at her with eyes that were full of so many deep and substantial things.

She touched the left side of his chest and slid her hand over to where she felt the strong, rhythmical pounding against the palm of her hand. His skin was warm and firm. The pads of her fingers grazed a hard, smooth knot—the place where he'd taken a bullet for her. There was a lump of emotion in her throat. "I can feel yours, too," she said quietly, and their gaze remained locked until he bent his head down, stilling her with brief kiss that he hesitated to pull back from.

His hand slid away from her chest and moved around to brace against her back—he sat up, lifting her with him, sitting back onto his heels. With his free hand he touched the curving space where her neck and shoulder met... and slowly he took hold of the collar of her flannel shirt and began to pull it down and off, looking at her for a cue or any sign he should stop. She let him continue then helped, shifting and moving each arm in turn, her pulse pounding a million miles an hour, her nerves going crazy every time that the edge of his hand or fingers grazed over her bare skin, her eyes falteringly trying to stay on his but nervously falling away again and again. He was undressing her, she was letting him, and she could barely think straight. When her shirt was off she was left in her in the gray tank top. Alex looked into his eyes fleetingly, swallowing, nervous. She had her legs wrapped around his middle still, he was only holding her there with one arm, but she knew that he was strong enough that even if she had let go of him completely, he'd still be able to
hold her in place. He was so much more powerful than he looked. And yet he was so achingly gentle with her. It made her love him more, made her want him more.

She pushed his shirt down slowly off of his shoulders, looking at the spot there where the bullet wound was. It looked like old scar tissue even though it was only from a day ago. A thousand bullets. He didn't wait for her to pull the shirt off completely, he reached behind himself to each opposite arm and pulled it off himself, allowing her arms, which had locked around his neck, to keep her there securely against him as he sat. His arms were strong and defined, his shoulders broader than she remembered, and even though she thought she would love him in whatever body he was in, she loved the one he had claimed. The sight of him becoming more and more naked had her dizzy. He wrapped those strong arms of his around her again and gently lowered her back down to the bed. Once again his hard length pressed up against her, causing her to gasp out an exhalation of air. She was overwhelmed to think that she could cause that to happen to him.

He heard her gasp softly, a sound that made blood flush his body with further degrees of pleasure and desire, and he didn't understand how he could feel more of those things—every time that he thought he'd felt all he could, there was more with her. Cas marveled at the way Alex responded to whatever he did, and how in turn, whatever she did caused him to want more, always more. She was underneath him and he very much wanted to crush her, make her his all over again... things that distantly, he felt he shouldn't desire. And yet still he did. He pushed aside the voices telling him this was wrong. It couldn't be wrong, he didn't want it to be wrong. He bent over her gently, his mouth meeting hers over and over again in sweet, fleeting, exploratory kisses. The rush of sensations she bestowed on him was so vast and yet not enough at all. He needed more, so he sought more.

His hand went to one of his favorite places, the curve of her hip bone. He felt the shape of it through fabric then moved his hand down, slid it up inside the shirt to feel her warm skin soft underneath his fingers—and hesitating, he began to push her shirt up further, knowing that in traditional human sexual encounters, the clothes all came off—and that's when he felt her go tense. He stopped short, pulled back from him as her breathing hitched. Her hand had shot out to cover his. "I... I have scars," she said, and there was quiet fear or shame in her voice. Maybe both.

He'd stopped the second he felt her go tense and he looked at her, not understanding, suddenly worried he'd done something wrong, something that she didn't want. "I know," he told her, confused and concerned. "...I've felt them."

She still didn't look okay. "But you haven't seen them. They're... really horrible."

His face scrunched in a wounded expression as he understood that she was embarrassed of herself. "Nothing about you is horrible," he told her, and she looked at him a minute longer, and Cas made to move his hand away. "We don't have to," he told her earnestly, not wanting to do anything if she wasn't willing—but her hand gripped tighter, kept his hand exactly where it was.

She was quiet for a couple seconds. "No," she finally replied, tentative. "It's okay." She took a second, looked deeply into his eyes and then decisively she guided his hand up a little bit, which shifted her tank top up, revealed a small strip of skin above the waistband of her jeans. "I want to," she told him, and he could hear that she did, but also that she was nervous about it. He hesitated, trying to decide if he should keep going. She pulled on his hand again, and he looked at her carefully, making sure, then he pushed the soft gray material up slowly, up to the top of her rib cage, and he looked down at her torso, saw the scars he'd glancingly felt in the Vatican. They were large and jagged claw marks, four of them slashing downward from the top of her rib cage on the right across her stomach at an angle. The skin of the scars was discolored and raised in an uneven pattern, standing out strongly, a strange blotchy pink against the rest of her fair olive skin. He
traced his fingers down, matching up his fingers to the lines of each of the arcing scars. How awful it was to think of the day this must have happened to her.

"Werewolf," she explained in a single, soft word as she looked at him and pushed herself up slightly onto her elbows, her eyes dark and unconfident. Cas thought for a moment. He knew that when he kissed her mouth it made her feel good, maybe even beautiful. He wondered if he kissed her there, where she felt ugly, if the same would apply. Wordlessly, he shifted himself downward, moving his face closer to her stomach, and he felt her tense again and he glanced up at her—she was looking down at him uncertainly, holding herself rigidly, confused about what he was doing. His eyes lowered to the ragged line that had been carved into her skin what must have been years ago, and experimentally, slowly, he pressed a slow kiss to the end of the scar as his hands held her waist gently on either side. He could feel Alex breathing fast underneath his lips and saw out of the corner of his eye how her hand clutched into the bedspread hard as she made a little surprised sound. Again he glanced up at her face, uncertain about what he was doing. He saw how she was waiting and trusting of him, surprised at what he was doing... but expectant of more.

Encouraged, he continued and his lips unintentionally grazed across her skin as he moved up a little further, kissing another claw mark gently, falteringly. He felt little permanent ridges in the scar tissue there against his lips, where thread had been stitched unevenly. He thought of her being hurt and in pain, he thought of what these scars meant, and it only made him want to protect her more, keep her from ever being in danger ever again. And he pressed kisses more fervently now, with burning slowness, his thoughts and love somehow bleeding out into the way in which he touched her.

Alex watched him with rapt attention, breath caught in her throat—in her whole life she could never have imagined this happening. She could feel every press of his lips even through numb scar tissue, each touch was like a spark singeing her skin in the most achingly beautiful way. She felt some of his hair brushing against her each time he bowed his head over her, she felt the tip of his nose pressing into her skin and she watched his dark head of hair bending over her slowly, repeatedly, saw the expression on his face—he seemed reverent of her, so careful, and it was so very intense that she almost couldn't watch, couldn't handle seeing him doing that to her.

He'd reached the top of her rip cage, startlingly close to her bust line and he glanced up at her. If it hadn't been intense before, it certainly was now, startlingly so. His eyes were filled with so much predatory intention and there was a raw nature she wasn't used to seeing there. He came back to her, kissing her again, but this time she felt overpowered by him and by how much he obviously wanted her—the kiss became deep and fire-filled, stoking heat between them, and the feeling was like nothing else for Alex, who became empowered and daring. She locked her arms around his neck, rolled him over—well, he let her—and she was on top of him now, drawing back from him just a little, their stomachs still touching as she looked down at him. He was gazing up at her like she was some kind of goddess.

The ends of her hair trailed across his shoulders and the planes of his upper chest, she looked from his eyes to his jawline, his neck, and she was so overcome by the desire to lean in and kiss him there. So she did, leaning down the small space and planting a gentle, hesitant kiss just below his jawline, her hands spread out on his shoulders, gripping gently. She felt his breathing catch. Growing bolder, encouraged by the way he responded to her, she let her lips leave a wet grazing trail to the spot below his ear, feeling the shudder his body gave as she did. Her hands moved down, gripping his upper arms as she kissed him again below his ear and then a little lower on his neck, but this time not with closed lips—she let her mouth stay soft, she sucked slightly, experimenting, and he made a higher pitched sound of surprise, she heard him breathing heavily into her ear, felt one of his hands on her head gripping solidly and he made a low growl of frustration when she bit down gently, nipping at the curve of his neck.
With surprising force and speed he took hold of her and flipped her over, putting himself on top of her once again, kissing her burningly, pulling at her tank top, breaking the kiss long enough to pull it up and over her head as she maneuvered her arms clumsily through the arm holes. She felt him reaching back around her with both hands, grabbing at the clasp of her bra roughly. There was a loud ripping sound and he abruptly pulled back, looking at Alex with a strange expression. "I think... uh, I broke it," he said, pulling a hand out, looking at the ripped patch of white fabric that he held—one end had mangled metal clasps, the other end was torn jaggedly—and Alex found herself suddenly giggling because only Cas would do that—tear her bra in half in his haste—that, and he looked so worried.

"It's not the only one I have," she said, still grinning up at him and then wondering if you were supposed to laugh during sex, or foreplay, or... whatever this was. His expression softened, he smiled ever so softly at her, bent to kiss her again, and she could feel the way his lips were upturned against hers.

She felt his fingers slide up her shoulders, underneath the straps of her bra, and he pulled back. His eyes traveled up to hers, and she realized he was about to take it off, leaving her naked from the waist up. Her amusement from a minute ago was gone. She swallowed deeply, watching him as he pulled the bra down and away from her slowly.

No one else had ever seen her like this, and she was breathless, nervous, flushed, shy. He seemed overcome at the sight of her and then he stretched himself over her, kissing her lingeringly, moaning softly when his bare chest molded to hers. She whimpered at the new feeling of warm skin against her in a place she'd never been touched before by someone else. His eyebrows moved together deeply, his hand ghosted up her side, thumb brushing against the curve of her breast, a touch that made her whimper helplessly. She hung onto him tighter, becoming more and more convinced that if she didn't have him soon, she'd die from anticipation.

As such she moved her hands down between them boldly, drawing a soft sound from him as she fumbled with his belt buckle, the button on his slacks, the zipper. He followed suit, mirroring her, pulling urgently at her jeans. Even the realization of what he was doing made her feel like she could faint. When he began to pull at one of the legs, she wriggled, trying to get out of the confines of her pants—Cas practically ripped them off her and flung them away then looked back at her, and that's when he glimpsed her demon ward tattoo. It was inked into the skin on her side above her left rib cage and he touched it with two fingers softly then looked at her in the eyes. She was unguarded beneath him and waiting anxiously—and he realized he was still wearing too many clothes, looking down at himself—he shoved the waistband of the black pants down halfway to his knees, realizing he was still wearing shoes, too—he grew frustrated at all the things that were on him and proving difficult to remove.

He kicked his shoes off clumsily, doing it for the first time ever. Even as the shoes hit the floor with two clunks, he was wriggling out of his pants. Castiel was then slowed by intense realization of what they were about to do. He'd spent so much time thinking about what it would be like to be with her again and yet here on the cusp of the moment, he felt afraid—or perhaps the word was nervous—but still at the same time, he couldn't bear it, had to be close to her, despaired to give himself to her and to have her again.

She looked afraid, too—and it made his chest clench in pain, in worry. "Why do you look afraid?" he asked her, putting a hand against her face and holding it there. The touch of his hand seemed to drive some fear out.

"I'm-I'm not," she said, and she put her hand over his, her fingertips moving gently against his, sort of stroking his fingers. "I'm ready," she murmured, and he saw how she breathed faster when she
said that. Hearing her say that made him breathe faster, too.

Alex watched Cas as he looked down, and she followed his gaze—he still wore his white boxers, she still wore modest cotton panties. His fingers curled around the waistband of her underwear and her breath caught in her throat—she felt so exposed and small, totally at his mercy—and she was afraid, a little bit, unsure of herself at least and thinking back to the Vatican and wondering how that brazen woman could have really been her. She felt her underwear being pulled down wished the room wasn't so bright and wished she felt more sure of herself; she felt so naked and fought the urge to cover her chest with her arms. He stopped, looking at her in questioning concern.

He moved his hand to gently grasp the back of her neck, his thumb rubbing gently against the delicate skin at the nape of her neck as he looked at her carefully, and even though she was scared, felt exposed, when he touched her so gently, looked at her so fully, she felt braver, remembered how badly she wanted him, how deeply she felt for him. No turning back. She didn't want to turn back. She felt her muscles relax a little, she just focused on his eyes, nothing but his bright waterblue eyes. He continued. She pulled her legs up a little bit, slowly, one at a time, letting him thread her underwear off of her... in her chest, her heart was beating a million miles an hour.

His hand came to rest against where her hip and thigh met as he kept looking at her in the eye, brushing his thumb back and forth across the skin of her abdomen slowly, over and over, waiting for her to be okay, waiting for her breathing to calm a little. Alex wanted so badly to tell him the truth that welled up inside of her. That she loved him. Instead, she pulled him down by the back of his neck to her and kissed him slowly—slid a hand down his chest, down his abdomen, and his breath caught. She touched him just above where his boxers began, drew back from the kiss, looking at him meaningfully, anxiously. He took her meaning—and it was his turn to look afraid, she saw the anxiety flash through his eyes as he reached down, one-handed, shifting around, taking off the last remaining article of clothing.

Alex waited until he'd taken them off completely. She heard the sound of the boxers softly hitting the floor, felt the sides of his knees against the insides of her calves and her heart jammed in her throat. He hovered over her now, she realized she was gripping his upper arms, and she swallowed. His shoulders and arms were strong and defined by taut muscles, his chest was broad and hairless and firm, his torso was sturdy and tapered downward to narrow hips and below that... wow. He was perfect and she realized anew that oh my god this is really happening—she looked at his face with her mouth gaping open and he looked back at her, vastly worried.

He held himself back from her, keeping his hips far from hers, suddenly seeming unsure. But she wasn't unsure. "Closer, Cas," she told him softly, beckoning him gently even though she was about to lose her mind from ever-mounting need. His eyes flickered downward as he slowly did as she said—and she felt her breathing pick up in anticipation and nervousness as he moved down and forward toward her. His chest touched hers once more and he settling himself between her thighs—he warmed her everywhere, his bare skin touching hers, and it was the most wonderful and thrillingly terrifying thing she'd ever known. She felt the soft nudge of him between her legs—her grip on him tightened instinctively, every part of her body was on high alert, begging for the moment she'd been afraid of just a minute ago. His eyes came to hers and she felt how tensely he held himself, how nervous he was too. And she thought it was somehow fitting that they would both want it so much and both be so scared when it came down to it. She was overwhelmed with how thankful she was to have this with him.

Just like he'd reassured her a minute ago with gentle touches, she saw that he needed reassurance, too. She searched his eyes, her gaze flickered to the fading bullet wound scar on his chest, then back to his eyes. On instinct, she touched his cheek with the back of her fingers. "I trust you," she whispered honestly, every part of her straining for him now, ready, so ready. His face softened, the
fear faded away, and in its place was something else altogether, something that made her stomach flip and breathing pick up. He looped an arm under hers and around her, his hand coming to rest at the back of her neck, holding her tightly.

With aching and gentle slowness he pushed into her, helplessly letting out a soft little groan even as his head fell toward her shoulder. Gasping at the gorgeous feeling and amazing pressure, she buried her face in the side of his neck, holding onto his upper arms tighter as he became part of her and she of him. It was tortuous and it was divine the way he felt inside of her and it felt so much more intimate like this, with both of them naked, bared, nothing between them at all.

Her senses were so focused on Castiel inside of her, the feeling of his chest on hers, his hips over hers, his strong warm bare arms, his thighs pressed against hers. She realized that she could feel so much more than the first time, that she was aware of every sensation, that she was so turned on that even though he was holding completely still inside of her not even doing anything yet that she was close to going over the edge. "Ah..." she moaned helplessly, suddenly desperate, pulling on him, needing him now, already knowing it wouldn't be long for her.

Cas's eyes were locked on hers and he responded to her pleading sounds, holding onto her tightly as if for dear life as he began to move himself in and out of her at a deep, slow rhythm he became more and more sure of. She clung tightly, amazed at him, almost in shock or awe—her mouth hung open and every thrust made a shocked, pleasured-yet-distressed sound come out of her mouth. Strained sounds of raptured disbelief escaped from Cas's mouth, he seemed overwhelmed completely just like her. His hips met hers over and over and each time was unbearable to her, each time was too much and not enough, and he sounded like he was dying, or maybe that was her—she felt the tension mounting in her body fast, pooling in the low parts of her belly, and her eyes fell closed, she anxiously hung onto Castiel as fingers tightened into his hair. Everything she had was quickly becoming nothing at all—in that moment he had everything that belonged to her—and she gave it freely, losing herself in his arms and the fever of the moment. The sounds he was making were the most erotic thing she had ever heard—these helpless little moaning whimpers and gasping pants. The way he was making love to her was torturing her in the most beautiful way imaginable. The feelings he filled her with were thrusting her into the end of herself and desperate for it she grabbed onto him as tightly as possible, wrapping her legs around his middle and pulling him deeper as her forehead hit against the top of his shoulder. He let out a soft cry when her legs clenched around his waist and she groaningly whispered his name in despair. Castiel heard the way she said his name in a voice so overwrought with need, need for him and him alone and it made him need to move faster for her. He began to almost whimper because he couldn't, it was too much—and he wasn't himself anymore, not anyone, just the man who loved this woman. He kept going, fighting himself and the surrender he wanted to make. He refused to allow himself. Not until she was satisfied... not until she was given release.

Without warning, the dam broke over Alex and a frantic choking gasp came out of her mouth as every atom burst into bliss, as every cell shattered apart—she sobbed out and held onto him for dear life with every limb she had, shuddering uncontrollably as impossible ecstasy ripped through her and wracked her all over. Right behind her Cas gave a desperate, groaning cry, then another and then another, his arms tightening on her almost painfully as he came, pressing her down into the bed as he was rendered uncontrollable by the orgasm. The height of pleasure rolled over them like high tide, drowning them completely, teaching them the meaning of euphoria, shocking them with the intensity of gratification. Cas strained against her a few last times with his hand tangled in her hair to hold her close—he quaked and shivered and then fell into breathless stillness over her, his open lips brushing against her neck. The only sound was of heavy breaths and they hung onto each other for a long minute in silence, mutually stunned.
Underneath him Alex trembled, completely spent and wrecked and renewed all at once, stunned at how different it had been from last time—how much more intimate and fast and urgent it had been, how she felt tears pricking at her eyes—and she wasn't even sure why. Breathless, she moved her head back and she looked up at him. He was looking at her intensely, emotionally, seeming similarly affected, similarly floored by what they'd just done together. His arms tightened gently around her and he cradled her in the most intimate embrace they could share. He looked afraid to let go of her. "I meant what I said," he told her in almost a whisper. His voice was strained and emotional. She recognized that he was deeply upset. "I'm going to find a way to change the future," he said, increasingly emphatic. "I'll rip down the laws of nature if I have to. To keep you safe, to protect you."

The severe and passionate tone in which he said those things, the way he looked at her... it was almost frightening. Reeling from what he'd done to her on that bed, from the feeling of him still buried deep inside of her, she searched his eyes, starting to believe, starting to see what she really must mean to him. She thought of the Castiel she'd met in 2014, the Castiel who had lost his mind and wasted away when she died, she thought of how Cas might have killed Dean earlier that day if she hadn't stopped him.

Nothing ever meant anything to me until you.

"You really would do anything for me, wouldn't you?" she asked him in softly incredulous epiphany, and somehow, she almost felt afraid of the answer.

He brushed back her hair from her forehead, answered her helplessly, honestly, for better or for worse. "Yes." He seemed distressed, scared, and she didn't know what of.

Wordlessly, she pulled him back down to her, hugging him tightly, feeling his arms envelope her in return, feeling him bury his face in the side of her neck. And she was scared, too. Of the future, of what they were hurtling toward. She didn't feel brave anymore.

You really would do anything for me, wouldn't you?

Yes.

It was only a word—one word—but it was the one that would lead him to tear apart Heaven and Earth in the years that followed. The one word that would start things that could never be taken back or changed.
Dust filtered through the air, catching the midmorning light that came through the attic windows. The only sound in the small, cluttered space was of heavy, slowing breathing.

Castiel's head was bowed onto Alex's shoulder and he remained motionless, resting, just listening to the sound of their breathing while feeling the beat of her heart against his chest. His eyes stayed shut and he took in every sensation, every feeling. His arms held her close, hers were around him too—he could feel all of her bare skin damp with a sheen of perspiration pressed up against his. And the reality of what he had just done with her washed over him anew as the feelings of bliss faded.

Cas drew his head off of her shoulder and found her eyes waiting to meet his. He felt the stab of guilt in his stomach again, but attempted not to show the emotion he felt. He remembered how deeply it had upset her last time when she'd seen his conflicted feelings. And this time he had no right to be torn or regretful—he had asked her for it, begged for it even, wanted it so much. How could he now sink into a state of shame and confusion in front of her? It would only hurt her and make her feel badly. However, he knew, as soon as their eyes locked, that she knew he was upset. "What's wrong?" she asked him so softly, concern filling the face he loved so much.

The fact that she so easily saw through him affected him deeply—made him feel even worse. He felt guilt-stricken, just as he had last time. Like he'd done something he should be ashamed of, something wrong. Something sinful. Something that dishonored her and himself too. All the years he'd spent in Heaven, watching over humanity, sexual relations had seemed undignified and low, an act he'd found to be crude and unseemly and had been taught was a sin in certain situations. He had never understood what led humans to desire it or enjoy it. But now, here on earth, walking in the body of a man, being awakened to a horizon of emotion and sensation and ability… being near her physically, learning the spark of a kiss, tasting the thrill of her touch… falling into her arms and discovering a heaven so unlike the one he had drifted down from… he understood now.

But he still struggled. He wasn't sure how it could feel so obscene and divine at the same time. Castiel worried. Was he a sinner? He thought of the feelings she gave to him when he was inside of her, when she wrapped herself around him and called him forward to a small death he wanted to die over and over again… these feelings and sensations weren't simply physical and couldn't be tied to just his body. Here in her arms, even now despite his guilt, he felt connected in a way beyond the physical. As though he were forever bound to her alone.

A minute ago he'd told her he would rip down the laws of nature itself to save her from the future they'd seen in 2014, and he wasn't even sure what had prompted him to say that—he'd felt so intensely, like all of his thoughts and feelings were so close to the surface. All he'd wanted to do was give those thoughts and feelings to her. He wanted to give everything to her.

"Cas?" she asked him, looking at him closely, her eyebrows growing closer still in worry. "What is it?" He realized he hadn't answered her initial question.

"I'm..." he didn't know how to reply, he could barely look her in the eyes—she was flushed, naked beneath him, he was over her, inside of her, it was right after they had engaged in the most primal human act he could think of. He'd made her writhe and gasp and tremble and reach ecstasy, she'd
made him lose himself and make sounds he didn't know how to make. They'd found some beautiful moment therein, a moment of pleasure and connection and things Castiel wasn't sure how to describe fully. But he couldn't bear the thought that he'd wronged her in any way. He was an angel and it had been hammered into his mind: Sexual relations outside of marriage were a sin, but sexual relations between an angel and a human… weren't even allowed. And yet here he was. "I'm... unsure what to feel right now," he confessed honestly, worried about how she would react.

Her expression softened. "It's okay," she told him quietly, and she seemed to understand how vast and complicated his feelings were, she seemed relieved he didn't say something else. "I know."

She turned her head down just a little. Cas realized perhaps he should remove himself from her—and almost reluctantly, he moved, shifting himself and with a shudder, he pulled away, mouth dropping open a little at the way it felt. Alex took in a sharp breath when he did, bit her lip glancingly, and he missed the look of loss that shimmered over her features. Castiel glanced down at himself, a little breathless again. He had never been unclothed like this before or really examined... himself. He was a little surprised at what he saw, then suddenly he didn't understand. She was a more petite person, and he had suddenly discovered that the body he was in... was not petite in specific places. "How... does that fit inside...?" he asked, perplexed—and she was staring at him with the most peculiar expression, and then she shocked him when she burst into loud, unrestrained laughter. "What?" he asked, confused. "Did I phrase myself incorrectly?"

She had a hand over her mouth. "No, it's—I—you—" she couldn't stop laughing, a tear leaked out of her eye she laughed so hard. Her eyes were wrinkled up, her laugh was so boisterous and carefree. Cas felt his confusion fading, felt his face softening, lightening. She suddenly stopped, looking at him in dawning surprise, or maybe that was awe.

"You're... smiling," she said, looking up at him with surprised eyes. And Cas realized he felt it—his mouth was quirked up to one side, lips parted, revealing teeth. And to his knowledge, he never had done that before. He realized he could feel the smile everywhere, not just on his face.

"I've... never seen you laugh like that," he said, still thinking about it. That was, he was fairly sure, why he had smiled. She seemed so different to him in that moment. Completely soft, open, unburdened. No guards up.

"...I feel happy," she told him, seeming to be surprised to hear herself, too. "Crazy... with everything that's happening. But... yeah. I feel happy right now." She touched his bare shoulder with her fingers, looking at it glancingly, then back up at him, a shade more shy. "Here with you."

Her simple touch and words made his stomach feel as though it turned a flip. He bent his head down, rested his forehead against hers for a moment. He felt the same and it was thrilling and terrifying all at once. He was unsure what to do now, if he should avert his eyes and allow her space, if she wanted him to stay or to go, or... she seemed to read his mind. "Can you just... stay with me awhile?" she asked, and Cas realized that was what he wanted, too.

Following his instincts with both caution and a growing feeling of safety, he rolled off of her, laying on his side beside her, keeping his arms around her securely—and she reached across his torso, pulling his discarded trench coat over them like a blanket, her eyes still faltering away from his gaze. She bowed her head down and rested it against his shoulder, ducking his gaze completely.

Underneath the heavy fabric, she was pressed up against him, bare skin to bare skin, and Castiel was in awe of this atmosphere, the feeling of her arms wrapped around his middle, her head resting against his shoulder. His body still echoed with reverberations of what she'd given to him. The air around them was thick and sweet, heavy. How could anything in existence be better than this?
"I don't even know your favorite color," she suddenly said, prompting Castiel to become quickly confused.

"Um. What?"

She was quiet for a second. "I… I don't know enough about you, Cas."

He worked her words over a few times in his head before he gave up trying to know what she meant. "Know enough about me for what?"

She drew back a little, looked him in the eye, regarded him with thoughtfulness, and didn't answer him for a long moment. "Just… I want to know you. Everything." She looked at him like she was trying to decipher an intriguing riddle. "I mean… do you miss Heaven? Do you like music? Were you ever an angel kid?" She seemed so lovely to him right then, looking at him like that, wanting to know him, their chests pressed to each other's, her eyes catching the light that streamed in from the window. "I want to know all of who you are," she finished quietly, bashful.

Castiel ran his fingers against the side of her face, tucking some errant strands of hair behind her ears. "Ask me whatever you wish to know."

"Why can't I see your wings?" she asked immediately. "I saw the shadow of them once but…” one of her hands was on one of his shoulder blades, "they're not there."

He thought a moment. "They're not like the rest of the things in this world—they're neither corporeal or incorporeal." He was frustrated slightly, unable to give her a real answer. "It's hard to explain." He thought back to her questions. Do you miss Heaven? Do you like music? Were you ever an angel kid? Questions that surprised him. "Certain elements of Heaven I miss," he answered slowly, thoughtfully. "Knowing my place. The familiarity of it all. But no. I don't think I miss Heaven itself." You weren't there. He looked at her for a long moment. Alex hung onto his every word as he thought through her other questions out loud. "I've never given thought to if I had a favorite color or not," he said honestly.

"Blue. It'd have to be blue, right?" Alex said, smiling like she knew, but as Castiel gazed into her eyes he abruptly realized he did have a favorite color.

"No. Not blue," he told her, and her little smile faded under the intensity of his gaze. "I like the color of your eyes best."

She seemed embarrassed or like she felt discomfort, he saw that her cheeks flushed a little bit. "Cas…” she said, and it sounded like she was protesting.

"I made you uncomfortable," Cas said, unsure how he'd done so. Feeling embarrassed, he looked down. "I apologize."

She touched the side of his face, made him look back at her. She held his gaze. "Don't." She looked at him a minute, trying to figure out how to word herself. "You just say things sometimes that... really surprise me. Really make me feel..." she trailed off, her eyes dropping away from his shyly, her hand slipping away from his face and back down to his middle. "I dunno."

"Badly?" Castiel asked, trying to understand.

"No," she said, the ghost of a smile on her lips. "Not badly." She curled her head into his shoulder again, and the room was quiet for a long moment.
"What's… your favorite color?" he asked her, because he realized he didn't know.

He felt her lips smile against his shoulder. "Blue."

Something swelled in his chest. He was full of a feeling that he only felt for her, and he bowed his head down closer to hers, his nose pressed into the hair at the side of her head. Her arms tightened around him a little in response and his chest swelled even further. Her hand rested on the side of his waist, her thumb slowly moved back and forth over his skin, and he felt her draw back a little, and he pulled his head back too, looked down at her.

"I wish I could see you," she said earnestly, searching his gaze openly. "The real you."

Cas was caught off guard. "My true form isn't… anything like this," he said, glancing down at himself—the body of the man made of muscle, tissue, flesh. "I don't think you'd like it," he told her, feeling a twinge of sadness. His true form, which he felt so detached from now… was fearsome and alien in comparison to this.

She didn't seem deterred, just looked at him with soft eyes. "If it's you… then I think I would."

Cas looked at her deeply, his eyes flicking between hers. He felt the familiar swell between his ribs. "I think this is me, now," he told her, and she seemed mildly taken aback. "I don't think I'll be returning to Heaven anytime soon," he explained, looking down.

She studied him, face soft with an empathetic sadness. "Because you can't or because you don't want to?"

"Both," he answered sincerely, not understanding his reasoning completely, just knowing his answer was truthful. He tried to tell her what he felt, everything he was thinking. "Here… on earth… with you… I..." he trailed off, didn't know what he was trying to say. Frustrated, he went silent, and she didn't push him. She was staring into his shoulder, thinking hard.

"Cas?" She looked as though she were gathering the courage to ask him about something. "You said that… that you saw us in twenty-fourteen, right?"

Castiel felt a twinge of dread and general bad feelings. "Yes."

Her gaze was curious and a bit shrewd. "What were we like?"

He frowned a little, trying to decipher her meaning. "Do you mean… in our interactions as a… a couple?"

She nodded hesitatingly, and he thought hard about what words to use to describe what he'd seen. "We seemed… close." He paused in deep thought. "We… lived together and were always with each other, from what I gathered." His mind's eye wandered over the memories, and he remembered seeing himself smiling widely more than once, her too. "We appeared to be happy," he said quietly. "But then you died." His jaw tightened. "And I don't like who I became."

She was silent for a long moment. "Was it my fault you got that way?" She seemed surprisingly emotional, deep in thought, saddened. "I… don't want that to be you. Ever." She blinked a couple times, rapidly, her eyes shining as they looked into his. "You were so lonely and depressed and broken."

He brought a hand to the side of her face, disliking the sorrow in her eyes. "I know," Cas said, and he thought of the things he had seen that she hadn't. He'd seen glimpses and flashes of the future, she'd visited it, met the man he supposedly would become. He was silent for a long moment. In the
very back of his mind, he realized he had to tell her what he had avoided all this time. "It wasn't just your death that made me that way."

She frowned, growing worried at his tone. "What do you mean?"

He wasn't sure how to tell her, and his hand fell away from her face.

"What is it?" she asked anxiously, and she was propped up now on her arm now.

Cas met her waiting gaze slowly, hesitatingly. "I've always felt that I should tell you this but… I never have," he admitted, and looked down, afraid to tell her this for reasons he could not name. His eyes flicked back up to hers. "There was a… child. Our child." Her face had gone blank. "You… were pregnant, Alex. When I… he… killed you."

"What?" she sounded stunned, her eyes went back and forth over middle distance in front of her, then she looked back at him, puzzled and almost accusing. "All this time you've known that and never told me?"

Cas couldn't hold her gaze. "It seemed too awful."

"You should have told me," she insisted, but she seemed confused.

"Why?" Cas asked her, genuinely wanting to know her reasoning.

She looked at him directly, her face full of a certain kind of mournfulness. "Because it is too awful to know that. To know that you… shot me… while I was…" she trailed off. "That's too awful for you to have to carry all by yourself." She let out a heavy breath, looked at him tensely, seemed to be thinking hard about what she was about to say. "For what it's worth Cas... you—he—did the right thing." Cas felt his stomach clench oddly when she said that. "I mean, Croats aren't a joke. And for some nutso reason if I were to get turned tomorrow… I'd want you to do the same."

"Alex, no—"

She cut him off. "I'm just saying. I know it's horrible. And I know you hate it, or the thought of it. But it was… it is… the right thing to do. It's a mercy kill." Cas felt himself becoming upset, deeply, and Alex seemed to regret what she'd said, if only because of how he reacted. "Hey," she said, cupping the side of his face again. "It's okay."

"No, it's not," Castiel protested, thinking of everything he'd seen, how meaningless and preventable her death had been, how horrible it was knowing that in any version of their future he was the one who put a gun to her stomach and pulled the trigger, ending her life as well as the spark of their offspring. He couldn't even get his mind to fully comprehend that thought—that they had created a child together, that they were a mother and father together. He barely knew how to have a conversation, how could he ever fill a role as pivotal as a father?

Alex's thoughts seemed to be following a similar path, and she looked very uncertain. "I don't know how I feel about that… being pregnant."

Cas remembered. "You didn't know how you felt about it in the future, either."

Her eyes came from someplace far away back to him. "How did you—uh, future you—feel about it?"

Cas thought back. "He—I—seemed to welcome the idea."
Alex's eyebrows were high up. She cleared her throat. "I, uh, I don't understand how I could have gotten pregnant, anyway." She frowned a little, looked sort of chagrined. "This may be TMI but... I haven't had my period in years, Cas. That's what I get for skipping meals and never sleeping and always being stressed out, I guess."

Castiel was silent for a minute—he knew that already and it worried him. He knew all about her body, and all the other bodies he encountered. He knew that Alex wasn't the most physically healthy, that she neglected herself almost, barely made time to keep herself alive. Similar to Dean, only while Dean stuffed himself to the brim with foods that would bring on a heart attack, Alex barely remembered to eat food at all. "You should eat and rest more," he told her sadly, to which she gave him a look, like he was asking the impossible. Cas looked down, wishing she could have a different, safer, better life. "You were physically more substantial in the future visions I saw of you. Perhaps that's how you could conceive."

She tilted her head to the side. "Are you saying I was fat?" she asked, looking at him oddly, like she was about to either laugh or be angry with him, he wasn't sure which.

All humans were made up of a certain ratio of fat, muscle, tissue—all humans were fat. And bone. And tissue. And muscle. But from the way she asked the question, he understood that she thought he was implying something negative about her body. "Uh... no?" he answered, and gauged her reaction. He'd said the correct thing, she looked appeased. "You weighed approximately seventeen pounds more than you do now," he told her factually, and she looked impressed.

"Huh," she said, then almost smiled, the corner of her mouth flicking upwards briefly as she looked down. "Yeah. We really must've been happy." Her smile faded and she looked at him with growing anxiety. "Are we really... doing this?" Her gaze faltered for a moment. "Knowing how it might turn out?"

Without hesitation, Castiel tightened his arms around her, pulled her closer. Their legs touched, their stomachs touched. "I won't let it end that way," he told her intensely, reminding her of what he'd promised.

"But what if you can't change it?" she asked him softly, a whisper.

He held her gaze unflinchingly. "I will. I have to." Their eyes remained locked for several seconds longer, and then she closed her eyes, curled into him and buried her face in the space between their bodies. He could feel her eyelashes fluttering against his neck when she opened her eyes and blinked.

"I need to tell you something," she said quietly, and he heard the anxiety in her voice.

Her tone caused him a mild flush of anxiety. "What?"

"I uh... I kissed you... future you... in twenty-fourteen."

Oh. He already knew that. But she didn't know that he knew, and was looking at him apprehensively, worried. "I know," he told her, warmth swelling in the vicinity of his chest because it seemed to worry her, what his reaction would be.

Surprise darted across her eyes. "You know?"

"Yes," he answered. "I saw that, too."

Her surprise remained and grew. "You're not angry?"
"Angry?" Cas repeated, thinking about it. He had felt angry when he'd first seen it because he now knew he had been jealous. Jealous of himself, which was strange. But the anger was faded, and a question was all that remained. "I'd just like to know why you did that," he ventured, because he truly wasn't sure why.

"I... was confused," she said, visibly uncomfortable and conflicted. "And he was you, sorta." Her eyes faltered from his. "I didn't think you would ever kiss me." He caught her meaning—she'd wanted to kiss him before and thought he never would. Strangely, that warmed him. The faintest blush of rose tinged Alex's cheeks as she looked down at how they were naked and twined together, having done so much more than kissing. An almost coy smile played secretively on her lips as she looked at him more boldly. "Guess I was wrong about that."

Cas felt his lips turning upward in response to her smile, in response to what she implied. This private and intimate thing they shared was special, thrilling, wonderful. Despite his misgivings, here was the only place he truly wanted to be. Despite his doubts about whether this were wrong or right, several things distracted him from dwelling on it further: Her warm body next to his, her eyes so open and unguarded, her smile so soft and beautiful... he touched the side of her head, letting his fingers trace across her tousled hair. He contemplated every aspect of her, finding every single thing about her to be lovely.

She contemplated him the same way and he watched her eyes traverse his face, felt her fingers brush gently against the skin of his arm and chest. Seeming to be overwhelmed after a moment, she ducked her head down, tucking herself underneath his chin where she maintained silence. "I've been thinking about it." She said after a moment. "You did the right thing today. Dean needed a kick in the pants."

Castiel frowned, wondering if she were remembering wrong. "I... put him through a wall, I didn't kick his pants."

She pulled away from him, grinning again, and he loved it when she did that. She shook her head, obviously amused. "You don't know how cute you are, do you?" she asked, her tone playful.

Castiel faltered, and in all seriousness, swallowed nervously. "Uh, no." He waited, then when she only looked at him with a growing little smile, he tried again. "How cute am I?"

She pressed her lips together, her eyes went to his mouth, then back to his eyes. Her eyes seemed to sparkle, then she grinned huge and hooked her arm around his neck, kissing him hard with a laugh. His confusion faded away and he felt the ghost of a smile turning his lips upward. He responded appropriately, kissing her back as they lay tangled together beneath the trench coat.

"So all that horror movie crap is real," Adam surmised dubiously, sitting back and trying to process everything Sam had just explained to him. "Dad hunted monsters and ghosts and demons—and you do too." He sat back, looked at Bobby, and then Sam. He rolled his eyes and made a disgusted little sound. "Well that's easy to believe."

Sam looked at him, a touch of sudden amusement playing on his features. "You were dead in the ground a few hours ago. You should probably broaden your horizons."

He had a point. Adam rolled his eyes again and looked away while falling silent. He rubbed his hands together anxiously, glancing around the room again. He thought about it again: demons, ghosts, monsters, angels... it was all real and Dad hunted that shit...? It just seemed a little nutso if you asked Adam, but maybe there was more to life and reality than he'd noticed his first time around. Adam glanced up and to the side, at the hole he'd noticed in the wall—it looked like
something big had smashed into it, the plaster was bent inwards.

"I'm doin' a little remodeling," Bobby said sarcastically, and Adam looked at him, saw that the old man was watching him closely, had seen him watching at the hole. Adam looked down and away again, very aware that these people were watching his every damn move—how long had he been here, anyway? Several hours at least, all of which had been spent being looked at weirdly and told about crazy stuff he could barely bring himself to believe. He had to get out of here. The angels would be waiting. He wasn't sure why they weren't here already to get him, unless maybe they couldn't find him. All he knew was that he had to get back to Mom and see her again. He let out a heavy breath, tried not to look as stressed as he felt. This was some fucked up crap.

There was the sound of footsteps descending the stairs, and then Alex came into the study at that point. Adam glanced at her sidelong, trying not to be obvious. She had changed clothes and had damp hair. She'd been missing in action for awhile now, what, for several hours at least. Her and that trench coat dude both, the supposed angel. He looked at her oddly, studying her with thinly veiled skepticism. Maybe Sam and Dean as these badass hunter characters he could buy, but her? She looked like she weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet, like it'd be easy to snap her in half like a twig.

"Where've you been?" Sam asked her absently, glancing up from his book.

"Uh just, trying to get my thoughts straight," she said, and Adam was distinctly aware that she sounded like she was lying. She tucked a stray hair behind her ear self-consciously. Sam, however, was distracted. "And then I fell asleep," she continued. "But I can help now."

"Take your pick," Bobby said, and gestured at the books on his desk. She grabbed one, sat in a chair, threw her feet up onto the end of the desk.

"Hey, what've I told you about that?" Bobby griped at her, but there was a hint of a smile hiding behind his beard. Alex looked at him from under her lashes for a moment, he gave her a friendly but warning look, and she took her feet off the desk, shifting in the chair.

"Whoops," she said, smiling a little down into the book. She had a pretty deep voice for a chick, Adam thought to himself. But it was still soft somehow. She had a baby face and you expected a high pitched voice to come out of her mouth, but when she spoke and out came this sort of deeper, kind of husky voice, it was a little surprising.

"You seen Cas?" Sam asked her, glancing up at her again distractedly.

At the mention of the angel, Adam saw how the corner of her mouth twitched. "Yeah. He, uh, went to check on Dean I think," she replied nonchalantly.

"Ah. Well, Dean's been quiet all day, didn't even seem surprised that I locked him in there," Sam said heavily, scrubbed a hand over his mouth several times. "I'm gonna give him a little longer then try and talk to him."

"Hmm," was Alex's unenthusiastic reply—she looked at her twin for a couple seconds, then returned to looking at the book she'd selected. Adam looked at her closely, trying to figure her out. She struck him as odd, and he couldn't figure out what group she would have been in during high school. She'd changed since he saw her last—she was wearing an oversized black Led Zeppelin shirt with a green flannel shirt thrown over it, jeans that were too long for her legs and bunched up at her ankles around her faded boots. Her hair had been pulled into a damp pony tail that clearly she hadn't even bothered to smooth out. She didn't have pierced ears or painted nails and she wore no makeup. She sort of seemed like what Dean would look like if he'd been a chick, Adam thought.
with a smirk. You could definitely tell she was John's daughter, her dark features and strong jaw. In fact, Adam realized that for twins, she and Sam didn't really look that much alike to him. It's funny... when Dad had mentioned his other kids, he'd always assumed Sam was the girl—Samantha, right? It made sense at the time.

Adam watched the three of them for about thirty minutes and they pored over a book about end time Mayan prophecies. They argued in good nature and swapped mostly inane sounding theories in between long patches of studious silence. Even though he could tell they were all under huge amounts of stress and pressure, they seemed to be dealing. From time to time one of the three would glance Adam's way sort of mistrustfully. He'd had about his fill of this, and was going stir-crazy. He was counting down the hours until night time when he thought his best chance at ditching out of here would be.

"Yeah, okay," Sam finally said, sounding sort of tired, sitting back in his chair and rolling his neck as if to ease some kinks. "I need a break. Bobby, think I'm gonna grab a shower."

"Don't forget to wash behind your ears," Bobby muttered, engrossed in the book he was reading over, then throwing Sam a glance. Sam chuckled at the comment and lumbered out, going upstairs.

Adam looked at his half-sister curiously, watching her a couple minutes longer. She was tapping a pen now against a blank notepad she'd made zero notes on, and was leaned over the corner of the desk opposite of him, brow scrunched up. Maybe it was sheer boredom, but he struck up a conversation. "So you're a hunter too, huh?" Adam asked her. She looked up at him dubiously, no trace of friendliness to be found. "They told me," he explained, blasé. "About Dad and how you all grew up."

Her eyes narrowed just a little. "Yeah, I am," she said neutrally, and left it at that, didn't say anything else, just looked at him. He made a doubtful face, and seeing it, she sat back from the book she was studying, a confrontational look on her face. "What?"

"Doesn't that rough lifestyle mean you might break a nail?" he asked, looking to pick a fight, and she gave him a mildly annoyed eyebrow raise.

"Do I look like the kind of girl who gives two shits about that kind of crap?" she asked, looking to pick a fight, and she gave him a mildly annoyed eyebrow raise.

"Don't that rough lifestyle mean you might break a nail?" he asked, looking to pick a fight, and she gave him a mildly annoyed eyebrow raise.

"Do I look like the kind of girl who gives two shits about that kind of crap?"

He smirked a little. "Hmm," he took in her tomboy appearance again and made sure she knew he was insulting her when he said, "No."

She just rolled her eyes and returned to her book. Her pen didn't tap anymore, she just held it still. Adam was quiet a minute. "So, all that stuff Sam said about Dad living life on the road and dragging you guys along with him was true?"

Exasperated, Alex slammed the pen down onto the table, turning her full attention to him, even though she had a bad attitude. "No, he made it all up," she said smartly. The Bobby guy gave her a look and Alex's jaw worked weirdly, she looked at Adam again. "Yes it's true. We grew up on the road, doing shit that people like you can't even comprehend." She almost looked bitter with him. "Be glad you had a normal life."

"Normal?" he repeated, insulted.

She wasn't paying him attention anymore, back to her book again. "You heard me."

Adam forced himself not to respond, and instead took a moment. He wasn't going to get intel from taking the troll bait from this bitch. As Alex flipped a page of the book unseeingly, Adam noticed a
dark scar across the palm of one of her hands, he indicated it with a nod. "How'd you get that?"

She gave him a dark little smile. "Someone kept asking me too many questions," she said evasively.

"Kids, kids... can we settle down here?" Bobby complained, his cantankerous face half hidden behind a volume. "Sheesh," he muttered. "Family reunion of the decade."

Alex complied sullenly, and after a moment, Adam tried again. "So if angels are such bad news, why do you keep that one in the trench coat around?" Adam asked, and just like he thought, she reacted immediately, glancing up at him sharply, seeming to be guarded.

After a second, she answered diplomatically. "He's... different than the others." Adam smirked again.

"Yeah. I bet," he said, his voice dripping with suggestion. Her expression immediately clouded over. Enjoying himself and how easy it was to get a rise out of her, Adam raised his eyebrows up slightly. "You uh, got a thing for him or what? You like older guys?"

Bobby was peering up from underneath the brim of his ball cap, seeming interested now. Alex's eyes looked like they could kill, but she was trying to act like she didn't care. "You wanna keep running your mouth or do I need to shut it for you?" she asked sarcastically.

That was hilarious, and he had no issue letting her know he thought so. "I'd like to see you try," he said, grinning crookedly at her, a real smile at the thought of this girl trying to pull one over on him. Her eyes flashed at him and Adam just grinned bigger. She was a lot easier to piss off than Sam was. At this point, Alex gave up glaring at him and returned to ignoring him. "I'm uh, kinda famished," she said after a couple beats, and leaned over his knees, looking at her pointedly. "You wanna fix me a sandwich?"

She looked at him like he was an idiot. "Kitchen's right over there, Food Network."

"You heard the lady," Bobby told him, his tone more measured and calm than Alex's. Adam pushed himself up and sauntered into the kitchen to make a sandwich. When he had gotten out all the stuff he needed to make something, he turned around and saw that his half-sister had disappeared from the study. He looked at Bobby carefully. The dude was stuck in a wheelchair, but Adam had seen that he had a shotgun laid across his lap. Not really wanting to chance getting shot, Adam decided to bide his time.

He slapped a sandwich together, reflecting on how many times he'd done this—made his own breakfast, lunch, dinner, in his overwhelmingly lonely childhood.

Alex went downstairs, into the quiet darkened space of Bobby's basement. Adam was such a little punk. He reminded her of that kid in high school who was always making smartass comments and alienating everyone. He definitely fit into this family, that was for sure, especially right now, what with everyone at odds and under each other's skin and beyond stressed out. What a mess.

Cas was near the bottom of the stairs, standing still as he watched the panic room silently, and the sight of him did a thousand things to her—calmed her down, thrilled her, made her feel warm, made her forget her annoyance with Adam. He turned when he heard her, his eyes softened, his lips turned up just slightly. Alex gave him the smallest of tense smiles as she reached ground level. She hadn't seen him since she'd gone for a shower. "Any change?" she asked, sort of hopeful.

"No, he's quiet," Castiel replied, looking at her and then back to the panic room, frowning slightly
now. "Restless though."

Alex nodded slowly, following his gaze, feeling the lightness of hope fading out. She wanted to believe in her big brother that he was stronger than this. For once in his life why couldn't he just stop trying to play savior of the world, stop trying to sacrifice himself and instead try to find another way? Another way. She knew Bobby and Sam were trying to act like there was another way, and she wanted to believe there was one too, but nothing they'd found seemed to offer any hope. And it wasn't like Bobby had just started the research either. They'd been trying to figure out a way to kill the devil for months now. Her heart was sinking. Dean wasn't right, was he? That him saying yes to Michael was their only shot left? She refused to believe that, even though somewhere, in the back of her mind... she was starting to.

Beside her she felt Cas shift and saw that he was looking at her closely, craning his head down to try and see her face better. "What is it?" he asked her, seeing her upset expression. She faltered under his gaze and for a moment, she almost told him 'nothing'—but it wasn't nothing.

"I just... don't know what's left to do," she told him quietly, facing the truth herself as she spoke the words aloud. She felt almost guilty for the past few hours in which she'd given next to no thought to the apocalypse or her brothers or the world in general. Instead, she'd lost herself in Castiel's arms and just let go of everything else, had been happy, had forgotten her problems... and she was now faced with a huge dose of cold reality. The bitter truth. "None of those books have the answers we need," she said, almost to herself more than him. They all knew it but were desperate and maybe in denial. Alex looked at Cas in silent, tense uncertainty for a minute, then looked away completely, realizing that she was up against a wall. "Maybe that's because there isn't a fucking answer at all. Maybe there isn't a way to kill the devil." She felt sick saying it out loud. She looked at Cas with sudden hopelessness. "You're the one who said no one but God could kill the devil." And an angel would know.

It was Castiel's turn to look grieved and burdened and disappointed. His reply was reluctant and heavy. "Even if he can... he won't."

There was a weighty silence. "What... what options does that leave us, then?" Alex asked, and it was like she was begging Cas for a way out, a miracle, something to give her just a shred of hope. His face was full of sadness, he took a long time to answer, and he seemed to be in deep, conflicted thought.

"I'm so sorry, Alex," he told her in a strained voice, confusing her—she wasn't sure why he was apologizing, exactly—if it was because he didn't know an answer, or because he couldn't do anything to help her, or if he didn't like seeing her sad... or maybe something else. He drew a deep breath, his forehead rigid, and what he said next made her stomach drop. "I let Sam out of the panic room all those months ago," he told her, holding her gaze even though he was agonized. "I allowed him to go free, which enabled him to kill Lilith, break the final seal, and subsequently bring forth Lucifer from below." Alex was wide-eyed—because she'd always suspected it had been an angel who'd broken Sam out, but she hadn't known it was him. "Everything that happened that night... was my fault," Castiel said, shamefaced. "I never wanted you or your brothers to know what I did... and I tried to make it right by taking you to Sam, giving you and Dean a chance to stop him. I tried to undo the damage that I caused." He let out a breath, looked around unseeingly. "Obviously, I wasn't able to." He couldn't look at her in the eye now. "I just want you to know how much I regret what I did. I always have. But moreso now than ever." His jaw tightened, he shook his head slowly. "If I had listened to my instincts, to you and Dean... Lucifer would still be sealed away. We wouldn't be facing this dilemma at all."

Alex's mouth had dropped open softly, her mind working fast and furious to piece it together. "You
"Think all this is all your fault?" she asked in soft disbelief.

Obviously he did, from the look on his face. "I'm certainly not without blame," he told her, and she realized that she couldn't exactly disagree with him. He did have a part to play in it. But the truth was that they all did.

"Even if that's true," she said, unable to make him feel worse by saying he was right, "...we can't change the past."

"I know that," he told her quietly, and his eyes flickered up to hers somberly. "I know that well."

There was another pause where Alex was both trying to figure out how to feel about this latest development and also wracking her brain for a way to convince Cas that he wasn't completely at fault. "If you didn't let Sam out, some other angel would have," she reasoned. "We both know that." She looked at him sadly, because he didn't appear comforted in the least. Her voice softened. "Not one single person is to blame for this situation we're in," she told him, and searched his gaze. "Least of all you." It was true—Castiel had just been going along with what he thought was right, he'd been naive and shortsighted, afraid to stand on his own two feet after a lifetime of following orders. She knew that. He wasn't the one who had raised Lucifer. There had been so many players involved in the plot—Dean, Sam, Ruby, Lilith, Raphael, Zachariah, maybe more. Maybe even her. Perhaps if she'd followed Sam, not let Dean's death tear them apart, Sam wouldn't have been led astray by Ruby. The what-ifs were endless. All Alex knew was that the angel she loved was blaming himself for it all.

Not knowing what else to do, Alex laid a hand on the side of Castiel's neck, stroking her thumb down across his skin softly, and he appeared to be reluctant to accept the affection, his features wracked with guilt. "We're going to get through this Cas, okay?" she looked at him, anxious for him to cling to hope with her so it could be more real. "Somehow." She might not have believed it herself, but she wanted one of them to have hope at least. She was so blindsided by the things she'd learned today, the things he'd told her, and now this. He took her hand and gently pulled it off of his neck, turned her hand palm-up and ran two fingers from his other hand over the deep scar tissue there in the center. He said nothing, just contemplated the scar, then met her gaze again. His eyes were full of turmoil and uncertainty, doubt, fear. All the things that she was feeling, too.

Alex's jaw clenched as she looked at Cas, filled with dread. She took his hand, stopping him mid-stroke, and he looked up at her questioningly. "I'm going to ask you something and I need you to be one hundred percent honest with me," she told him, about to trust him with a question she was afraid to ask anyone but him. She slowly let go of his hand, hugged herself, nervous. "I don't... I don't really want to even think about asking you this," she admitted. He waited, frowning slightly, and she felt her stomach twist with nausea. "But I think at this point... I. I have to." She swallowed. "Was... was Anna right?" she asked, and her voice dropped to a flickering whisper.

"About what?" Castiel's frown then deepened measurably then turned to shock as he understood what she was asking. "About killing Sam?"

She just looked down, unable to believe herself, unable to believe she could actually consider it, and feeling worse because Cas sounded shocked at her. "It's just that... if there's not a way for us to kill the devil, do we have to think about... making sure he doesn't get his true vessel?" She looked at him again, at the point of no return, asking a question no one would want to ask. But needing to know the answer. Cas looked entirely stunned at what she was saying and it only increased the guilty sadness she was drowning in—that, and how he wasn't telling her no, which was what she wanted to hear. "I don't want to have to consider it at all," she told him truthfully, emphatic, hoping he would believe her. She was quickly growing emotional. "God help me I don't." She seemed to
realize the irony of what she'd said—God wouldn't help—and she became quiet, her eyes stinging with tears and powerlessness. She bowed her head. She couldn't face this. It was impossible. "That's my big brother," she said hollowly, voice cracking. "I can't lose him." She sat down on the stairs, put her head in her hands, miserable, almost in tears. "I can't lose either of them. I can't."

She felt Castiel sit down beside her closely, a comforting proximity. He was quiet for a moment, and then she felt his hand come to rest on the back of her shoulder gently, and she glanced at him, overwhelmed, feeling like an impossible weight rested on her shoulders. "I'll help you," he told her quietly. "We'll find another way."

Alex looked at him, unsure how she could love him any more than she did right then—for how hard he was trying, for how much he was giving her, for how obvious it was that he felt uncertain, too, but was going out of his way to comfort her. And it did comfort her, a little, just to know he was there with her and committed to helping her and her family. But the ever-increasing pit was in her stomach, the whisper-soft voice in the back of her mind kept repeating there is no other way. It's only a matter of time before your brothers are both gone, taken, destroyed. And maybe not just them. Alex looked at Cas, suddenly wanting to reach out and hold onto him and never let go. Just wanting to be with him and let the problems of the world fade out. She may have wanted that, but she wasn't an idealist. She knew that she couldn't run away from this, from any of it. There was no way to know how this would turn out, she realized with ever-increasing despair. Maybe all she could do was hold on as long as she could to what she had before the inevitable loss.

And she leaned into her angel, circling her arms around him tightly, grieving, afraid, and unable to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Wondering if, in the crossfire, she would lose Castiel too.

Adam picked at the crappy sandwich he'd thrown together, then set it down completely, not really hungry anymore. The sun had just set and the house was dark now. He sat at the kitchen table frustrated as hell. He glanced across the house, into the study, where Bobby turned around his chair, facing the bookshelf. And Adam suddenly perked up as he realized this could be his chance. He might not get another, these people were like hawks. Heart beating fast, thinking of seeing his mom again and being at peace in the afterlife once again, he stood up and stole across the creaky old floor, toward the back door, reached for the doorknob and then—

"Going somewhere?" Sam asked, freezing Adam in his steps. Shit.

Caught and he knew it, Adam turned around, kicking himself mentally but trying to act casual. Sam stood there, eyebrows raised expectantly. "Uh, yeah… out for a… beer," Adam said lamely, the first thing that popped into his head. Sam had to know that was a lie, but didn't call him on it.

"Great, we got beer. Have a seat," Sam said in somewhat strained pleasantness, and Adam looked the guy up and down again—dude had to be at least two-hundred pounds of solid muscle. Running would be a bad idea.

Resigned to his crap luck, Adam gave up and went back to the table reluctantly as Sam cracked the refrigerator open. "You know, you pitched this whole dewy-eyed bromance thing, but the truth is, I'm on lockdown, aren't I?" Adam muttered, casting cagey glances around, sitting with his shoulders hunched forward.

"I wouldn't put it that way," Sam said, bringing a beer and setting it on the table in front of Adam, who stared at it unmovingly. He didn't really want a beer, he wanted to get out of here and away from these people. Sam was clearing his throat and sitting down across from Adam, looking like he was about to attempt another conversation. "Adam, you may not believe it," Sam started, "but Dad was trying to protect you. Keeping you from all of this."
Adam didn't exactly feel in the chatty mood and looked at his half-brother with a rude, disinterested expression. "Yeah well, I guess the monster that ate me didn't get that memo." Sam's face twisted in empathy, and Adam felt his stomach turn.

"You remember that," Sam commented quietly, seeming to be bothered by it and surprised even.

"Kinda hard to forget, Sam," Adam drawled in cool anger, putting on the guilt trip.

"I'm sorry that happened to you," Sam told him earnestly—as if he actually cared, what a joke. "Still, trust me," Sam said, and there was a quiet bitterness there. "The one thing worse than seeing Dad once a year—" Sam's face was very serious now "—was seeing him all year."

Adam looked at his half-brother in thinly veiled distaste—how dare this jackass sit there and look at him with that wounded dog expression, acting like he knew Adam's pain, loneliness, the huge hole in his heart? "Do you know how full of crap you are?" Adam asked acidly, and Sam's expression grew confused. Adam wanted to kick him in the face.

In frosty contempt, he stared Sam down, incensed. "See, it was me and it was my mom," Adam told him. "That's it." He paused for emphasis—he hadn't had siblings to lean on like Sam had, or a dad for the first twelve years of his life. "She worked the graveyard shift at the hospital. I cooked my own dinners. I put myself to bed." Adam was bitter. "So you can say whatever you want about our dad, but the truth is, I would have taken anything."

Sam looked like he thought Adam must be crazy. "Anything?" He struggled silently for a second, looking a little on the annoyed side now. "You got things we never did, do you understand that?" The nice-guy persona was fading a little, into a more assertive, here's-how-it-is kind of attitude. "Dad wasn't who you think he was, Adam. Sounds like he showed up and played father of the year for a couple days with you here and there. But with us? He ignored us on a day-to-day basis, forgot our birthdays, acted like we were his personal little army detail, like he was our drill sergeant, not our dad. I left home when I was eighteen because I hated it so much." Sam paused and let out a heavy breath through his nose, looking disgusted. "He pretty much verbally abused me, and he pretty much physically abused Dean and Alex."

Adam managed to hide his surprise and look unaffected by everything Sam had just said, even though he felt immediately disillusioned and surprised. And not wanting Sam to know that, Adam fired back the first horrible thing he could think of, trying to keep his half-brother at a safe arm's length, trying not to let himself be open or vulnerable. "Yeah, well, they probably deserved it," he said, and let his mouth twitch into a lifeless little smile. As predicted, Sam looked angry, but visibly reined himself in.

"If you would just knock off the tough guy BS for one second, Adam…" Sam said, short on patience but trying, leaning further across the table, trying to get Adam to knock it off, which only made Adam go harder.

"What?" Adam asked flippantly. "You want me to tell you about all my crippling inner sadness? You want me to care about your life? Sorry but I don't even know you."

Increasingly frustrated, Sam wet his lips. "Look, all I'm saying is if we had known we had a brother—"

"Well, you didn't, so…"

"—we would have found you," Sam interrupted emphatically, angrily. Adam scoffed, shook his head. This was ridiculous. Sam talked a big game but it was pointless—it was the past and what
was done was done. Adam had died at the hand of some monster ghoul thing, he'd watched his mom beg for help as she'd been eaten alive. And the kicker was that and his supposed family who hunted monsters and creatures—had been nowhere to be found. At this point, Adam just wished Sam would fuck off. "Look, I can't change the past," Sam said trying hard to be calm, and his gentle, empathetic tone was like nails on a chalkboard to Adam. "I wish I could. But... from here on out—"

"What?" Adam interrupted challengingly, staring Sam down. "We gonna hop in the family truckster? Pop on down to Wally World?"

Sam reacted just like Adam had intended. He shook his head, disappointed and rejected, discouraged. He sat back, no longer leaning over the table. "Tell you one thing, with an attitude like that... you would have fit right in around here." He looked at Adam sort of sadly, heaved a sigh, then stood up. "Don't go anywhere," he told him, glancing toward the study, where Bobby was once again sitting at his desk.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Adam muttered, looking at Bobby, who watched him closely from across the house.

Sam went downstairs, and he had to pause, let Alex and Cas get up from where they'd been sitting. It was dark, but he almost thought it looked like she'd had her head on the angel's shoulder, like they'd been sort of arm in arm. And he felt himself soften a little bit. It did his heart good to see someone being so gentle and sweet with his sister—and more than ever he felt like she deserved that kind of stuff after finding out about what Dad did to her and Dean. He felt his insides darken at that thought. Damn. Today had been sort of horrible, for all of them, but especially her, huh? Not only did her oldest brother hurt her like Dad apparently used to, but Adam showed up and had thrown a whole new wrench into the mix. No wonder Alex had gone off for a few hours to be alone. Sam froze mid-step. Wait. Cas had been gone the whole time Alex had been, hadn't he?

Cas and Alex looked at him from where they'd moved to, a little oddly, Alex in particular seemed to be wondering what he was doing stopping in the middle of the stairs and staring like that. Sam forced himself to walk down the rest of the way, trying to hide his surprise at his dawning epiphany. He wasn't sure why he hadn't realized it before just now, and he really wished he hadn't realized, either. It embarrassed him a little, realizing that's why Alex had changed clothes and why Cas's hair looked a little wilder than normal. And Sam suddenly remembered how he thought he'd heard something drop onto the floor upstairs at one point when he'd been on the second floor in the bathroom... and he'd written it off as house-settling noises, but now he realized wow, that sound sort of made him think of shoes hitting the floor… had that been… them?

"Uh, hi guys," Sam said, trying to sound nonchalant and casual, fill the silence that felt so awkward to him. His weird, stilted tone and way his voice sort of squeaked received a funny look from his sister.

"… hi…?" Alex repeated back to him, unsure what he was doing—her eyes were squinted up a little like she was suspicious of his weird behavior.

"… hi…?" Alex repeated back to him, unsure what he was doing—her eyes were squinted up a little like she was suspicious of his weird behavior.

Sam cleared his throat and scratched the back of his neck, tried to push it all out of his mind, tried not to look at either of the pair too closely. Uncomfortable, he expelled a breath through puffed cheeks, looked in the direction of the panic room. "I'm, uh, gonna try and talk some sense into him," he said gesturing toward where Dean was, already dreading it, but trying to just stay focused. "He's had awhile to think, maybe he'll come around."

"Yeah, okay," Alex said, putting on a shield of an expression. "I'll come with you."
"You sure?" Sam asked, hesitating, forgetting his unease—because after everything that had happened today and how mad Alex had to be at Dean right now, he didn't want her to have to be part of this if she didn't want to. It would be nice to have some backup though, and maybe with both of them in there, Dean might actually listen… still, Sam could do this on his own, if he had to. But it turned out that he wouldn't have to.

"Yeah," his sister replied without hesitation, then looked at him like she was surprised at him. "You're not going in there alone," she told him simply, calmly, then followed up with a, "No way."

Sam felt a surge of powerful emotion at her immediate, firm response—because he got what she was saying to him: that he didn't have to shoulder this situation on his own. And Sam was so unexpectedly touched that couldn't look at her for a second—he wasn't sure when it had become him and her against Dean, but he was glad at least one of his siblings wasn't giving up on him.

"Okay," Sam said, and cleared his throat again. "Yeah. All right. Let's see what we can do." He drew in another bracing breath and led the way to the panic room, glancing at his twin one more time.

"Should I come in with you?" Castiel asked Alex, and his deep, husky voice was overlaid in poorly disguised worry. Sam paused, only a few feet from the door to the panic room. Alex had turned to Cas, the two of them were exchanging a significant look.

"It's... not a good idea for him to see us together right now," his sister told the angel quietly, and Cas's expression reflected the pain that her voice held. "It'll just set him off more," she said softly, then followed up with a very earnest, "I wish it weren't like that."

Sam stood there awkwardly, feeling like he was intruding on a private moment as Cas looked at Alex gently. "Perhaps it won't always be," he said, and falteringly touched her arm. Sam was surprised when his sister, seemingly on impulse, stepped forward to the angel and kissed him.

Sam looked away after he stared for a second; he was embarrassed all over again. He'd always thought it was weird to see Dean with girls—kissing them, trying to put the moves on them, etcetera—but it was nothing, it wasn't anywhere near as strange as this was, seeing his sister kissing Castiel... and like that, with so much tender emotion. And honestly, it was surprising how much meaning and measure Cas kissed her with, too. Again, Sam rubbed the back of his neck as he looked down at the ground. He heard the rustle of clothing as they parted, then heard Castiel tell her, almost a whisper, "I'll be right here."

He heard a little smile on her voice when she quietly replied, "I know you will be."

There was another long pause and Sam just kept staring at the floor until he heard footsteps. Sam looked up cautiously and saw Alex was headed his way. She shrugged a little, hiding a little bashfulness in the motion. "I know you know," was all she said, and brushed past him to stand at the panic room door. True. Sam wasn't sure exactly when this had all started between his sister and the angel, but he really wanted to know, if only for curiosity's sake. They had what seemed to be a really strong bond. Now wasn't the time to wonder about it, though.

Sliding the heavy lock away and yanking down on the heavy handle, Sam swung the panic room door open.

In the middle of the room inside, Dean stood there and looked back at them conspiratorially, his eyes flickering over his siblings, then resting on Cas, who was scowling at him silently from further back outside of the doorway. Alex and Sam stepped over the raised threshold of the door as Dean's eyes narrowed just slightly and he gave Cas a look. "Well, Cas, not for nothing... but the last person who looked at me like that..." he shrugged mockingly. "I got laid."
Sam looked at Dean wide-eyed, trying to see if Dean had any clue what he was talking about—Alex looked similarly mortified, but Dean was just smirking at Cas, being an asshole. Oh my god, if only Dean knew how appropriate that comment was... uncomfortable yet again, Sam glanced at Cas. "Uh, why don't you, uh, go keep an eye on Adam?"

Cas hesitated, looked at Alex, who glanced at her twin, then back at Cas, giving him a little nod. "We're fine."

And grudgingly, Cas nodded, closing the door without touching it. Dean spread his arms, indicating the panic room, and clearly his mood wasn't vastly improved since earlier. "Is this really necessary?" he asked sourly.

"You tell us," Alex replied darkly—she stood near the edge of the room, keeping her distance and not masking how beyond unhappy she was with him right now.

Dean seemed to shrink a little underneath the way she regarded him, he looked down. He lost a little of his steam. "Don't look at me like that," he muttered. He sounded ashamed, and Sam knew it was because of what he'd done earlier, shoving her—but Dean avoided the subject altogether, skipping ahead to the Michael topic. "I was trying to do the right thing," he said softly. "What I'm supposed to do."

Not matching his quiet tone, Alex crossed her arms demanding. "What, all the sudden you believe in destiny?"

"I got my reasons," he told her defensively, and she threw a hand up, prompting him to please, go ahead and share with the class.

Dean looked at his sister almost pleadingly. "I mean you were there, Al, I shouldn't have to convince you. You saw the future that I saw, remember? You saw me not saying yes and where that got the planet." He threw a hand out, indicating Sam. "We both saw him—" Dean said, and Sam felt his stomach turn, realizing what Dean was talking about. Alex's face fell as Dean continued. "And how it wasn't him—it was Lucifer. Now you tell me how I can just sit back and let that happen."

Alex visibly struggled to find an answer for Dean, and Sam looked at his little sister, pained. He knew this had to be beyond hard for her. He'd never spoken with her one-on-one about the whole Lucifer thing but every time it got brought up with the three of them, he could see his twin shutting down. She'd either mentally check out or physically walk away. And he couldn't blame her. He barely knew how to face the idea that Satan wanted him, either. "We're working on finding another way," Alex said, trying to sound assured, but not quite getting there. "One where you live, Sam lives—everyone lives."

Dean shook his head, looked down again, smiled softly, a bitter little expression. "That plan doesn't exist, and you know it. We've tried to find another way, you know we did. Gave it our best shot. And now I got less choice than I did yesterday, what with this angelic Plan B upstairs..." he raised his eyebrows for emphasis, looked at Sam now. "And I am not letting him do it, okay?"

"Who, Adam?" Sam asked. "No, I'm... I'm not, either." Did Dean honestly think he would let that happen?

"No, you're not getting me," Dean muttered and turned around, walking away slowly, scratching his head absently.

"Oh, no, no, I 'get' you perfectly," Sam said, pausing for emphasis. "But I'm not letting you do it,
Dean got to the table, turned around, leaned against it, and looked at his siblings dead serious. "Bottom line that kid's not taking a bullet for me."

"Why do either of you have to do it?" Alex asked, exasperated, and Dean's previous gentle, quiet tone was gone.

"Oh good luck talking him out of it, the angels made damn sure he'd do what they wanted, hanging seeing his dead mom over his head," he ranted, then leaned forward, looked at each sibling with a defiant glare. "It's me or it's him. And it's got to be me." He leaned back, turned his hands palm up, in a gesture that seemed to say he saw no other way. "Look, I'm tired of being the reason so many people have bit the dust, okay?"

"Dean..." Sam started, but was cut off.

"I'm serious," Dean said, deadly quiet again. "I mean, think about how many people we've gotten killed, Sam. Mom, Dad, Jess, Jo, Ellen." Each name he said was like a sledgehammer to the stomach. "Should I keep going?" Dean asked, and Alex came forward finally to stand beside Sam.

"We didn't kill them," she protested.

Sam quickly added, "It's not like we pulled the trigger."

Dean didn't listen to either of them even for a second. "We might as well have. I'm tired, guys." He paused, let it sink in, and he looked years older than he was. "I'm tired of fighting who I'm supposed to be."

"This isn't who you're supposed to be!" Alex exploded, emotional and emphatic and obviously angry.

Dean just looked at her, unaffected almost. And maybe his lack of reaction was what was the most troubling. "You don't have this on you, Al," he said faintly. "You can't possibly understand what I'm going through, and thank God for that too. I just wanna save who I can, all right?" He wet his lips, looked at Sam, seeming to be pained. "How can I make either of you two understand?"

"We do understand," Sam retorted a little sharply, then took a second to compose himself. "But if you could take half a second and stop trying to sacrifice yourself, maybe this family could actually stick together." He looked at Dean long and hard. "Can we please just give that a shot?"

Dean was shaking his head, looking down to the floor beside his foot. "I don't think so," he said simply, and Sam clenched his jaw, keeping his mouth shut so he didn't say something that would only make things worse. Dean looked up and suddenly shut his eyes for a second as his shoulders fell slightly. He appeared to be chagrined. "Come on Al... please don't cry," he said quietly, and Sam quickly looked over at his twin, saw that she had silent tears running down her cheeks, a heartbroken expression on her face. "Don't do that."

"I believed in you," she told their Dean brokenly, and a muscle jerked in his cheek, he met her gaze briefly, agonized.

He looked down and drew his mouth into a hard line, then his voice lowered to a barely audible volume. "No you didn't," he said. "And you know what? That's what it boils down to, kiddo. Belief. And I... I just don't believe anymore, either."

"In what?" Sam asked, dreading the answer.
Dean looked up, and he seemed to be broken up completely, reluctant to answer. "In either of you," he finally said, a whispered low blow. But what he said next was worse. "But especially in you, Sam." It felt like the floor had disappeared beneath Sam's feet and he was falling—his chest seized up in pain when Dean said that. "I mean, I don't," Dean said, and it was with brutal, heartbreaking honesty. Not anger, not a general dick attitude. He was being totally real, and that's what hurt the most. "I don't know whether it's gonna be demon blood or some other demon chick, or using me or Alex against you or what, but… I do know they're gonna find a way to turn you."

"So you're saying I'm not strong enough," Sam said, blinking away the sting of tears.

"You're angry, you're self-righteous," Dean told him, in that same quiet, matter-of-fact sad way. "You're human. Lucifer's gonna wear you to the prom, man. It's just a matter of time."

Alex looked at her twin in quiet horror and Sam shook his head, unable to hear this, hating how certain Dean was and how Alex was listening to him, too. "Don't say that to me," he begged his brother, voice hovering above a whisper. "Don't put that on me. Not you… of all people."

"I don't want to," Dean answered slowly. "But it's the truth. And when Satan takes you over, there's got to be somebody there to fight him, and it ain't gonna be that scrawny little kid. No way. Lucifer'd eat him for breakfast." He managed a self-deprecating smile. "So, it's got to be me. At least with me as Michael, we stand a chance of killing the devil. I may not be as big as you are, but I'm your big brother. I've always been able to take you down, right?" He attempted a wavering smile, trying to bridge the gap between this horrible place they were in to some fond memories of when they always used to wrestle and play fight. It didn't work—Sam was struggling to compose himself, and Dean looked like he realized he shouldn't have even tried.

Dean heaved a jaded breath. "Listen, this is my decision, not either of yours. I know you're just trying to… to look out for me." He paused, cold again. "But you don't get to decide this." He looked at Alex. "Didn't you say something like that to me just the other day?" he asked, and Alex's jaw worked oddly, she looked at Dean in a deeply wounded, betrayed expression, as if she were wondering how could you? And then wordlessly she turned away and shoved the door open, leaving them alone and slamming the panic room door behind herself.

Dean looked at the closed door, his expression strange. Sam shook his head, a soft, humorless little huff of air meant to be a laugh escaping his lips. "You know, you're getting pretty good at this, Dean," he said softly.

"What?"

"Pushing the people who love you away." Sam looked at his brother accusingly.

Dean just gave him attitude, sauntered over to the desk, pretended to be interested in the book that was there. "Why are you still here then?"

Sam pushed aside his urge to hit his brother, and replied steadily, even if he was a little strained. "I'm disappointed in you. But I'm not giving up on you."

Dean's eyebrows shrugged up and down in a display of chagrin as he looked over his shoulder in what appeared to be little interest. "Huh, well. You're the last one left who's in that club." He looked at Sam sullenly, turned around, crossed his arms. "Sorry to tell you but I'm just gonna let you down. It's what I do best."

"Enough with the pity party," Sam told him intensely, giving his brother a pointed stare. "So you think I'm gonna give up and say yes… what happens to Alex, huh, when we're both dead or gone?"
Dean went to the little cot, sat down with his feet far apart, elbows resting on his knees. "She's a big girl, can take care of herself," he said, but it sounded like he were reciting lines off a script—his heart wasn't in it.

Sam called him on it. "Do you actually believe that?" he questioned incredulously, then went a little closer to his seemingly unreachable brother. "Dean just a couple years ago she was a totally different person, or have you forgotten? Don't let her fool you—she depends on us—and you—a lot more than you think."

"Nah," Dean said bitterly, still not looking at Sam. "She's got trenchcoat." He looked up at Sam at that point closely. "By the way… did you know about that?" Sam's expression gave him away and Dean's mouth turned downwards in distaste and anger. "Yeah, thanks for the heads up."

Sam was at a loss. "I don't get why you're being like this about them."

Dean's eyebrows shot up, like he couldn't believe what Sam had just said to them. He sat up straight as his expression quickly turned from surprise to a deep glare. "Because it's wrong, as wrong as you and Ruby was."

It was Sam's turn to be surprised. He looked at his brother like he was insane. "Cas isn't a demon who is using Alex to start the apocalypse."

"No, he's just using her," Dean fired back adamantly.

Sam grabbed the chair from the desk, sat down in it, looked at Dean thoroughly, emphatic, his voice and even the way he sat distinctly lecturing. "Dean. Cas took a frigging bullet for her. He gave her the ability to speak, he's healed her and saved her life—our lives—a bunch of times. He went against Heaven for us and ever since then has been trying to help us find a way to stop the apocalypse… if anything, we're using him."

Dean looked distinctly ruffled by that thought but then quickly covered that up by acting like it sounded stupid. "Please," he muttered, and quickly switched topics, trying to hide what clearly looked like the beginnings of a guilty conscience. "Forget about Cas," he said gruffly. "Just think about this, Sam. If you and I both say yes, those jackass angels don't get a chance to mess with our sister. I mean they got Adam, they turned him against us. It's only a matter of time before they get their claws in her and use her to make us do what they want, or worse, kill her."

Sam couldn't argue with that, but still, Dean seemed to be forgetting something. "So… save our sister… but let half the planet burn?" he asked, doubtful, wondering if Dean really meant that.

His brother looked at him, pained, surprisingly vulnerable. Soft again, sad. "She's our blood, Sam. I spent my whole life trying to protect you both and if I can't save both of you, at least I can save one. Maybe I can even make a deal, make sure she gets a Heaven or, I dunno I—I just..." he seemed to be out of steam and rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand before continuing. "I'm just saying… if only one Winchester can survive this mess… it's gotta be her, man." He looked at Sam despairingly. "Look me in the eye and tell me you don't think the same thing."

Sam couldn't answer for a second, because he knew what Dean meant but… "It's the lives of half the people on the planet for hers," he protested.

"I know it is," Dean said, looked down. "She deserves to live. I don't." He looked up at Sam sadly. "And I'm not sure if you do either."

"How can you say that?" Sam asked, cut to his heart by Dean's words.
"Because it's the truth. And you know it is." Dean looked at him without a trace of anger. Just sadness. And Sam thought about the demon blood and Ruby and the things he'd done as a kid and how he'd let Jess die and how he'd failed to bring Dean back from Hell on his own and how he'd abandoned his sister when she'd needed him the most. And Sam said nothing for a long moment, just looked down, rested an elbow on his knee and moved his hand across his mouth in distressed thoughtfulness.

Dean leaned forward over his knees. "We can't say no forever, Sam, do you get that? They'll keep upping the ante, they'll start killing everyone and everything we know and love to get us to do this. They are gonna make us do this. No ifs, ands, or buts." Dean's eyebrows were raised up high. "Now we can decide to do this together, on our terms, save a lot of people in the process..." he searched Sam's eyes intensely, "Or we can stand by and let someone bully us into doing it." Sam looked at his brother tensely, trying not to be swayed. "I'm gonna do it," Dean told him decidedly. "I am. So what do you say, huh Sammy?" Dean almost seemed pleading, and for a second, Sam was considering. "You said you wanted us to stick together, so... here's your chance." Dean looked at Sam, waiting for his response.

And Sam was suddenly reeling, unable to believe he could even consider becoming Satan's vessel, unable to believe his brother would try and talk him into it. Sam stood up from the chair, almost knocking it over, and he walked a couple paces off, quickly becoming enraged at himself. "No, Dean." Sam was adamant and angry, but most of all, betrayed. "That's not an option for me, okay? Not now, not ever."

Still sitting, hands on his knees now, Dean looked like he had expected as much and nodded, shrugged. "If you get our sister hurt or killed in this process... so help me Sam, I'll never forgive you."

Sam raised his chin, looked down his nose at his brother. "I'm not the one who's hurting her, though, am I, Dean?"

Dean looked at Sam sharply, but said nothing. His glare wavered and he looked away, shoulders heavy and slumped forward as if in defeat. And Sam was suddenly hurtling to the opposite end of the emotional spectrum, to heartbreak and sadness again. He looked at his big brother, grieved to his soul. "What happened to you?" he asked, and Dean said nothing, just shook his head, kept it bowed. How was it, even when his brother was being the world's biggest dick, Sam could feel so bad for him? He paused for a long moment, grew introspective as he watched his brother closely. "Why didn't you ever tell me about Dad?" he asked softly, hesitatingly. "What did you ever tell me about Dad?"

Dean immediately became visibly guarded. "Ah come on," he said, feigning disinterest, batting away an invisible something with his hand. "You didn't need to know."

Sam disagreed, staring at his brother earnestly. "If I had known, I would have found a way to get us away from Dad," he said, then paused, realizing. "Maybe that's why you never told me." Dean made no reply, and Sam thought back to nineteen ninety-nine again. He closed his eyes briefly, opened them back up, fighting a painful feeling in his throat. "She... she told me she fell down some stairs. That time you went away on that road trip and met Lisa, remember?" He had Dean's attention. "That was Dad, huh?" Sam shook his head in disbelief, disgust, sadness.

And even though it was clear that Dean had mixed feelings, he looked at Sam sharply. "Dad was a hero," he replied defensively. "He was a good man."

Indignant anger boiled in Sam's veins. "Then why did you have to protect her from him?" he asked very loudly.
"Listen... Dad had his faults, I know that," Dean snapped. "He was pretty screwed in the head from the job, from what happened to Mom, to us. It's a wonder he wasn't worse."

Sam stared at his brother sorrowfully. "All I'm hearing are excuses," he told him, and his heart ached viscerally. "He never should have laid a finger on her. Or you. I'm sorry."

Dean glanced up in Sam's direction, wouldn't look him in the eye. "Yeah. Well. I'm sorry too."

"It never should have happened," Sam told him intensely, disliking how Dean just seemed to be okay with the fact that that things had been that way.

Dean almost smirked. "Yeah, and you know what else shouldn't have happened? You and me, both knocking her down. Even once, man." And the realization that yes, both of them had purposefully hit or shoved their sister… was enough to break Sam's heart. Dean obviously had taken it to heart a lot more than he had shown. He had his head in his hand again, and Sam remembered, pained, when he'd backhanded her across the face when he'd been high on demon blood. He'd never forgiven himself for that and never would.

Dean let out a gruff sounding breath, composing himself and clapping his hands between his knees, refocusing. "You know, speaking of Dad, Alex saw him in Heaven a couple days ago. Cas told me all about it."

Sam was thrown off. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah," Dean confirmed. "The old man got a message through somehow. Don't ask me how cuz I haven't even had a chance to ask her about it but... Dad said something about Azazel's plans and how it's still dangerous..." he looked at Sam tiredly. "You know anything about that?"

Sam was staring at Dean in complete disbelief. "N-no," he answered, and it must have been the way he said it or the look on his face.

Dean was suddenly interested, intent, and looking at him almost suspiciously. "You sure about that?"

Looking at his brother in total fear and panic, because he thought he didn't have to worry or wonder about those dreams he'd had all those years ago anymore—Sam covered his true feelings with anger. "Yes Dean, I'm sure. Look, I'm not saying yes to Lucifer and Azazel is dead and gone and I want you to stop acting like you know everything. I'm stronger than you think!" He left the panic room in a huff, slamming the door behind him.

"Friggin' drama queen," Dean muttered, then raised his voice a few notches as he stood up. "You can't keep me in here forever!"

In response to his shout, Dean heard the door lock and he clenched his fists in frustration. He could hear Sam and Alex talking in indistinct voices outside of the room and he growled in exasperation. So much for talking it out. So much for them understanding or listening to him. He was gonna have to do this the hard way. He remembered again what Cas had said to him all those months ago about the apocalypse, Dean had been a mess from Alastair's handiwork—hooked up to a million IVs and feeling like death warmed over. Cas had shown up in his hospital room. Dean remembered asking him "Is it true? Did I break the first seal? Did I start all this?"

Cas had looked at him point-blank, told him "Yes. The righteous man who begins it is the one who must finish it."
And at that time... similar to now... Dean had felt unable. "Well then, you guys are screwed," he had replied. "I can't do it, Cas. It's too big. Alastair was right. I'm not all here. I'm not—I'm not strong enough. Well, I guess I'm not the man either of our dads wanted me to be. Find someone else. It's not me."

Did he feel strong enough now? No. Did he feel capable of this? No. He felt like he was taking the coward's way out even though he logically knew that this would save a lot of lives.

The righteous man. Well, he might have believed it was a load of bullshit, at least in the beginning, but apparently Heaven didn't. He was the righteous man. Somewhere along the line fate had picked him as the one who would start the apocalypse and end it, too. That was the single shred of hope that he held onto now, that he could, in fact, end this, defeat Satan, and allow planet earth limp along a little longer. Problem was, he was locked in Bobby's basement, where he couldn't get to the angels. It was looking like he had to take matters into his own hands. He had enough motivation to last a lifetime, and was ready.

He remembered coming face to face with Lucifer in Sam's body when Zachariah had sent him to the future. Satan's words had always haunted Dean, but today, he almost wanted to laugh in the devil's face. "You won't say yes to Michael," Lucifer had taunted. "You won't kill Sam, you won't be able to save Alex from her own foolish choices... whatever you do, you will always end up here. Sam will die, Alex will die. Nothing you can do will change that. Whatever choices you make, whatever details you alter, we will always end up—here. I win."

Not today, motherfucker. You don't win today. Not anymore. He wasn't altering details, he was changing the entire damn storyline. Dean listened closely—he didn't hear his siblings talking anymore—good, they'd gone. With any luck, Cas would come stand around uselessly outside again and Dean would be able to lure him in and escape.

Dean took out the switchblade he kept at his ankle, snapped the blade up. It glinted in the incandescent light. "Here goes everything," Dean muttered, and drew the sharp metal across his skin, hissing against the pain then watching bright red blood come forth.

He was very aware that he'd seen his brother and sister for what was probably the last time.

Upstairs, Castiel watched Adam quietly in the darkened study. The lights were off, the kid was sleeping. Bobby, in turn, was watching Cas and realizing while Sam and Alex were downstairs, he had a chance to feel the angel out a little bit. He wheeled over, cleared his throat, not sure how exactly to broach the subject. "Listen kid, uh... I gotta talk to you about somethin', man to man." He paused, realized his mistake. "Uh... man to angel."

Castiel turned to him, gave him his full attention, his eyes narrowing into a squint. "Of course," he said, and waited.

Bobby looked at the guy carefully, trying to be firm and clear, but also polite. "Now you may think it ain't none of my business, but I've known Alex since she was knee high to a grasshopper and—I love the kid. Like she was my own." Bobby braced himself, put it in short, clear terms. "Don't let me catch you treating her wrong, hear me?" Cas's head canted just slightly to the side, his frown remained, Bobby continued before he had a chance to reply. "She deserves a guy who's gonna be around for the long haul," Bobby told him, and fixed him with a meaningful look. "Is that you, son?"

"The long haul?" Cas questioned, apparently not understanding the question.
"The rest of her life," Bobby replied, and saw understanding wash over the angel's features. "Someone who ain't gonna run off and abandon her like every other damn man in her life ever has. That girl deserves the best. And then some."

Cas opened his mouth to reply, but the sound of the downstairs door opening interrupted the conversation. Sam came out and around the corner, looking haggard.

Distracted from Cas, Bobby looked at Sam carefully, hopefully. "How's he doing?"

Sam said nothing, shook his head and shrugged, defeated. Bobby nodded, knowing he shouldn't have hoped for Dean to get his head of his ass. "How you doing?" he asked Sam, who just looked down.

Cas was frowning again, looking at Sam with a hard, worried expression. "Where's Alex?"

"Downstairs, said she was gonna try and talk to Dean one more time."

"By herself?" Cas asked, straightening in alarm.

Sam put a hand out, trying to ease Cas's worry. "Cas, it's fine, you have nothing to worry abou—"

Castiel brushed past him and went downstairs.

Sam groaned in frustration, ran a hand through his hair.

Castiel could have transported himself angelically down to the basement, but he didn't even think about it until he was halfway down the stairs. The second his feet hit the ground floor, he forgot about that realization completely. He heard a crash, and he was suddenly afraid that he was too late. He restrained himself purposefully, realizing it might not be what he thought, that in the past, his overreactions had frightened Alex and been, in slang terms, over the line. Still, he rushed across the space between himself and the panic room door, he slammed the viewport latch back to see into the room. "Alex! Dean?" his eyes swept over the room, he saw no one—and then he stood taller, looked down—saw a smashed lamp and Alex laying in the middle of the room, and she wasn't moving, she looked like she could have been dead, and there was a streak of blood running down her cheek. His entire system seemed to go into horrified, panicked overdrive. Without hesitation, without even thinking, Castiel ripped the panic room door off of its hinges and he surged into the room, rushing over to her and dropping to his knees beside her, trying to see if—

"Cas."

He whirled, saw Dean, who looked sick and resolved—and in the space of a millisecond saw the angel sigil drawn in blood—he shot to his feet, trying to stop Dean—but it was too late. The other man slammed his hand down over the symbol and a feeling like searing hot acid enveloped Castiel who screamed as he was painfully blasted far, far away.

Dean squinted against the bright light, a hand over his eyes. Cas was gone, and Dean was out of breath. He stared down at the crumpled form that was Alex, in the middle of the panic room. Beside her, the broken lamp he'd hit her with. This wasn't how this was supposed to have happened.

He stood there and he almost felt as if he could be physically sick as he stared down at her in a panic, realizing the irony of what he'd done—hurt her again right after giving Sam a grand speech about saving her. But in the end, this was about saving her, wasn't it? He cursed her fighting spirit and the fact that she'd made him do that—if she hadn't walked in and seen the angel sigil, if she hadn't been about to run and give him away—Dean backed up a couple steps, his chest was
consumed in pain and he had to leave, get away, now. He was in too deep now. There was no going back from this.

Sam came into the study carrying his groaning sister, who looked like she'd been hit in the head—"put me down," she was mumbling, and Sam obliged even as Bobby was wheeling over, panicking, shocked. "What happened?" he demanded, then realized someone was missing. "Where's Cas?"

"Blown to Oz," Sam hissed, trying to help his sister stand, who was batting him away, getting her bearings. "Dean did this to you?" Bobby asked, incredulous.

"Yeah," Alex muttered angrily, holding a hand to the side of her head. She had a bleeding cut beside her ear, at the top of her cheekbone. "I went in, saw him drawing that freaking angel sigil, he knew I was gonna yell—he put his hand over my mouth, we fought, he smashed a lamp over my head… good times."

Sam's anger was almost palatable at this point. "I am gonna kill…" he stopped himself mid sentence, refocused on Alex. "You okay though?" he asked her intensely, and again, she made a face like she was annoyed.

"I'm fine, stop asking," she said, avoiding her brother's concerned, riled up gaze. Bobby realized she was embarrassed.

Sam was floundering, obviously pulled in a hundred directions, upset and overwhelmed. "Look, I'll go find Dean," Sam said. "He couldn't have gone too far. Just watch Adam."

Bobby looked at the kid like he must be crazy. "How? You may have noticed, he's got a slight height advantage."

"Then cuff him to your chair," Sam said, exasperated.

"Just go Sam, we've got it," Alex said tersely, then prompted him with a loud "hurry!"

Wordlessly, Sam left, and Alex touched a hand to her bloody cheek, hardly able to believe what had happened. Some metal part of the lamp had cut her and it stung like a bitch. She couldn't tell how messy or how bad the cut was, either. "I'm gonna go clean up real quick," Alex muttered, and made for the bathroom, angry as hell. She knew her brother was a desperate man—he'd proven it when she'd walked into the panic room and seen the sigil he was drawing in blood on the metal locker. She'd taken one look at it and turned to escape, to shout for someone, warn Cas—but Dean had grabbed her, clapped his hand over her mouth he'd begged her not to make a sound, to please understand, he had to do this. She wasn't even sure how she'd broken his grip but she had and slugged him in the face and when she'd walked into the panic room and seen the sigil he was drawing in blood on the metal locker. She'd taken one look at it and turned to escape, to shout for someone, warn Cas—but Dean had grabbed her, clapped his hand over her mouth he'd begged her not to make a sound, to please understand, he had to do this. She wasn't even sure how she'd broken his grip but she had and slugged him in the face and when she'd made a run for the door, he'd grabbed a lamp and blindly swung at her. It had worked. It had silenced her. She looked at the cut on her cheek. It wasn't that bad, just bloody. She wiped it off a little bit, rolled her eyes at her reflection, stalked out of the bathroom.

She was shaking from anger at Dean and what he'd done. The worst part of it was blasting Cas to kingdom come. How dare he?

Alex got to the bottom of the stairs, walked around the corner and saw Adam coming out of the study, looking distinctly shady and sneaky. Oh, you do not wanna piss me off any more than I am already, kid. "Where you going?" Alex asked, startling him. He stopped, a couple feet out of the study and into the kitchen. She approached him boldly, staring at him hard.
"What happened to your face?" he asked, seeing her cut.

Alex was in no mood. "I asked you a question," she snapped. "Where are you going?"

He set his jaw. "I'm leaving," he said, and stepped to the side, trying to get past her, but she mirrored his movement, stepped with him, blocking his way. His eyes stayed on hers and he clenched his jaw in impatience. "Get out of my way."

"No," Alex said in a low threatening single word, and he paused, then tried stepping the other way, she went with him again, gave him a severe warning look, pointed a finger into his chest hard and pushed him back. He looked down at her hand contemptuously, took a step back, and looked her up and down.

He seemed unsure of himself, but was trying to act like he was some badass. "Listen, I don't wanna have to move you, but I will if I have to."

"Oh, yes, please. Go ahead and try, cupcake," she told him, short on patience and almost itching for a fight at this point. She looked him up and down and made sure he knew she was not impressed or scared by him in the least.

Anger flickered across Adam's features and he stepped closer to her, probably trying to test her and stare down at her, see if she would really stand up to him. And Alex, who had been fighting for years and years knew enough to take the offensive, to use the element of surprise—cuz he was bigger than her and strong, but it didn't matter how big your opponent was. If you knew how to fight dirty and use surprise to your advantage, keep your feet on the ground… you could take down almost anymore. As Adam stepped forward to stare down at her, she reeled back and she socked him squarely in the face. He stumbled back a couple steps, making a surprised noise of pain even as she shoved him with all her strength back into the study—he fell back onto his elbows and stared up at her in shock, blood running out of his nose.

And that's when Alex saw Bobby, unconscious and slumped in his wheelchair, shotgun across his lap, a smashed lamp on the ground beside him. Are you friggin' kidding me? Alex's mouth dropped open and her first instinct was to run to her uncle and make sure he was okay—she looked at Adam vengefully, and she didn't just see Adam, she saw Dean too. How fucking dare that little twerp?! He was on his feet now, looking at her, breathing a little heavier than before, wiping blood from below his nose with the back of his hand.

"You got lucky," he told her, drawing himself up to his full height, trying to intimidate her, trying to act like he'd only gone down because he hadn't been expecting her assault.

"Care to test that theory?" she asked dangerously, and she could see from the look on his face that he was pretty much regretting everything about how he'd gotten himself into this moment. She saw him eyeing the shotgun—and they both dove for it at the same second, but Adam got there first, yanking the gun up and pointing it at Alex, who stood there and stared at him, raising her chin slightly, gauging his distance from her, the way he held the guy. This was too easy. "You're not gonna shoot me," she told him calmly, almost bored, waited for him to reply.

"What makes you so sure about th—" he began to ask, and Alex lunged forward, grabbing the barrel of the gun with one hand and the hilt of the other fast, cracking the wooden butt of the gun across his face with violent force, stunning him so much that he fell backwards.

"Because you're on the ground and don't have a gun, idiot," she told him, standing over him with the weapon she'd procured, one foot on his chest, holding him down on the ground as she trained the gun at his head. She chuckled dryly. "First rule of hunting... don't lose your weapon," she told
him in a voice dripping with sarcasm. He was holding his jaw in offended shock, like he couldn't believe what had happened, or that she would do that. He made to move, but she cocked the gun, shook her head, pushed him down further with her foot. "Wouldn't be wise for you to move right now," she told him, then gave him a humorless little smile. "When Sam gets back with Dean, you two lamp-smashing psychopaths are going into the panic room forever, you hear me?" she demanded angrily.

And that's the exact moment when the house began to tremble and a brilliant white light shone all around them.

The celestial whispers were the first thing Castiel heard as he came to himself after being blasted away into the corners of the four winds. For a glancing moment, he couldn't understand the words being said—his thoughts were reassembling themselves, he was quickly remembering how he'd found Alex laying on the floor, struck down by Dean's hand—and that mental image made the very blood in the veins of Castiel's body boil in anger. Dean had done those things to escape, to go to the angels, to utterly betray them all. Castiel tore through space, rocketing back to the panic room, expecting to find her still there, even though some time had passed—but there was nothing but the sickening sight of several small blood droplets on the floor where she'd been. Cas swept through matter into the upstairs area, and found the study was wrecked by signs of a struggle—an unconscious Bobby Singer sat in his wheelchair, head lolling forward—and Cas went to the man, touched his pulse, looking around in growing desperation—he felt his heart hammering painfully, his throat closing up, things he couldn't control or stop. He stood back from Bobby, took two steps backwards. He called out for Alex, turning in a circle, seeing nothing and no one, feeling an absence of human presences nearby. Where was she? Where was she?! And then he stopped moving as the words the angels were whispering suddenly became clear, unmuffled, loud and unavoidable.

*We have Alex Winchester and Adam Milligan.*

Utter horror overcame Castiel and panic soon followed as his mind tripped over itself, unable to form clear thought. *No—why—how?* What did the angels want with her? What were they going to do with her? His immediate reaction was that *he had to rescue her*, and his second thought made him feel physically ill: she could be anywhere or earth, *anywhere*, and he had no idea *where*—

And then he heard a man praying in place of Dean Winchester—and Castiel was almost unable to see, such were the levels of his wrath. So, Dean wanted to call down the angels? He would *have* what he wanted. Castiel drew his hands into fists and disappeared, hurling through the fabric of space at blistering speeds toward Dean, who was completely unprepared for *which* angel would come and answer his prayer.
"The end is nigh!" The street preacher called loudly. He stood in front of a liquor store holding his bible up high above his head.

Dean hurried toward him—if he hesitated at all, he might not follow through with this. The closer her got to actually doing it, the less he thought he could follow through.

"The apocalypse is upon us!" The preacher shouted in a voice hoarse from shouting. "The angels talk to me, and they asked me to talk to you! The apocalypse—"

"Hey!" Dean interrupted breathlessly. The preacher looked at him in surprise as he came to a stop in front of him. "I'm Dean Winchester. Do you know who I am?"

There was shock and recognition the second he asked. The preacher's eyes widened and his mouth fell open. "Dear God!"

"I'll take that as a yes," Dean muttered, a little weirded out. "Listen, I uh, need you to pray to your angel buddies and let 'em know I'm here."

Without any further encouragement, the preacher fell to his knees in prayer, sandwiching his bible between his hands. Dean's pulse jumped up, he tried not to panic. He was really gonna do this, wasn't he? He didn't have time to think about it anymore. The preacher began to pray in a loud, impassioned voice as Dean's stomach began to churn in earnest. "Our father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name—"

"You pray too loud," growled a familiar, gravelly voice, and Dean jumped, startled at the sudden appearance of Castiel who touched the preacher and rendered him unconscious in the span of a half-second. The preacher hadn't even finished falling to the ground before Dean was realizing oh shit not good—before he could react any further, he was grabbed hard and dragged into the nearby alley. For the second time that day, Cas slammed Dean up against a wall, this time brick, and pain exploded across Dean's already-bruised back and shoulders.

"What are you, crazy?!!" Dean protested even as Cas flung him to the opposite side of the alley hard. He stumbled from the force of the push, disoriented, and Cas grabbed him tightly, shoved him flat against the wall, then held him there.

"How could you?!" Castiel shouted, and then reeled back and hit Dean in the face, twice, each impact of the angel's fist making pain explode in Dean's cheek and then jaw. Cas grabbed Dean tightly by the collar and breathed down his neck practically, seething through bared teeth. "The angels took her because of you!"

"W-what?" Dean asked, confused, his mind suddenly ringing in a whole new kind of alarm. But Castiel didn't explain, he flung Dean to the other side of the alley, blinded by rage. He hit Dean in the stomach, once, twice—and it was like being struck by a mallet. "Cas! Please!" Dean begged, blood seeping out of his mouth.

"No!" Cas snarled, and threw him to the other side of the alley, grabbed him tightly, his face inches from Dean's. "You don't deserve mercy," he spat. "Not after what you've done, what you were
about to do!" He shook Dean angrily. "I gave everything for you!" Cas raged. "And you give me this?! You betray us all!?" He stared at Dean venomously, and his low voice trembled. "If she dies because of what you've done…" he trailed off, too angry to finish his sentence.

He dragged Dean away from the wall, held him with one hand, drew back and hit him hard in the face, sending him stumbling and falling backward. Relentless, Cas steadily bore down on the stumbling man and then kicked him hard. Dean flew back, hit the chain link fence several feet up from the ground, and slammed back down onto the ground.

On the ground, Dean heard footsteps and he cringed, anticipating that Cas's strong hands would grab onto him again, drag him up, and beat him some more. The footsteps stopped. Nothing happened. Struggling, he looked up, saw Cas looking down at him with cold fury written all over his features. "Tell me why I shouldn't lay you to waste right here and now," the angel hissed.

Dean panted, every inch of his body reverberating with so much pain. "I-I got nothing," he replied weakly, honestly. Coughing and gagging on his own blood, he could barely hold himself up.

Cas gazed down on him with revulsion and disgust. His fists were clenched tightly, he looked like he were holding himself back. Dean realized Cas really was going to kill him—no ifs ands or buts. And maybe, he thought, maybe he deserved it. Maybe this was the way it was supposed to end. He was just so done with everything, so filled with guilt over his failures, and he hurt everywhere. He couldn't fight anymore and he didn't want to. "Do it," he told Cas faintly, begging him almost. And when the angel didn't move, Dean's voice raised several octaves. "Just do it!" he shouted. His vision swam, he blinked rapidly, and Castiel looked at him long and hard… then unclenched his fist, relented.

"No," the angel said, as if he were tired, weary, defeated.

What? Baffled, Dean opened his mouth to protest, to ask why. But Cas reached out with surprising gentleness, touched the other man's shoulder… and the world went pitch black.

"Adam did this to you?" Sam demanded, trying to examine the bruising cut on Bobby's temple, but the older man batted him away, annoyed.

"Like I told you, one second he's asleep, the next he's in my face with a lamp and it's lights out." Bobby paused grimly. "No pun intended."

"So what, Alex went after him or what?" Sam demanded impatiently, his voice filled with rising panic.

"I don't know, Sam—" Bobby tried to explain.

Sam lost his temper. "Bobby what the hell! They could be anywhere!"

"Watch your tone, boy!" Bobby said, trying to stay calm but just barely succeeding. "We'll find them."

The room was suddenly swept by a gust of wind that scattered papers wildly. "No we won't." Cas stood there supporting an unconscious, bloody Dean. The angel's face was held rigidly in a harsh expression, he looked almost ill. "The angels took them."

"Angels?" Sam repeated in horror, then thoroughly looked at his bloody, beaten brother. "And what the hell happened to him?"

Cas returned Sam's alarmed, questioning look with a dark glance. "Me." He half-shoved, half-
handed Dean at Sam, who caught him fumblingly.

"What do you mean, the angels took them?" Bobby asked in rising concern. Castiel was looking at one of the study chairs oddly as Bobby continued. "They were hidden!"

"Adam... must have tipped them off," Cas said, distracted and gruff. He walked over to the chair, picked up the jacket that was laid there—it was Alex's. His expression was unreadable and he silently looked down at the jacket in his hand.

"How?" Bobby demanded, trying to understand.

"I don't know," Cas said, and his grip tightened measurably on Alex's discarded jacket, his eyebrows stitched together. "I don't know," he repeated, louder, and his voice was filled with levels of alarm and distress that Bobby wasn't used to hearing from the guy. His jaw was rigid, he finally looked at Bobby. "Maybe in a dream." His eyes swept back and forth over the floor near his feet in deep thought, he looked at the jacket again, hesitated, and then put it back, became determined, and drew his angel blade. Sam's face went cold when he saw the blade gleam. Cas glanced at Bobby and Sam in turn, and his face was full of an ominous quality. "All I know is that I have to find them, now."

"Where do you think the angels—" Sam started, but Cas disappeared with another mighty gust of wind. "Cas!" Sam shouted in protest, but the angel was gone. Not knowing what else to do, Sam dumped Dean down onto the cot, shook him by the shoulders, and then smacked him in the face, even though his cheek was bleeding and his lip was split. "Wake up," he growled, slapped Dean again, who suddenly sputtered to life and protested: "Ow, ow!"

"Dean you frigging moron!" Sam shouted, pushing Dean down by the shoulders.

"Wha—" Dean seemed dazed, unsure of where he was for a second.

"Hey take it easy—" Bobby tried.

"The angels have Alex and Adam!" Sam thundered, standing up, removing himself from proximity to Dean before he punched his brother in his already fucked up face face. The confusion in Dean's eyes cleared. His expression became alarmed and he sat up, groaning pathetically in pain, looking at Bobby and then Sam, not understanding.

"T-the angels? How?" Dean asked, panting and holding a hand against his side.

"I don't know how," Sam retorted, "all I know is that they do."

"Shit," Dean swore softly, and put his head in his hand. "Shit! This is my fault."

"You're damn right it is, Dean!" Sam raged at full volume. "I could break your nose right now!"

Dean attempted to make a face, but he ended up looking faintly ashamed. "Yeah well Cas might have already done that for you," he looked around, face twisted in pain. "Where is he, anyway?"

"He went to go find them."

"Alone?" Dean asked, eyes widening.

Sam scoffed contemptuously. "What, you wanna head up the rescue effort?"

"It's kinda my fault they got taken, Sam!" Dean exclaimed, to which his brother rolled his eyes.
"Yeah, exactly," Sam muttered, then seemed to get a second wind of anger. "I mean what the *hell* Dean?! I go downstairs and find Cas blasted away and Alex unconscious and bleeding on the *floor*?! How could you do that? I should cuff you to the damn *house* at this point! Have you lost your *mind*?!

"I don't..." Dean almost sounded near tears, which was rich. "...I don't know."

Sam took in an angry breath, his shoulders were tense and his jaw was clenched, he looked like he might, quite literally, explode. Bobby, who had wheeled over to his refrigerator, was coming back with a bag of frozen peas sitting in his lap. "Calm down Sam, ain't no use to lose your head right now," he chided in that quiet but firm way he had. Sam visibly struggled to control his temper. "'S done is done," Bobby reasoned, but he didn't look too happy with Dean either.

Bobby handed over the frozen vegetable bag to Dean, who accepted it shamefacedly and put it against his swelling cheek anyway. His shoulders hung in defeat. "We gotta get them outta there," he said quietly.

"Wherever *there* is," Sam retorted stiffly, crossing his arms. The three men exchanged glances. All they could do was wait for Cas to come back.

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They weren't at Bobby's anymore, she knew that much, but it was so *bright* and she couldn't see anything—Alex blinked a couple times, trying to get her eyes to work as she also attempted to remain standing on two feet. There was an odd feeling like she'd lapsed in time, like she'd been stuck somewhere. Like it was later than she remembered it being. Like she was on some kind of crazy drug bender. It was a strange, bad feeling. Last thing she remembered, she had been standing in the study, holding Adam down on the ground... and then the whole place had been enveloped by a blinding white light.

She heard someone shifting near her, and her eyes began to adjust. Adam was laying near her feet, groaning. "Where *are* we?" he asked, squinting as he rolled himself onto his side, seeming as disoriented as she was.

Alex looked around again, eyes adjusting—serene paintings framed by fancy gilded frames lined the walls, fancy little statuettes and vases dotted the surfaces of the ornate side tables pushed against each opposite wall, a plush couch sat across from a large dining table... and Alex felt the blood drain out of her face when she realized where they were. The beautiful room—the same one that she and Dean had been trapped in when Sam had been breaking the final seal to release Lucifer. Panic swelled in her chest. *No no no. What's happening? Why are we here?* Beside her, Adam was getting up woozily.

"Damn," he commented, holding his jaw gingerly, looking around at where they were. "Did you have to hit me that hard?" he complained.

"Shut up," Alex said, whispering—which was probably stupid, angels had better senses than humans, but still. "We have bigger problems right now." She looked around frantically, but there was no door, like before. But on the plus side, no angels either. Yet.

Adam saw the table in the middle of the room, which had beers stuck in a bowl of ice and beside it, a pile of hamburgers that it would take ten men to eat. Adam forgot his jaw and smirked, sauntering over to the table to admire the spread. "Maybe *you* have bigger problems, but uh, I think I'm home-free now."

"No, you're *not*," Alex insisted, trying one last time to get through as her idiot half-brother pulled...
out a chair and sat down. "Adam. Listen to me. Whatever they've told you, whatever they've said—they're lying. We gotta get out of here, now."

He didn't even look at her, just grabbed a burger and smiled down at it. "Yeah, sure. I think I'll have a burger..." he looked at her and smirked again, "care to join me?"

"No." Alex looked at the burger mistrustfully, then at Adam in genuine concern. "I wouldn't eat anything here if I were you."

He ignored her attempts to help him. "Suit yourself, Twiggy."

So much for trying to help. He began to eat the burger in huge bites. He chewed loudly and Alex wanted to strangle him. Instead, she grabbed a fancy metal candelabra from off of one of the fancy wooden hutches that lined the room, held it like a bat, and swung it full-force into one of the walls, sending drywall flying in powder and chunks alike. She hacked again and again, desperately, then stood back breathlessly... and the wall was just like new the second she stopped, all the damage she'd done gone. "You kidding me?" she protested, glaring at the wall.

Adam paused mid-chew. "What are you doing?" he asked her, and she spun around, giving him the most you-suck face she could muster.

"Remodeling," she snapped.

"Now Alex—you should know that doesn't work by now," came a new voice, and Alex jumped, startled, turning to see...


Her favorite angel douchewad stood there smiling pleasantly. "Hi! How ya been?" he asked, chipper. Alex glared and dropped the candelabra, sullen, resigned, knowing her powerlessness in the moment fully. Zach grinned at her, then Adam. The angel seemed pleased. Beyond pleased. "So good to see you again! I was afraid we left things on a bad note last time." If looks could kill, Zachariah would be dead under Alex's glare. He unclasped his hands from behind his back and chuckled, shaking his finger at Alex in good humor. "Imagine my surprise when I find out Adam here gets picked up by your beau Castiel and that he takes the kid straight to you! I couldn't have planned it better. Well. Maybe if Sam had been there too. That would have been A plus plus!"

"What do you mean?" Adam asked, frowning slightly, puzzled by the angel's excited ramblings.

Zachariah suddenly looked sideways, narrowed his eyes, as if he were listening to something. His expression became odd. "Uh... sorry... can you excuse me for a minute? Seems like we've gotten some unexpected company outside."

He disappeared into thin air.

"What's he mean?" Adam asked.

Zachariah suddenly looked sideways, narrowed his eyes, as if he were listening to something. His expression became odd. "Uh... sorry... can you excuse me for a minute? Seems like we've gotten some unexpected company outside."

"What's he mean?" Adam asked.

Short on patience, Alex glared at him sideways, her arms crossed tightly. "What, about you and me or about unexpected company?" she asked. And then, at that moment, she realized what Zach had meant about both. Her stomach suddenly turned on its side and she felt her face fall, her arms uncross slowly. "This is a trap, Adam," she said, her voice made soft in shock. "This is a trap for Dean."

Adam shook his head, made a face. "No... no way. The angels said—"
She lost it. "Who cares what they said!" She shouted, barreling over to him. "Listen to me!" She grabbed him by two fistfuls of his shirt and shook him, yelling, "I am telling you the truth! These assholes are using us! They are a bunch of cutthroats and liars!" He stared at her without moving, looking at her sort of fearfully, and Alex shoved him back into the chair.

He straightened himself guardedly, looked at her with growing doubt. "Y-you don't know that," he said lamely.

Alex could have punched a wall, she could have kicked his teeth in, she was so angry at how helpless and stuck they were, how stupid he was. She said nothing, just began to pace. This was a trap, it had to be. Of course Adam wasn't Michael's vessel, those frigging angels had lied to him and were going to use him—crap, and her—as bait to get Dean here to say yes. Who was out there? What did Zachariah mean? Was Dean out there right now saying yes to save her and Adam? Completely out of coherent thoughts, Alex grabbed a vase and threw it at the wall with an angry shriek. The glass shattered all over the floor.

"Good job," Adam muttered, staring at her sidelong, sullen. He didn't seem to have an appetite anymore.

"Shut it," Alex snapped at him, trying to think, trying to think.

In the dark warehouse Castiel stood in a wide stance, facing the angel who stood in front of the entrance to the beautiful room. "Hello, Castiel," said the other angel, his blade at his side, gleaming in the low light. He had dark hair, fair skin, almond eyes. Cas knew him.

"Eliphaz," Castiel acknowledged lowly. His blade was at his side, too.

"This seems like a bold move," Eliphaz said, gazing at Cas with cold calculation. "Coming here alone. Where is Dean Winchester?"

Castiel glared at him unflinchingly. "Move aside."

"Neither will I," Eliphaz warned, his gaze clouding. "Leave. Now."

In answer, Castiel advanced on him, and Eliphaz suddenly disappeared. Where did he—Cas whirled a hundred and eighty degrees, barely stopping Eliphaz's blade with his. The clang of the blades clashing echoed loudly in the dank warehouse, and the two warriors struggled for a moment, then broke apart, standing away and circling each other.

"Look at you, Castiel," Eliphaz said quietly. "I didn't believe the rumors until now." His dark eyes appraised Cas carefully. "You've changed." He wrinkled his nose just slightly, looked at Cas with repulsion. "You reek of humanity."

They continued to circle each other slowly, watchful. "Better that than the stench of corruption," Cas replied, and Eliphaz's face twisted into a snarl, he lunged forward and slashed at Castiel's torso—Cas jumped back, narrowly avoiding being harmed, he recovered and slashed his blade, too, sending Eliphaz back into a bend to avoid getting cut across the neck. Using the moment to his advantage, Cas arced his blade downward at Eliphaz's chest, but the other angel stopped Cas's blade a fraction of an inch away from his chest by grabbing hold of Castiel's wrist with his free
hand. Eliphaz's blade streaked down through the air at Cas at the same time that he stopped Cas's attack. Cas barely caught him by the wrist... not before the blade had sunk into Cas's shoulder by a few inches.

There was a cry of pain and Castiel realized it was him making the sound—Eliphaz was slowly grinding the blade deeper into Cas's shoulder, hitting against bone. And the two angels wrestled, strength against strength, Cas just barely holding the other angel back. Eliphaz was right, he had changed... he was weaker, he was slower. But he also had something driving his actions that no other angel in Heaven or Earth had. Cas thought of Alex in the beautiful room, needing him, and traced the constellations of freckles on her shoulders with his fingertips as she slept nestled against him. He thought of her alone and at the mercy of these angels who meant her harm, who would hurt her without hesitation to get to Dean. And overcome with helpless rage, Castiel seemed to grow stronger—he pushed Eliphaz's wrist away from himself slowly, and with it came the blade. The tip of it was bright red with Cas's blood.

Blue light shone out of the wound in his shoulder—but despite that, Cas felt his strength soaring, felt his blood singing with a new resolve. He raised his foot and kicked Eliphaz hard in the stomach, and the other angel flew backward, halfway across the warehouse. Even as he hit the ground, he was getting back onto his feet, holding his blade in front of him at a ready stance... but as he had righted himself, Cas seized the small window of opportunity, drew his blade back and sent it flying straight at the other angel. The sword plunged into Eliphaz's chest. Shocked, Eliphaz looked down at himself, then up—Castiel was suddenly right there in front of him. Eliphaz's hair blew back with the speed at which Cas had moved across the distance between them. Castiel grabbed the hilt of his blade. "You should have moved aside when I told you to," he said lowly, and drove the blade all the way in—blue light exploded from Eliphaz's eyes and mouth, he screamed, and Castiel yanked out his blade. Eliphaz fell down dead, and the outline of spidery black angel wings spread out beneath him on the dirty concrete floor. Black feathers fluttered through the air.

Castiel looked down on the angel he used to call brother, realized how far his feet had led him from the path he used to follow. Sadness shimmered through him. Cas turned when he heard the sound of slow, steady clapping. Zachariah stood there, and behind him were six more angels. "Nice, I give it a nine out of ten, Cas!" he said of the fight that had just transpired, and Castiel narrowed his eyes. "So! What brings you by?" Zachariah asked, acting pleasant, putting his hands on his hips.

"Mm..." Zachariah feigned thoughtfulness, touched his chin in contemplation. "No." He looked at Cas's shoulder pointedly. "You don't look like you're gonna be up to much more roughhousing, to be honest with you." He chuckled, then dropped the act completely. "But enough small talk. Where's Dean?"

Cas lowered his chin, tightened his grip on his blade, said nothing, looked over the angels flanking Zachariah. On his left, Daniel, on his right, Hezion. They were both skilled warriors, especially Hezion, and Castiel knew he couldn't go up against them and win. Zachariah was examining him closely. "You know, Eliphaz was right. You have changed. I guess you would, what with the kind of time you spend with the locals." He smirked knowingly at Cas.

Castiel narrowed his eyes. "Enough, Zachariah. Release the girl and the boy to me. Now."
"Yeah, sure! Of course!" Zachariah said with what seemed to be a great amount of concern, and turned to the tall, dark-haired male angel at his side. "Hezion... bring the female out here to me."

Hezion's dark gaze met Cas's for a glancing moment, he disappeared and reappeared two seconds later, holding a very confused looking Alex by the arm. On the other side of her, Daniel took hold of her other arm. The second Alex caught sight of Cas, her expression fell and she became frightened. "Cas!" she exclaimed, going still, looking at him in stark horror.

Cas's front of calm indifference was gone. "Are you all right?" he asked, unable to hide his anxiety. "Have they harmed you in any way?"

Zachariah chuckled, answered for her, took a few steps Cas's way, his hands clasped behind his back. "Oh, we haven't, but we will."

"It will be the last thing you do," Cas threatened, to which Zachariah laughed good-naturedly and turned back around, looking at Alex as if she were his prized pet. She looked back at him with contempt.

"You know, Alex," Zachariah said thoughtfully, casually sauntering over to her, "you doesn't look much like your mother... quite frankly I don't know what trench coat over there sees in you but... maybe you're the same sorta gal..." he brushed Alex's hair back from the front of her shoulder, revealing the skin of her neck, he ran his fingers along the curve of her neck slowly, "...deep down inside." Alex's face was twisted up in annoyed disgust.

Castiel bristled immediately and stepped forward. Behind Zachariah, all of the angels raised their blades just slightly, in warning. Cas stopped short, torn and unable to move closer, unable to move away. Zachariah chuckled, stroking Alex's arm now, his touch distinctly sensual. He looked back at Cas in amusement as Alex tried to struggle away from Zachariah's hand in vain. Hezion and Daniel held her tighter in place. Daniel's expression was stoic, but Hezion looked at Zachariah sidelong, mildly troubled.

Cas's shoulders heaved up and down, he could barely control himself. "Geez, take a chill pill there, fella!" Zachariah mocked, making a face and removing his hand from Alex. "I'm just messing with you. She's not even my type!"

"Taking her will the the worst choice you ever made, Zachariah," Castiel told the other angel in no uncertain terms.

Zachariah looked amused and was now reaching into his jacket. Out came his shining blade, and Castiel froze, stopped breathing for a minute. What was he going to do with that? "You aren't exactly in a position to be making threats, Castiel," Zachariah said, examining his blade with what appeared to be great interest. "Tell you what. You leave, bring back the oldest Winchester... the girl lives. You keep making trouble here..." Zachariah swept the blade upward, pressing the length of it against the side of Alex's neck, "the girl dies."

Castiel desperately looked at the angels who held Alex. He knew Hezion and Daniel—he knew all of these angels—and yet they all looked at him as though he were despicable to them, as if they were above him completely. Zachariah was waiting for Castiel to respond. Cas remained still, unsure of what to do, trying to keep his wits about him, trying to maintain an outward mask of scorn and authority despite his inner panic. "You won't kill her, she's too valuable to you," he said, and hoped it was true. His mind was racing, calculating. His shoulder hurt, he was weakened. But he had to rescue her. She was so close and yet so far out of reach.

Zachariah grabbed Alex's arm from Daniel and yanked her to the front of himself, holding his
blade tighter against Alex's neck and as he did, Cas's entire body went tense all over again. "You really wanna test me?" He asked, soft and serious. "Step away, Cas. Bring Dean here, nice and easy, and then your precious little human pet stays alive."

Cas didn't move at all, he couldn't. He stared at Alex, who was looking back at him with wide eyes, and she shook her head slightly—to which Zachariah suddenly slashed his blade across the side of her neck lightly, enough to draw blood without being fatal. Alex hissed in surprise or pain. Cas stepped forward without even thinking, and Zachariah looked at him with eyebrows raised high, his blade now at Alex's throat. Cas's hand was forced. Cas took several steps back, feeling murderous and sickened all at once. Zachariah shoved Alex back at Hezion, who held her still with both hands.

"Good boy," Zachariah told Cas, even as Alex began to struggle.

"Don't bring Dean here Cas, please, just keep him away!" she begged. Hezion tightened his grip on her, and she made a soft sound of pain. Hezion looked at Cas with an unreadable expression, and Daniel, blade drawn, took a step toward Cas, letting him know it was time to leave.

Breathing hard, Cas looked at Alex, filled with fear. *He had no choice*. Every part of him protested, knowing that he was about to willingly leave her there. It was strange, too, a feeling like permanent loss weighed on him. He felt as though he would never see her again. He looked at her and only her, holding her gaze with his. "I'll be back for you," he told her, and she stared at him wordlessly—her eyes begging him—and against every instinct, with a great deal of pain that wasn't physical, Cas tore himself away from that place, leaving Alex behind.

Sam stood in the door frame glaring at Dean who sat on the bed, holding the bag of peas against his face pathetically. Bobby had one now too and was holding it against his slightly swollen temple. Suddenly, Cas reappeared in the middle of the study, startling them all. It had been about ten or fifteen minutes since he'd disappeared. And even as Sam stood up straight in surprise, he saw the blood splatter on Cas's shoulder, the glowing blue that emanated from the knife wound.

"Cas!" Sam exclaimed, going to him. "What happened to you?"

Cas ignored the question, harrowed. "They're being held and guarded heavily in the beautiful room," he said.

"Wait, the beautiful room?" Dean asked, setting the bag of peas down.

"Yes, no thanks to you," Cas snapped at him.

Sam was trying to get a better look at the angel's wound. "Was there a fight? Are you hurt?"

"I'll be fine," Cas said, glossing over it. He was in rare form, the opposite of calm. "Listen to me, we have to go now."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Dean said, standing up. "Fly in there blind? Cas, we need a plan!"

Cas turned on him as if he couldn't believe Dean would hesitate for even a second. "We need to get them out of there!"

"Yes, I agree, but let's get a game plan together, okay?" Dean reasoned, then looked at Cas strangely. "You're not thinking straight, man. We go in there without our heads on our shoulders, we end up with an even more messed up situation. Calm down."

"I can't 'calm down' Dean! If you hadn't sent me away I could have protected them both." Dean
withered under Castiel's glare and the truth of his words. "What you've done is unforgivable," Cas said, no longer looking at Dean. Shaking his head in disgusted disappointment, he glanced at Dean briefly. "I can't take you there. You'll only give in to their demands." He expelled a frustrated breath, clenched his fists, clearly holding in great amounts of anger. "This is an impossible situation."

Without warning, the study window shattered, startling everyone but Cas. Bobby looked at Cas's clenched fists and stony expression and he heaved a sigh, pushed his ball cap up an inch. "Cas, it's gonna be okay, you hear me? We'll figure this out." He looked at the shattered window and then the dented wall where Dean had been shoved earlier. "But you really need to quit wreckin' my house."

Cas seemed chastened. "I'm sorry, Bobby." He was looking down at the floor somberly. "I saw Zachariah hurt her. He wanted me to see."

"What? Is she hurt bad?" Sam asked, his worry tripling as he uncrossed his arms and stepped away from the door frame.

Cas shook his head slowly. "No but—"

"Why would he do that?" Dean interrupted, getting more and more anxious.

"In order to manipulate me, the same way he intends to manipulate you."

"The hell you mean?" Dean asked.

Cas looked at Dean starkly. "He took Alex and Adam in order to lure you there. When you arrive to rescue them, he'll use them to force you to say yes to Michael."

"Son of a bitch," Dean muttered, then looked at Sam sort of accusingly. "I knew this was gonna happen! I told you! If I hadn't been such a screwhead, if I had just quit being stubborn months ago, this wouldn't have happened!"

"Well it has, so now what?" Sam countered contemptuously, then he unexpectedly laughed humorlessly.

"What?" Dean demanded brusquely.

"It's funny Dean," Sam said coldly. "The angels thought you were stronger than this. They thought they had to take Adam and Alex to force you into this... when you were just gonna wimp out and do it anyway."

"Now you listen to me," Dean started angrily.

"We don't have time for your sibling rivalry right now," Castiel interjected gruffly, drawing strange looks from the Winchester brothers. "The situation is this: your half-brother and your sister are both being held by Zachariah and guarded by at least six angels. If you stay away, Zachariah will kill one of your siblings—probably Adam—and then torture the other one until you go there. When you go there, once you say yes, I see no reason for him to keep either of them alive."

The brothers were both somber now. "So what do we do, Cas?" Sam asked faintly. "How do we save them?"

"Why can't you just beam into the USS beautiful room and grab the kids and beam back?" Dean asked.
"I told you," Castiel reiterated. "There are angels guarding the room, and they're all very fast. One of them did this to me—" he indicated his wounded shoulder, "one of the younger, more inexperienced ones. All the others there are much older. Faster. It's... close to impossible."

"Look, I'm only seeing one option here," Dean said. "I gotta go. Now. You two come with me, maybe we can get the jump on Zachariah."

"Even if that were a possibility, how much of a fool do you take me for?" Cas questioned him.

Dean was exasperated. "Look, what if I promise you I won't say yes?"

Cas looked at Dean sullenly. "You were insistent on saying yes just minutes ago on the street, or have you forgotten?"

Dean pointed at his bloody face, deadpan. "Does it look like I've forgotten?"

Cas's expression was filled with thinly veiled contempt. "You created this catastrophe, Dean, I don't need you to make it worse."

"Look, I'm good and pissed now," Dean said loudly, growing insistent, walking over to Cas while staring him down. "They took my family from me and that was the worst possible move they could have made, okay?" He winced, giving away the fact that he was still in a great deal of pain. He brushed it aside, trying to convince Castiel. "I'm not giving those bastards the satisfaction of a yes now. They screwed up their chance at having this sweet ass the second they touched Adam and Alex."

Cas had grown introspective and sad, tilted his head to just the side, looked at Dean hesitantly. "You assured me that you wouldn't hurt your sister again and yet you did anyway. Why should I listen to anything you say?"

"Because I'm just as serious about saving her and Adam as you are!" Dean thundered, insulted and insistent at the same time. "If not more so!" He paused, grew bitter, looked at Cas with a cloudy expression. "Besides, Cas, I'm not the only one who's ever broken their word around here." Both of them knew what he was referring to: Cas's romantic involvement with Alex, despite his promises to stay away.

A muscle jumped in Cas's jaw, he looked hard into Dean's eyes as his voice lowered. "You aren't in a position to be disrespectful to me."

"Guys, we don't have time for this!" Sam interjected, drawing both of the men's gazes to him. "We need to figure out a plan and get our asses to the room now."

Mildly subdued, the angel and the oldest Winchester were silent for a moment, and Dean looked at Cas quietly for a second. "Why didn't you kill me?" he asked. "Back there in the alley? Why'd you hold back, man?"

Cas's eyes jumped up to Dean's, and he didn't answer for a long moment. He was appraising Dean closely. "Because she would never have forgiven me for it," Cas said, then looked down in thought, reluctant. "And truthfully, Dean... I didn't want to. I couldn't." He looked at Dean sadly, a little confused, like not even he understood his reasonings. "You are my friend. Even after everything you've done."

The study was dead silent. "Seriously?" Dean asked, taken aback.

"Yes." Cas paused, then squinted just a little bit. "...Seriously."
Dean seemed to be touched by Cas's words and he just looked at the angel for a second, speechless. And then he nodded, seemed to feel empowered, seemed to brace himself. "All right. Let's go bust these kids outta the angel slammer."

Zachariah took Alex back into the beautiful room and Adam stood up when they reappeared and when he saw her bleeding neck.

"What happened?" he asked, seeming surprised and even a little worried. Zachariah ignored his question, came toward the table, leaving Alex to stew angrily in the far corner of the room beside a fancy room divider.

"Sorry about that, sparky," Zachariah said to Adam. "Had some business to take care of. So!" He chuckled, sat on the side of the table casually, looked at the half-eaten burger on the table. "I see you and your brother Dean share the same refined palate."

"Uh..." Adam seemed uncertain how to react, looking at Alex in growing concern, his mood no longer smug and easygoing, instead uncomfortable and unsure. "Is she okay?"

"Don't worry about it," Zachariah said and indicated Adam's chair. "Have a seat."

"...sure, all right," Adam said, sinking back to the chair slowly, mildly suspicious. He looked at Alex a second longer, clearly trying to piece together what had happened. He tore his gaze away from her, looked at Zachariah. "So, uh... is it time?"

"For what?" Zachariah asked.

Adam looked like he was beginning to fear the worst, that what his sister had said was true. Still, he tried to hide that. "For Michael," he said simply.

"Oh!" Zachariah enthusiastically feigned remembrance. "Right. About that... look, this is never easy, but I'm afraid... we've had to terminate your position at this time."

Adam's face went cold with disbelief and betrayal.

"Hey, don't get me wrong. You've been a hell of a sport, really. Good stuff." Zachariah made the A-OK symbol with his hand. "But the thing is, you're not so much the 'chosen one' as you are..." Zachariah smiled pleasantly, "hmm, a clammy scrap of bait!" He grinned at that point, and then seemed to want to append what he'd said, raising a finger in thought. "In fact, I wouldn't even go so far as to call you that. For their sister, oh, the boys will come running. For you? I dunno. But, doesn't hurt to be on the safe side." He chuckled. "If there's one thing Dean Winchester can't resist, it's saving family." He looked at Adam and shrugged humbly. "Shoulda listened to your sister, turns out."

There was a low chuckle and Zachariah turned around. "What's so funny, Alex?"

She looked at Adam mockingly. Her arms were crossed and her face held no emotion but contempt and judgement. "Just... why'd you even bother to bring him here? He's not family. Sam and Dean will want me. Not this illegitimate douche bag." She gave Zachariah a cold little smile. "Could've saved yourself some trouble."

Zachariah stood up from his seat on the table, turned on his heel, and came to her. "Huh," he said in deep interest. "So that's really how your family feels about him?" He sighed dramatically. "Then I guess there's no reason to keep him around." He was animated, as if he had a great idea. "I guess I'll just let him go free and clear!" He looked at Alex and chuckled darkly. "I'm just kidding, of
course. Nice try though. I'll put him back in the ground, good and dead."

He turned around, took a couple steps toward Adam—and Alex wasn't willing to hold her bluff. "No—don't."

Zachariah turned around, looked at her with a triumphant little smile. "That's what I thought. Nice try though, Alex. A for effort." He seemed well pleased with himself and held his arms wide, indicating them both. "I mean, how can Dean resist? It's two for the price of one! And call me crazy, but it'll get him over here on the double. If it were just Adam, I bet they'd drag their feet, take all night..." he wagged a finger at her now. "Just watch. An hour, maybe two. Dean's in here, saying yes to Michael to save his precious baby sister. And the Winchester mutt too, I guess."

He looked at Adam and smiled facetiously. Adam was positively infuriated. "But you said I'm supposed to fight the devil."

The angel winced in exaggerated sympathy. "Mm, not so much. Hey, if it's any consolation, you happen to be the illegitimate half-brother of the guy we do care about." Zachariah grinned patronizingly. "That's not bad, is it?"

"So you lied... about everything." Adam summed up then looked away, clenching his jaw angrily.

"We didn't lie," Zachariah corrected, sitting back down on the table. "We just... avoided certain truths to manipulate you."

Adam stared at him balefully and Alex muttered "told you." She was glaring daggers at the back of Zachariah's head.

"You son of a bitch," Adam said quietly, shaking his head.

"Hey, how do you think I feel? I'm the one that's got to put up with that dumb, slack-jawed look on your face. Kid, we didn't have a choice. Gotta do what I gotta do, and nothing else was working. Michael needs his vessel and he put me in charge of that." He chuckled again, but it was a nervous sound. "Talk about high pressure, am I right?" When neither of them did anything but glare, Zachariah rolled his eyes, refocused on Adam. "The Winchesters got one blind spot, and it's family, each other in particular. See, Sam and Dean, they're gonna put aside their differences and they're gonna get the two of you, and that is gonna put Dean right here... right where I need him."

"Yeah, except... he won't do it," Alex told Zachariah. He turned to look at her. "This is a huge waste of your time, Zachariah," she said, putting every ounce of energy into sounding like she believed it. "He won't say yes."

Zachariah nodded, smiling to himself. "You wish that were true now don't you, sweetpea?" Her expression darkened at the nickname. "Now that I have you, trust me... if Adam wasn't motivation enough, you sure as hell will be. I mean, did you see how your boyfriend reacted to seeing me cut you open? Dean'll do whatever I want him to do." He stood up, adjusted his suit, and drew in a deeply contented breath as Adam and Alex watched him with glares. "Yep, feels good to be back on top! This is the night! Our night. The magic finally happens, and it's all because of you two." He pointed a finger at each of them, then took in a thoughtful breath, puffing himself up. "And me. But who's keeping score?"

"You really like to hear yourself talk, don't you, you son of a bitch," Alex muttered as she uncrossed her arms, staring him down. "Well you can shut the fuck up, cuz I'm not letting this happen."
"Oh, and you'll stop me how?" Zach asked, went to her, invading her personal space and looking into her eyes deeply. She recoiled, but she was against the wall and there was nowhere to go. He smiled then, reached around behind her, slid his hand down, grasped the hilt of her hunting knife that had been hidden by her long t-shirt and flannel. She watched him pull it out and appraise it thoughtfully. *Damn it*. He wagged it at her, his eyes raised up high. "I'm impressed that you would think about taking your own life to stop this from happening, to give me nothing to hold over Dean," he told her, and she was shocked that he knew that she'd thought about it. He narrowed his eyes at her. "But would you really kill Adam, too?"

She said nothing, just stared at the angel defiantly.

He laughed cheerfully and looked at Adam. "The things this family will do for each other. I'm tellin' ya."

"Do you really feel okay about half the people on this planet biting the dust because of your stupid angel pissing match?" Alex demanded, and Zachariah returned his attention to her, made a thoughtful face.

"Mm… yeah!"

Alex could have strangled him. "Screw you."

He shocked her when he touched her face with the backs of his fingers. She recoiled from his touch. "I *do* have the next few minutes free, sweet cheeks," he said, smiling darkly, his voice suddenly sensual. She smacked his hand away forcefully. "What?" he feigned surprise, amused. "I thought you *liked* angels! That's what Castiel told me…" his voice lowered a couple notches, he smiled at her leeringly. "You *are* a naughty girl, aren't you?"

"Hey man, you wanna leave her alone?" Adam asked. He was standing up now with his shoulders drawn up near his ears.

Zachariah looked amused and impressed, and he stepped away from Alex. "Wouldya look at that—the trademark Winchester hero complex." Adam looked murderous and Zachariah rolled his eyes. "Calm down, kid. Geez, I'm just having a little fun."

"You let us out of here now! The deal is off!" Adam demanded, looking positively scared shitless.

"Will you cool your jets, corky? Sit down. I still need you. Two Winchesters for the price of one, remember?" Adam didn't sit down and Zachariah grew more serious. "Plus, you still get your severance, I'm not gonna go back on *that*. You still get to see your mom, okay?" His tone softened, became almost dangerous. "I'm being pretty damn generous right now, you really should just shut up and accept my offer."

Adam's lip curled up slightly in scorn. "Take your offer and shove it up your saggy old white ass."

Zachariah grew impatient. "You know what? I keep hearing *this*…" Zachariah used his hand and made a talking motion. "But what I *want* to be hearing is *this*." He closed his hand-mouth and in tandem, Adam fell forward onto the table. He caught himself with his hands as he spit up dark, red blood. "Yeah," Zachariah said, pleased. "That's better."

"Stop it, Zachariah!" Alex said, rushing to Adam and grabbing either arm, bracing him and helping him stay stable, helping him sit back down into his chair.

"Where's the fun in that?" Zachariah asked.
Filled with hatred for the angel who was currently grinning at them idiotically, Alex practically snarled. "You're a fucking disease!" she spat, and he just grinned wider.

"Yeah. I am!" he said, and suddenly Alex found herself heaving up blood too and falling sideways. "I'll leave you to it!" Zach said, and disappeared.

Adam was struggling as Alex pushed herself up to her feet, gagging on a mouthful of coppery, tangy blood. She spat onto the floor vengefully, supporting herself against the table with both hands, breathing heavily. Her head was spinning. Adam, slumped down in his chair, was looking at her in shock. His chin was covered in blood. "I told you—" Alex said, but it wasn't in a mean tone. "Angels are lying assholes. They don't give two shits about us."

Adam looked almost like he could cry. "I... I should have listened to you guys," he said, and then gagging, he made a sound like a whimper.

"Spit, okay?" Alex said, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Try and sit up a little."

He looked at her with vast amounts of uncertainty and fear. "Why are you being nice to me? After everything I've done?" His voice broke, maybe because his throat was full of blood, maybe because he was scared. "You guys told me and I didn't listen."

"Whatever. What's done is done. Don't focus on that," Alex told him. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, looked at the bright red blood there... and then realized... oh my god... this was actually a great thing. "Wait a minute..." she whispered to herself, and then suddenly found herself smiling crookedly through bloody teeth, realizing Zach's mistake. "Wait a minute," she repeated, her mind racing and excitement growing.

"What?" Adam asked.

"Spit out as much blood as you can," she told him, and took the bowl of beers, dumped the contents out all over the floor, then held the bowl out to Adam, indicating that he spit there. "We're gonna need it."

He looked at her like she was nuts. But, he did what she said.

The three of them kept a fast pace—they'd been in Bobby's study just thirty seconds ago, now they were outside somewhere, following Cas, who seemed to know where he was going. "Where the hell are we?" Dean asked, as Castiel led the way through a dark, overgrown parking lot. Beside them was a huge rusted structure, a warehouse of some kind. It was still the middle of the night.

"Van Nuys, California," Cas replied shortly. He seemed to be in a hurry, his long legs keeping a brisk stride that Dean could barely match. Maybe halfway because he hurt all over from getting beat up earlier. He fought through the pain. Sam was beside Cas, looking around suspiciously, jumpy.

"Where's the beautiful room?" Dean asked, honestly confused—all that there was some old abandoned warehouse looking building lit up by a couple flickering street lights.

"It's in there," Cas told him, indicating the building they were walking beside.

Dean balked. "...The beautiful room is in an abandoned muffler factory in Van Nuys?" he asked in a tense whisper.

"Where'd you think it was?" Cas asked churlishly. They came to the end of the building where
there was a door covered in graffiti. Cas stopped, casting careful glances around. There was a single, flickering light overhead that lit the area in a pale blue cast.

"I—I don't know," Dean replied, looking at the building and definitely not associating it with the room he remembered being stuck in eight months ago. "Jupiter? A blade of grass? Not... Van Nuys."

"Never mind the location of the room," Cas said seriously, his gaze intense and first going to Dean, and then Sam. "This is very risky. Are you two clear on the plan?"

"No, not really," Dean said. "You said you'd clear out the mooks and then we go in and grab the kids, but… I thought you said before that the angels were too fast for you." He looked at the wound on Castiel's shoulder pointedly.

"They are," Cas replied matter-of-fact despite his stern expression. "But I'm going to try despite the odds. And if I can't fight them off… I have another way."

"What other way?" Sam asked, sounding very apprehensive.

Cas wordlessly began to take off his tie. "It's what you might call a long shot," he said.

"What... are you doing?" Sam asked, frowning at Cas.

Castiel handed his tie to Sam without explanation. "Hold this." Sam took it and looked at it oddly, unsure.

"What's the other way?" Dean asked, also looking at the tie suspiciously.

Castiel reached into the pocket of his trench coat and pulled a box cutter out, looked at it sort of grimly, slid the blade up with a few plastic sounding clicks. "This may be unpleasant for you to watch," Castiel said, and began unbuttoning his shirt.

Sam and Dean exchanged a look, baffled. "Whoa Cas, what's with the peep show?" Dean asked, but Cas said nothing, just pulled his dress shirt open. Both Sam and Dean jerked backwards slightly when Castiel sliced into himself, began to carve the shape of a circle into the skin of his torso.

"Whoa, hey, what—" Sam fumbled, clearly not sure if he should stand and watch or stop Cas.

Dean squinted, watching silently, beginning to recognize the shape being drawn in blood. "Are you… putting an angel sigil on yourself?"

Castiel gave Dean a look that was almost sarcastic. "Yes." He then wordlessly returned to his work. There was a long silence, and the brothers looked at each other uncertainly.

"What will that do to you?" Sam finally asked, looking at Cas hesitantly.

Cas grimaced slightly as he turned the blade, pulled it upwards, cutting another line into himself. "I have no idea," he replied without stopping. "I don't think it's been attempted before. But in all likelihood, it will kill me."

Dean's expression fell. "Whoa, whoa, whoa..." he looked at Cas, aghast for a second. "Cas, buddy, let's back up a sec, look at our other options..."

Cas had finished carving and looked at Dean somberly. "There are no other options, Dean." He looked at both of them in turn. "This has to work. I go in there, clear out the guards—one way or
another. You go in, spring the trap, distract Zachariah, Sam kills him with the blade I gave him. There can be no errors."

"You're really gonna risk your life for us again?" Dean asked, feeling sort of dazed by what was happening, looking at Cas and feeling confused.

"Yes," Cas replied, and looked at Dean meaningfully. "Don't let me down, Dean."

After the shit he'd put the angel through, the things he'd said to him, the way he'd tried to bully Cas away from his sister… most anyone else would have ditched long ago. Dean was beginning to realize he'd misjudged Cas. And even though Dean didn't approve of the angel's relationship with his sister, he couldn't deny that Castiel cared about her deeply. Enough to maybe die for a chance to save her. And that moved Dean to speechlessness.

"Cas—" Sam protested as the angel finished buttoning up his shirt.

"We don't have time to argue," Cas said, cutting him off. "I'll do my best to hold them off, defeat them. But if I can't... if I don't return..." he looked down, his voice softened. "Tell her that I'm sorry. And Sam..." he nodded almost imperceptibly at the tie. "Give that to her."

Sam's eyebrows moved together just slightly. "Why?"

Cas said nothing, just looked at Sam tensely, and then turned his attention to Dean. "Swear to me that you will never hurt her again, Dean."

Dean swallowed, feeling strange. It was like Cas knew he wasn't coming back. His voice faltered. "I-I won't, Cas." The angel looked at him long and hard, as if he were weighing the honesty of Dean's answer. He finally glanced at Sam.

"Keep her safe," Cas said. "Both of you. Don't give in to the angels." He went to the door and put a hand on the knob.

"Cas, buddy, you're talking like you aren't gonna come back from this," Dean said, halting Cas in his tracks.

The angel just looked back at both of them one last time and then wordlessly went into the warehouse.

"I'm so stupid," Adam groaned, "I wish I'd listened to you guys."

The two of them were sitting on the floor underneath the gigantic painting of some lady draped in flowy robes. Alex held a hand over her stomach, grimacing. Zachariah had put some nasty mojo on them, that was for sure.

She leaned her head back against the wall tiredly, looked at Adam sidelong for a minute. She needed to set something straight with him. "Hey, the shit I said about you not being family and stuff to Zachariah? I was trying to get him to let you go. Didn't mean it."

Adam looked at her then nodded through his pain. "Yeah. I know. Thanks for trying." He was trying to sound okay, but she could tell he was freaking out beneath the surface.

Alex took in a deep breath and let it out slow, looking up at the ceiling again. If she could get him to keep his head, things would go better for everyone. "We're gonna get out of here. Just remember what I told you to do."
Adam nodded, cringed, repositioning himself a little bit against the wall. "Yeah, okay I got it. If I can stand up. I feel really bad. Am I gonna die?"

"Nope," Alex replied immediately, trying to interject some humor into the situation. "You're not allowed."

That got a little smile from him.

"Dean will be here soon," she told Adam, "and if not him, definitely Cas." She paused heavily, thought of Cas and how scared she'd been to see him there, facing down a bunch of angels all while he bled from his shoulder. And then she thought about Dean, hoped that she'd have enough time to stop him from saying yes. Her little hare-brained plan was pretty rickety, but it was better than nothing...

"But it's a trap," Adam protested, distracting her.

"They'll know that," she told him. They would.

Adam frowned. "And they'll come anyway?"

Did Adam really think there was an alternative? "Yeah. Of course."

Adam thought about that for a minute. "Must be nice to have people you know will always come for you," he said, looking down at the floor. He was introspective and quiet. "You know, I don't think I would have minded growing up with you guys," he said, then quickly tried to sound less emotional. "I mean, getting to kill stuff is cool." He paused, glanced at her. "And so is always having someone around."

"You had your mom though, right?" Alex asked, to which Adam shrugged crookedly, looked a little unwilling to discuss it, but did anyway after a brief silence.

"She... wasn't around much, especially when I was school age." He looked at her, and she realized that maybe they were more similar than she'd assumed. "She was there but... she also wasn't. Sound familiar?" he asked, and maybe he was thinking the same thing, that they weren't as different as he'd thought.

"Yeah," she said slowly, thinking about Dad and feeling a twinge of understanding between her and Adam growing. "I'm sorry," she told Adam, and meant it. He just looked at the ground glumly. She realized how lucky she'd been to at least have her brothers growing up. Adam hadn't had anyone. He looked so lonely to her right then. Alex reached over and let her fingers touch his shoulder for a second. Their eyes met. "Hey, when we get out of here... there's an extra seat in the Impala." Adam's expression flickered. Alex smiled almost playfully, trying to lighten the mood. "I'll teach you everything I know, kid."

He matched her playful smile, made an overly thoughtful face. "Should be a pretty quick class," he joked, pretending to be sarcastic.

"Pfft," Alex coughed on a laugh, tasted more blood in her mouth.

They fell silent again, waiting. Alex looked at the little angel statuette that sat on the gilded table to her left. She was trying not to think about how badly this could end. Last she knew, Dean had disappeared and blasted Castiel away to kingdom come... where had Dean run to? If he had planned to say yes, why was Zachariah holding her and Adam? Something must have happened to change his mind, or maybe... maybe Cas stopped Dean from following through. Maybe Sam found him before he got far.
Alex hated not knowing. Sitting here helpless and useless was unbearable to her. Cas knew where she was and had told her he would be back for her—that was all she could bank on right now. She believed him. But she hated being a bargaining chip. She really would have turned her knife on herself and killed herself if she thought it would save half of the people on the planet. But that wasn't an option anymore. There was nothing to do but sit and wait and hope.

She heaved a huge, gusty breath, trying to expel some stress.

Quietly, Castiel entered into the dim warehouse for the second time that day. The door shut behind him and he moved forward slowly into the darkness, watchful and careful. This time, he knew what he was up against. His senses were all straining, his muscles tense. He held his blade in hand. He saw no one, but knew the angels were close. He could hear their thoughts; whispers on the very edge of his mind.

He came to the small structure within the warehouse where he knew the beautiful room was and then suddenly one of the whispering voices was loud, close—and Castiel whirled, barely ducking and dodging the slash of a blade aimed for the back of his neck. Cas's hand shot out and grabbed the other angel, Enoch, by the wrist and twisted it backwards, stabbing him in the leg with his own blade. Enoch screamed even as he held on tightly to the blade and Cas yanked it out, stabbed down at Enoch's stomach. Falling down onto his back, Enoch resisted, held the blade away, but Castiel used every ounce of strength he had and put his weight behind it, rammed the blade downward into Enoch, who again screamed as the blade plunged into his vessel. His eyes and mouth filled with blue light, he collapsed, dead, underneath Castiel.

Cas stood up, his blade at his side, his shoulder ringing in renewed pain. He cast glances around, hearing the other angels whispering, growing closer. But they remained hidden. "You were warned not to return alone," came a deep voice, and Castiel turned quickly to see Hezion standing about twenty feet away, his blade at his side. His dark eyes glinted unreadably at Castiel. "Where is Dean Winchester?"

"Not coming." Cas replied darkly, sizing Hezion up, knowing that it would be nearly impossible for him to defeat this particular angel.

Hezion paused heavily, seeming to be let down by the information. He then raised his chin, looking at Castiel without any hint of emotion. "In that case, I've been ordered to kill you, Castiel. I'm sorry."

Castiel bristled. "You don't know the meaning of that word."

Hezion looked faintly unsure of Castiel's statement, but made no reply to it, only tossed his blade to his other hand. His eyebrows raised slightly. "I can't make promises, but I'll do my best to make it quick for your sake."

Castiel narrowed his eyes, realizing that the whispers of the angels were closer now. He glanced over his shoulder—Daniel was there, closing in slowly. Castiel turned in a small, tight circle. The other angels—Ishmael, Sabriel, Gadish, Zipporah—were all closing in, surrounding Cas on all sides. His gaze swept over them, he turned back to face Hezion, who was slowly coming closer. Cas knew that he had no chance against them if they all attacked him at once. He would have fought them to the death had they attacked one by one—but it was clear, now, what they planned to do. Outnumber him completely. Cas realized he was forced into using what he had planned as his last resort.

He thought of his promises to Alex, his assurances that he would never leave her, the commitment
he had made to protect her. Guilt washed over him at the thought of him breaking his word to her, leaving her alone, perhaps forever, should this kill him.

"I don't want you to leave me," she had told him tearfully just a couple days ago.

"I won't," he'd insisted.

"You don't understand. I lose everyone. Everyone."

Her words echoed in every part of him.

The knowledge that he was doing this to save her was the only thing that made it possible for him to continue. This was sacrifice, and she was worthy of it. And with that in mind, he dropped his blade to the floor where it thudded loudly, echoing. Castiel's shoulders were heaving, he glanced between Hezion and Daniel almost angrily. "What are you waiting for?" he demanded, taunting them to come closer, then glancing to his side at Sabriel. "Come on."

And they all came rushing in, blades held high. Castiel ripped open his shirt, pressed his palm into the center of the sigil, and he erupted into blazing light, wind, and fury. His last thought, as everything burned to sunlight, was of her.

"What was that noise?" Adam asked, startled.

Alex had heard it too—it had been like the sound of a high pitched explosion and a blast of wind. Her adrenaline kicked up a few notches. She shook her head, tense and stressed. "Dunno."

They looked at each other uncertainly. They were both weak and tired from the blood loss. Suddenly, one of the walls opened like a door and Dean was rushing in. Shocked at the sight of him, Alex could only stare for a second. She noticed that his face was messed up, like he'd been beat to hell and back.

"Hey. Hey," he said, coming to them urgently, dropping to a knee. "You two okay?"

"It's a trap, Dean!" Adam sputtered, trying to get to his feet and grabbing and dragging Alex up with him. Dean stood with them, his hands on their arms as he cast glances around.

"Yeah, I got that memo," he said tersely.

"Well, finally!" came a new voice, and Dean whirled around to face Zachariah, who had suddenly appeared right behind him.

"Zachariah," Dean said, standing between the angel and his siblings. "I should have known you were gonna show your ugly ass face."

"Yeah, you should have!" Zachariah said, smiling widely, looking at Dean mockingly. "Did you really think it would be that easy?"

"Did you?" Dean challenged coolly. Sam came out of nowhere at Zachariah from behind, an angel blade raised high—but Zachariah turned around at blazing speeds and knocked it out of his hand, threw Sam against the decorative room divider.

The second the angel turned around, Alex screamed "now, Adam!"

And with what little strength he had, Adam tore the big painting they'd been sitting beneath off of the wall, revealing an angel sigil drawn in his and Alex's blood. Alex slammed her palm down onto
it, turned and looked over her shoulder just in time to see Zachariah's dumb, slack-jawed look of shock as he became a haze of light that burst and then disappeared completely.

The room went still into silence. Dean looked shocked, stunned. Sam, on the floor, stared.

Alex looked at them breathlessly, a weird look on her face. "What?" she asked. "You think I was gonna let you say yes?" she grimaced, spit more blood out, sick to her stomach.

"I was… I was gonna kill him," Dean said lamely, like she'd spoiled his big plan and Alex just gave him a look, leaned against the table for support as Adam bent over, a hand on each knee.

Sam stood up, wincing a little, and Alex looked at Dean, then Sam, her eyebrows drew close together. "Wait. Where's Cas?"

Sam's expression flickered and something about it seemed to strike her as foreboding. She looked at Dean for an explanation and he wouldn't look back at her. Alex looked at him with a suddenly horrible feeling. "W-where is he?" the brothers looked at each other silently, then back at her, said nothing.

"Listen, Al…" Dean went toward her, she backed up, looked at him mistrustfully, and he stopped short.

Sam, who was up now, glanced at Dean fleetingly, went to his sister and put a gentle arm around her. "Let's get outta here, huh?" he asked, looking around at the room.

"But…" she trailed off. Normally she'd probably be pummeling him for answers, but the way he and Dean had looked at each other, the way Sam's expression had wavered when she asked where Cas was… she became blank, wordless.

"Can you walk?" Dean asked Adam, who nodded, said yeah.

Sam led her toward the exit of the room. Beyond it was the interior of a dark warehouse, and Alex looked up at the side of Sam's face, feeling woozy. "Sam, where is he?" she asked faintly.

"Just, let's get you outta here, okay?" Sam repeated himself, not giving her an answer, walking with her out of the beautiful room and into the dark, dingy warehouse. Why wouldn't he answer her?

Alex glanced at the dark warehouse, and then she saw, on the ground about ten feet away, a single, discarded, silver blade. Her heart dropped and she froze, horrified, realizing something horrible had happened here. She tore away from Sam, staggered to the blade and weakly dropped to her knees, picked it up, then looked back at Sam, completely beside herself. "Is… is this his?"

Sam's silent, grim expression was all the confirmation she needed and she looked around wildly, then back at her brother. "W-where is he?" she asked, dazed, shellshocked.

Sam approached her slowly, hesitantly, as if he were trying not to set her off. "We don't know. He… he made it possible for us to get you out."

Alex looked at the blade, not understanding. Feeling blindsided. Remembering, just a few hours ago, Cas's arms around her, holding her close, silently promising that they would never let her go. And now this big empty cold nothing, this blade covered in blood and Sam refusing to tell her where Castiel was. Her violent, uneven heartbeat was choking her. She looked up at Sam in shock. "Is… is he dead?" she managed just barely, clenching the blade tightly to herself.

Sam knelt down beside her, put a hand on her shoulder and was very, very gentle. "Shh, hey, hey,
don't think about that. Listen. He carved an angel sigil onto himself, so I mean, he's probably fine, right?"

Alex just stared down at the blade in sickened silence, unable to agree with her brother for even a single second. She felt, deeper than deep, that Cas was not fine. She couldn't find words, she almost felt like she would pass out. But Sam was taking her by either arm.

"Come here, come on," Sam guided gently, standing her up. "We need to get out of here."

He helped her walk out of the warehouse. She would have no memory of how they got from the warehouse to the car they stole, such was her distress.

The two angels stood on the deck of an expensive yacht at sunset. They stood at the railing, side by side, silent. The boat was still, idling. Zachariah cleared his throat nervously, glanced over Michael. Here, in some rich dead guy's heaven, Zachariah saw Michael as who he had last been—John Winchester from 1979. Michael didn't look happy. He had his hands clasped together on the railing, and even though he leaned casually, his hands were tight enough that the knuckles were whitened. "So, yet again, Zachariah," Michael finally said. "You've failed to obtain my vessel."

"Dean's... just not cooperating," Zachariah said hesitantly, choosing his words carefully, deeply afraid that he would be fired, literally, for his failures. "Believe me boss, I tried, I did, but I'll do better next time, just—"

"Save your simpering for another day, Zachariah," Michael told him bluntly and looked out at the ocean for a moment. "Didn't I tell you this was your final chance?"

"Yes," Zachariah replied faintly, trying to think of a way to get out of this, but realizing that there really wasn't one. He was probably as good as dead now. Michael was pissed. As soon as Zachariah had recovered from being blasted away by that bitch Alex Winchester, Michael had pulled him here, against his will. This was not good.

"Listen," Michael said finally. "I prefer to do things by the book. You know that. But I recognize that time is short and my options are all but nonexistent." He paused and looked over at Zachariah levelly. "Dean is stubborn. More stubborn than we thought. And now that you let our only leverage over him get away... we have even less to work with than we did before."

Zachariah watched Michael nervously. This felt like the lead in to an ass kicking.

"We're running out of time," Michael continued levelly, now bracing his hands against the railing, spreading his arms out a bit as he looked over the tranquil ocean again. "Lucifer is close to obtaining his vessel—very close. I need mine. I trusted you with an important task, Zachariah. And you've let me down."

Zachariah wasn't too proud to beg, and he realized now was the time. "Gimme one more chance, Michael. I'll, I'll—" Zachariah recoiled under Michael's sidelong restrained glare. "We-we offer to bring his mom back, his dad," Zachariah fumbled, trying to prove himself useful, trying to think of anything. "I can get the sister again, maybe even one or both of the brothers!"

"Can you?" Michael challenged stoically. "As I recall, you tried and failed for months to do that. You had them for, what, the span of a few small hours today before you lost them again. No."

Michael raised his chin a little, looking down his nose at the other angel. "And besides. Dean resisted you the last time you reduced his siblings to bleeding lumps on the floor," he pointed out, reminding Zachariah of when he'd tricked the Winchesters into going to their father's old storage
building. Zachariah had made all three of them suffer, had practically killed Sam, but Dean had still said no. Michael looked at Zachariah patronizingly. "Why did you think the same tactic would work this time?"

"I mean, I thought that I could—" Zachariah began.

"Dean Winchester is a wasted labor," Michael cut in sharply. "Even if you hadn't been blown away by the two youngest ones, do you really think he would have said yes? I've grown tired of his refusals to cooperate, his game of hide and seek. I don't have time for it any longer."

Zachariah remained silent, unsure if saying anything else would help or harm him. He was completely at Michael's mercy right now and felt the scales tipping steeply against his favor. "I'm going to give you one final chance, Zachariah. If you do what I say, you'll be rewarded. If not, you'll be stripped of every power you've ever had."

Zachariah tried not to wince under Michael's intimidating, penetrating gaze. "I'm-I'm in," he said, because he knew he didn't have another choice. "Just tell me what to do."

Michael looked at him for a long moment, his expression unreadable. "Adam Milligan is the only option left. He's not preferable, but he's better than what I have right now. Which is, as you might remember... nothing."

"But... I thought it had to be Dean," Zachariah protested slowly, thinking back to the prophecy. "The Lord works in mysterious ways," Michael murmured, seemingly to himself. He glanced at the other angel fleetingly, appraisingly. "Do you believe that, brother?"

"Uh yeah, of course," Zachariah replied automatically.

"I do too," Michael said in distant thoughtfulness. "Perhaps this is one of them. Perhaps our father is testing my ability to adapt to unpredictable situations." Michael straightened up. Zachariah looked at him in confusion. "But—but what about—"

"Enough!" Michael suddenly exclaimed, and off in the distance, thunder rumbled. The sky had darkened, Michael seemed several inches taller and wider. Zachariah was quiet for a long moment and Michael's expression faded back into calm indifference. The sky returned to a soft rosy orange.

"Now," Michael continued in measured calm. "Dean was my plan all along. But Adam... is accessible." He heaved a heavy breath. Zachariah felt a great amount of dread rising up inside. Adam was not accessible, not anymore. But Michael seemed to think he was. "I have a way to convince Adam to say yes... but I'll need your help making it happen."

Withering a little, sheepish almost but mostly just afraid, Zachariah hesitated. "Uh, I dunno, he was gung-ho about saying yes there at the beginning but... then I, uh..." Zach laughed nervously, a high-pitched, pathetic sound. "Circumstances unfortunately were not to his liking and uh..."

Zachariah decided to cut the BS. "I pissed him off royally." He tried to keep himself light and joking, hoping Michael's anger would stay at bay, that maybe the archangel would value Zachariah's forthcoming truthfulness. "I think the kid would rather eat shit than have anything to do with Heaven right now, to be honest with you."

Michael chuckled, as if he knew something the other angel didn't. "Don't worry, Zachariah," he said confidently. "Nothing you could have said to him will change the fact that he's ours already."

Zachariah frowned, tried to follow Michael's logic. "How?"
They weren't on the yacht anymore. They were in some other heaven, a small kitchen. A woman with blonde hair was making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, humming to herself, smiling. She was oblivious to the angels, who remained hidden from her. She wiped her hands on her apron, turned around. "Adam, sweetie, sandwich is ready!" she called, then laughed when a little blonde boy bounded into the kitchen, flapping his arms in excitement.

Michael smiled softly, looked at Zachariah. "His mother. I have a new plan for her. I have a way to use her that we didn't think of before."

Alex woke up slowly, in a pleasant fog of sleepiness. When had she dozed off? Her head rested on Cas's bare chest, his arms enveloped her, she rested in the rhythm of his steady breathing. Underneath her ear, she could hear his steady thudding heartbeat. "Hello," he said softly as she raised her head and looked up at him. His face was soft and boyish, relaxed. She remembered everything: Bobby's attic, the lovemaking, how he'd held her and traced patterns of fascination across the skin of her shoulders as she'd drifted off...

She smiled almost sheepishly. He was warm and they were still naked under the trench coat together. "Hello," she echoed.

And now? Now Alex was in the back seat of some stolen car, not even remembering how she'd gotten there or how long they'd been driving. Adam was beside her, Dean was driving, Sam was silent in the front seat. Where was Cas? It had been hours, days, weeks since they left the warehouse she thought. Or it felt that way. She wasn't sure, she felt sick all over. She kept telling herself: Cas will reappear soon. He'll call us and angel himself over and all of this sick worrying will have been over nothing.

After she'd said hello back, she'd asked him how long she'd been asleep. A few hours, he'd said, looking at her with this soft, deep gaze. She remembered feeling strange, shy, beautiful, part of a moment she for once in her life really belonged in, there with Cas in the attic, in the space of what they had created and discovered together. What was theirs alone.

Now she was cold, far away from that place she only had with him. He was missing, he was lost, and she knew it, felt it deep down past her bones. If he didn't reappear soon, if he didn't call soon, she would know her worst fear was true. She held his blade tightly in her lap, refusing to think about it, unable to think about how she would even begin to cope with losing Cas forever. He was the one. The one she wanted and loved and had fallen for completely. She squeezed her eyes shut, remembering.

He ran his hand down her arm, looking at it in deep, distracted thought. "Alex," Castiel finally had said softly, his eyebrows pressing in together just a little bit as his eyes sought out hers. The look on his face had stilled her, she felt like he was about to give her bad news, like he was about to tell her something that scared him. He swallowed, searched her eyes. And the second he started to speak, the tone of his voice gave him away, she knew what he was going to say. "I think... that I—"

And when she realized what he was about to say—that he was in love with her or that he loved her—she scrambled to cut him off. "D-don't," she protested, suddenly caught up in fear.

Castiel remained silent, but looked at her, his expression slightly wounded, and Alex regretted her gut-punch reaction of fear. "I... I know you do." She paused tersely, wracked with anxiety. "You don't have to say it out loud," she said tightly, and ducked his open, questioning gaze. She became quiet, looking down and feeling a little mortified with herself. It almost felt like a curse to say that you loved someone out loud. She looked back up at him, not able to say the words themselves and
not able to let him speak them either. She was too afraid.

Alex opened her eyes back up to the dark, unfamiliar car. Beside her, Adam shifted and she could feel him looking at her. Dean and Sam kept glancing back, too. It was like they knew something she didn't. Like they had already decided that Cas wasn't coming back.

She stared into nothing and felt nothing.

It began to rain outside, heavily.

She wished she'd told Cas the truth. *I love you.*

It was too late now.
"One by one hollow heroes separate as they run."
- Breaking Benjamin

Barstow, California

The waitress set down four plates at the booth. "Get you guys anything else?" she asked.

"I think we're good, thanks," Sam told her, and gave her a wan, distracted attempt at a smile. The waitress told them to just let her know if they needed anything else, then left them to it.

They were at a twenty-four-seven diner, it was still raining outside, and it was early, like crack of dawn early—they'd driven in silence for about two hours after leaving Van Nuys in the stolen car. Sam was trying to keep himself together mentally at this point. He was bone-tired exhausted, run ragged, and not sure what the hell was happening right now.

He glanced across the table at Dean, who was stuffing his face, taking huge, rude bites of his breakfast sandwich. Usually food always got Dean in a better mood, but right now, the oldest Winchester was just eating like it was his job. He didn't look happy at all. Beside him, Adam was about to start on his sausage and biscuits, glancing around uncomfortably, obviously feeling a little awkward and cautious, unsure about the situation he'd abruptly found himself in. Sam couldn't blame him. Suddenly stuck on the road with your family—but a family you didn't even know at all. Add the angel drama onto the top of all that and it was a wonder Adam was being as calm and composed as he was.

Beside Sam, Alex had picked up her fork and was pushing her scrambled eggs around her plate slowly. She'd been really quiet the whole time since Van Nuys, and it was hard to tell what exactly she was thinking or going through. Sam stared down at his eggs and toast. He didn't feel hungry, but he made himself eat. The four of them didn't say anything, just ate in increasingly stilted silence. Sam could barely stomach the food, he was too distressed. He hadn't talked with his older brother yet about everything that had happened over the past forty-eight hours or so, but he knew he needed to. He thought about Dean picking fights, taking off, being unwilling to cooperate or listen to reason, running away after hurting Alex and Cas alike... it was all horrible and nerve-wracking, but the thing Sam felt most uncertain about was the sudden one-eighty Dean had done, promising not to say yes after being so adamant about not saying no any longer. It was confusing as hell and Sam wasn't sure what to believe anymore. All he knew was that he didn't want to confront Dean about it yet—not with Alex and Adam present.

It all made for some very high strung nerves. Sam didn't like being without a game plan—they'd settled on 'going back to Bobby's,' but what after that? Was Dean really anti-Michael again? Were they going to band together and fight this thing after Dean had given him that grand speech in the panic room about saying yes on their terms? Sam had a bad feeling about this whole thing... and with the sudden addition of Adam, who was quiet, watchful, cautious of them—everything felt a little bit claustrophobic. Sam glanced at Dean at the exact second his brother happened to look up at him.

"What?" Dean asked defensively through a mouthful of food.

"Nothing," Sam hedged, and made himself take another bite of his eggs. For another minute, there was no more talking—just silverware clinking and Adam drinking up the last of his Coke through
his straw with a loud, sputtering sucking sound.

Sam gave him a look like cut that out. And Adam stopped, cleared his throat, set his cup down, glanced around at everyone at the table. He looked like he felt like the odd man out. "So. Uh. What do we do now?" he asked, maybe figuring that if no one else was gonna talk broach the subject, he would. Sam looked at Dean, who said nothing, just chewed a huge mouthful and looked out the window pointedly. Not getting an answer, Adam looked between the two brothers a little suspiciously, sensing the discord. "Something you're not telling me?"

"Everything's fine," Sam said, trying to avoid any conversation that was too deep. "Eat your breakfast."

Maybe he came across a little brusque or maybe Adam didn't like the tone of Sam's voice. Adam's expression became guarded and a little bit offended. "Everything's fine?" He grew sullen. "I may not be one of the gang but you don't have to lie to me."

Becoming frustrated at himself and the situation, Sam backpedaled. "Sorry Adam, it's just... I don't know what's next, okay?"

"So we figure it out." Adam said, maybe trying to be helpful, but instead just getting on Sam's nerves. "I mean like it or not, I'm part of this now."

Yeah, maybe he was, but it wasn't that simple. Sam didn't know what to say, just heaved a deep breath. Adam was coming in kind of late into this situation and how could Sam even begin to explain what they were really up against? They hadn't even told Adam about how Sam was Lucifer's vessel. The kid might think he knew the situation, but the truth was he didn't—he couldn't have unless he'd lived through it with all of them.

At that point, Alex mumbled something about the bathroom and got up, left the boys to themselves. "She okay?" Adam asked after a couple beats, watching her retreating form for a second, then looking at Sam. "Seems messed up."

"She'll be fine," Sam said, but it was an automatic answer, one he gave only to close the subject. He had no idea if Alex were okay or not. Adam seemed to sense that Sam was shutting him down and left it alone, made a face and took one more bite of his breakfast sausage and sat back, tossed his crumpled napkin down onto the plate, stood up, excused himself, headed to the bathroom too.

Thank god. The second Adam was out of earshot, Sam leaned forward to Dean, seizing the opportunity. But before he could even open his mouth, Dean cut him off. "Look man, I know what you're gonna say, so don't even bother," he said holding up a hand as if to physically stop him. He didn't look Sam in the eye, not fully.

Sam moved back slightly, looked at Dean as if to ask oh really?

"I changed my mind, okay? For real. I'm not saying yes." Dean said, his tone forceful. He took in a breath, set his coffee down, still not looking at Sam. "I guess I owe you guys an apology," he said grudgingly.

Sam looked at his brother in disbelief. "An apology," he repeated. "Dean, you need to do a little better than an apology."

"What, you want a cookie too?" Dean asked sarcastically, finally looking at his brother, and he shrugged, like he was out of ideas. "I mean, what else am I supposed to do? I said I'm sorry, now we move forward."
Sam was frustrated, to put it mildly. "Hey, you know what?" he leaned closer, his quiet voice sharp. "I don't trust you right now and even if you really are sorry, that doesn't do much for me." He didn't bother to hide how pissed he was. "What if you 'change your mind' again, huh? I can't take that chance." Sam leaned forward even more, his tone intense. "I need you to convince me that you're not gonna run off again or pull any more crazy crap like you have the past couple days. I can't let you run this show if you're gonna go AWOL again."

Annoyed and maybe a little convicted, Dean was getting defensive. "I'm not, okay?"

"Swear it," Sam replied intensely.

"I swear," Dean replied immediately, half rolling his eyes, like he was just trying to get Sam off of his back.

Sam looked at him steadily, seriously. "Swear it on Mom."

Dean's expression fell, he blinked a couple times, stunned. "Sam—"

Sam cut him off. "I mean it, Dean."

Dean's lips pursed out slightly. He was clearly not excited about it, but he did what Sam asked, and this time he sounded more like he meant it. "I swear. On Mom's grave." He seemed to resent Sam for bringing Mom into it, though. "You happy?"

Not really. Sam didn't feel much better. His fears were not abated much at all.

Dean looked at him intently, like he was seeing how hard a time Sam was having. He softened a little, relented. "Listen, there's gotta be another way, and we're gonna find it," he said firmly.

Sam bristled at his brother's statement. "That's what I've been trying to tell you," he retorted.

Dean sat back in the booth, spread his arms. "Well I'm listening now, so what've you got?"

Sam faltered. "Uh—" Adam returned and Sam glanced at him as he slid in beside Dean again. "I dunno, maybe we start asking around where we haven't yet? Shamans, mystics, psychics? Someone's gotta know something."

Dean looked uninspired. "Maybe. No one's known jack squat before, but hey. No leaf unturned, right?" It was hard to tell if he were trying to sound cynical or if he just felt that way. But he pinched the bridge of his nose briefly and reached for his coffee, pushing some obvious fatigue away. "I'll call Bobby in a few, see if there's anyone out in this area before we head back."

"We're going on a hunt?" Adam asked.

"An information hunt," Dean replied a little sarcastically, his eyes darting toward Adam sidelong. "I hope you like long car rides and frustration, kid."

Sam drank a little more of his coffee, too, hoping it would start to work soon. But knowing himself, he knew that he'd need like three shots of espresso to jolt him to clarity at this point. He set the mug of coffee down. It was getting hard to keep morale going right now. He was just tired. He'd never been so tired before in his life. This was hard. For a few minutes they waited around while Sam ate the rest of his breakfast and Adam hunched down in the seat, stared vacantly out at the restaurant dining room. Dean worked on finishing his coffee.

Finished with his food, Sam glanced back toward the bathrooms, realizing that Alex had been gone
awhile now. For a minute, he contemplated whether or not he should go check on her. Usually he wouldn't but... after what had happened today, he felt a sudden, strong pull deep down, urging him to make sure she was okay.

Listening to his instincts, Sam told Adam and Dean "I'll be back in a sec," and he went to the back of the restaurant, hesitated, then knocked on the women's bathroom door lightly. This was kind of awkward. There was no answer from inside. He knocked on the door again, a little louder, cleared his throat. "Uh, Alex? You okay?"

No reply.

Ah geez. This was sort of awkward. He nudged the door open, peeked inside, hoping no one saw him and thought he was a creeper. It was a bathroom with multiple stalls, all of which looked open and empty. He heard a weird hiccuping, gasping sound, and peered around the door to get a better view of the room and then he saw his sister was at the sink, bracing herself there, her hands gripping either side of the shining porcelain—her phone was forgotten in one hand as she bent over the sink—had she been trying to call Cas? She was staring down unseeingly, hyperventilating almost, her expression blank and shocked. She looked pale, like she'd been sick, and without a second thought, Sam went to her quickly, helped her to stay standing. He was alarmed at how bad she looked. "Hey whoa, whoa whoa whoa, just breathe," he told his twin, who shook her head, staring at the space in front of her.

"I'm not... I'm..." she didn't seem to be able to form coherent sentences, and realizing that she was shaking, Sam guided her over to the wall, helped her sit down with her back against it. He crouched in front of her, holding her by the arms steadily.

"Listen to me," he told her, trying to get her to look at him. "Breathe in and out, okay? Everything's gonna be fine."

He felt his sister grabbing onto the arms of his jacket, her eyes were squeezed shut now, she was panicking, shutting down almost, but clearly trying to regain control. And Sam remembered the last time she had acted this way: the day that Dean was shredded by Hellhounds. _Jesus, Alex._

"You're all right, it's okay," Sam told her urgently, trying to be soothing and calming even though he was _freaked out_ to see how she was floundering. He could see her fighting herself, trying to calm down, and he put a hand on her head, gripping her firmly. "Hey, hey, stay here with me, breathe. In and out. That's good."

Her eyes opened up finally, and his heart broke a little bit at the pain in her eyes. "He's gone," she said, her voice a pathetic, rasping whisper. "Just gone, and I don't... understand..."

"Hey—" Sam tried to smile encouragingly, but it was more sad than anything else. "Give it a little time before you decide he's gone for good, okay?"

She searched his gaze, her expression tense, and it seemed like she was thinking a thousand things but couldn't say any of them. She looked down again, expression twisted up into almost physical pain as she tried to regulate her breathing. Sam suddenly remembered something and he fished around in his coat pocket, drew out the tie that Cas had given to him before he disappeared.

"He told me to give this to you," Sam said quietly, catching her attention.

She looked down to see what he meant, saw the tie, and her face went slack. "I think... he wanted you to keep it for him until he got back," Sam said, thinking that maybe this would give her the hope that Sam didn't really have—he'd seen how resigned Cas had been, how he'd looked like he was knowingly walking into his death. But Sam couldn't stand to tell his sister that, and maybe,
just maybe Cas had been wrong. Maybe he would be back.

Alex didn't do anything for a second, just looked oddly at the tie in Sam's hand before she reached out and took it slowly, carefully. She looked like she was remembering something, like she was dazed. She seemed confused now and unsure. But at least she was breathing normally and not about to have a breakdown.

"You okay?" Sam asked, appraising her carefully. "Wanna stand up?"

Alex stared at the blue tie in her hand, realized Sam had asked her a question. She shook her head very slowly, avoiding Sam's gaze. "Just... give me a few minutes?" She felt him hesitate. "I'll... be out in a few," she said faintly. "I'm okay."

Sam obviously didn't like it, but he respected her request and nodded, gave her arm an affectionate, supportive squeeze and stood up, left the bathroom with a couple of reluctant backward glances.

The room became silent except for the drip drip of the leaking faucet. Alex ran her thumb over the texture of the tie slowly. She thought back to yesterday afternoon in Bobby's attic.

She was decent again—wearing her underwear and her tank top once more, covered enough that she didn't feel awkward. Castiel sat on the edge of the bed, his back to her as he put his socks and shoes back on—he was wearing his pants again but was shirtless, and Alex was studying his back carefully. The tattoo of the cross that had been across his shoulder blade was gone completely—had she imagined it? She swore she remembered seeing it when she'd met Jimmy Novak—that the guy had even told her something about it being some college-era tattoo he'd regretted. So why wasn't it there anymore?

Finally, Alex asked Cas about it. He hesitated, thoughtful, then told her he hadn't liked the tattoo personally, that he'd removed it some time ago. She was surprised. He really is claiming this body as his own, she thought. She'd looked at him quietly, watched him pull his shirt back on from the side of her eyes, never over the fact that she got to see him like that. She had gotten a little flustered and busied herself by picking up his tie from off of the floor beside the bed, and that's when she saw that Cas had put his shoes onto the wrong feet. He was just too cute.

He'd been confused at her sudden outburst of giggling laughter, and she'd pointed out that the shoes were on the wrong feet. Castiel commented that the shoes looked so alike, it was hard to tell... and she watched him fix his mistake, watched him switch the shoes and then tie those crappy little lopsided bows he tied. And she didn't want him to ever tie knots differently than he did—she loved the strange, clueless way he did things.

While Cas buttoned his shirt back up, Alex had jokingly held his tie against herself and asked if it looked good on her. He'd paused his work and had seemed to be puzzled at her question, telling her that he didn't think women wore ties, traditionally. He'd said it with wide eyes and a just-trying-to-be-helpful expression that unexpectedly melted her heart.

Alex put his tie back on him carefully once he was done buttoning his shirt. She knotted the tie neatly for him, but made sure it was backwards, just like he always wore it. It was somehow one of her favorite things about him, that damn tie, and she told him as much. He'd just looked at her quietly, his gaze thorough. And she'd felt like he could see everything about her.

She held onto the tie tightly now—this remaining piece of fabric was more than clothing, it was a part of Cas, and that thought ripped open the painful tear in her heart even further—he'd slipped out of her grasp, she didn't know where he was or if he was even alive.
Sam and Dean didn't think he was coming back. Even though they weren't saying it, she saw it clearly on their faces.

Alex could barely even begin to think about how to feel—she wanted to fall away from herself, be somewhere else, to be someone else. She felt nothing, she felt everything, she was suddenly alone in a way she'd never been alone before. There was this emptiness, this utter fear and dread in the pit of her stomach, making her sick all over.

She hated herself for the uncontrollable panic she was fighting, she hated herself for being so afraid that he was never coming back.

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Nothing, Arizona

"Are you coming?" Dean asked, and Alex looked up, confused. The car they'd stolen—a Ford Explorer—was parked, she was the only one in the SUV—where were Sam and Adam? Dean had opened her door for her and he was looking at her in expectancy and slight concern.

"Coming where?" she asked, feeling dazed.

He looked at her, his concern deepening. "...inside?"

Inside where? She leaned her head to the side, looked around—where were they? It looked like the middle of the desert—they were parked beside some ramshackle highway shop that looked like it'd been chewed up and spit out. She saw Sam waiting a little ways off in the middle of the parking lot with his hands in his pockets. Adam had his arms crossed. They were both squinting in the bright noonday sun.

"Weren't you listening when I was on the phone with Bobby a couple hours back?" Dean asked, and at her silence, he spoke like he was repeating himself. "We're gonna see about some mystic guru chick out here...? Name of Aura...? She was on the way back to Bobby's...? Figured it was worth a shot...?" He paused. "Any of that ring a bell?" He looked at her weirdly when she said nothing. She instead just frowned, distracted and bewildered. "You seriously don't remember me telling you this a few hours ago?" Dean asked dubiously.

She tried to think back, but her memories of the day so far seemed inaccessible and dreamlike, she couldn't put the details together and she didn't want to, it took too much energy and she just made a faint and dejected little groaning sound, looked down and shook her head. "Of course I remember," she lied outright, afraid he'd think she was crazy.

Dean was silent for a minute, then when he spoke again, it was softer, apprehensive. "Al... you're really starting to worry me. You okay?"

Alex looked at her oldest brother and wanted to feel the passion of anger she'd had for him just a few hours ago—the hatred she'd felt for his choices, his actions toward her. But now, so sad and scared, she instead just looked away, feeling nothing about Dean, nothing.

Her brother looked at her for a long moment, then stood back a little, making room for her to get out and stand. "Get out of the car, can you?" he asked, and Alex guessed she could and vacantly swung her legs over the side of the seat, out onto the ground below and she got up and out. Her limbs felt odd and she wondered briefly if she were in mild physical shock. She was light-headed and her pulse was fast, unpleasantly so.

"Look," Dean's voice said beside her somewhere, and he sounded heartfelt, kind, slightly pleading.
His hand touched the back of her arm hesitantly, gently. He said something like *don't give up, I raised you better than that*. Listening was hard right now, too. She could barely focus, but she told him *okay*. Just to get him to shut up.

He said something else but it seemed muffled, she couldn't hear anything but the word *sorry* very well.

"Okay?" he asked gently, and she was lost. What had he just said?

Again, trying to feign wellness, she nodded, no idea what she was agreeing to. "Okay."

And Dean looked at her a minute longer, not convinced she was okay, but then he let it go, motioned for her to go with him. She did, just put one foot in front of the other, went through the motions, tried really hard to focus, to get out of the weird fog she was in.

Adam watched Dean and Alex come toward where he and Sam waited. Something was wrong with her and it was obvious. She seemed shellshocked ever since that trench coat guy had disappeared. The way she was acting, you'd think he'd died. Maybe he had.

"Shall we?" Dean asked gruffly, and led the rest of the way across the cracked, weed-choked parking lot.

Adam had high hopes for what they were about to do—meet some sort of psychic lady who, according to the Bobby guy, might know something that could help with the Winchester's efforts to stop the apocalypse. It sounded cool, a psychic. But what Adam wasn't sure about was why Dean and Sam were so dead set on stopping Michael's apparent mission to kill the devil.

It seemed like killing the devil once and for all would be a *good* thing, right? The world was full of billions of people, and, you know, if a couple million had to die so that Satan was gone forever… it wasn't the *best* trade, no, but *still*. It was the devil. You'd expect there to be a little fallout.

Adam glanced up at the billboard that loomed over the parking lot they were in—it said *NOTHING* in block letters, and it was sort of eerie, really. This seemed like a weird place to find answers. It was out in the middle of the Mojave desert, along Highway 93, which was just one endless, flat, straight highway with desert on either side. There was nothing and no one for miles. This little "town" of Nothing was named well. The only building there was one low, flat yellow shack with a sign in front of it, hand painted, that said *ALL MART*. A bunch of junk was piled next to it. The side of the building had been messily painted by hand and advertised "crystals - divination - herbs and remedies - incense - specialty tea - spiritual supplies."

"Oh good, *spiritual supplies,*" Dean commented wryly, pulling the dirty glass door open. A bell jingled as they walked in.

Inside the little shop it was dim and musty, smelled like a vitamin shop, and Adam didn't like it. A woman who looked to be of middle eastern descent was sitting behind a counter and she seemed surprised to see them, looking up at them from a teacup she’d been studying. She had graying hair braided straight down her back, she was wearing a wildly patterned, colorful dress, she had many jingling bracelets stacked on her wrists. A red third eye was pressed into the space just above the gap in her eyebrows. She set her teacup down and rose to meet them. Adam could see that the cup had no tea in it, just a bunch of… brown stuff.

Hanging back, Adam squinted. "What was she doing?" he asked Alex in a low whisper. His half-sister seemed far away mentally, but when he asked her that, she came back, at least for a minute.
"Uh..." Alex looked, craned her neck, and she muttered her reply quietly. "She was reading tea leaves—a.k.a. crazy stuff." And Alex once again fell into glazed over silence, staring ahead with a vaguely sick expression on her face. Adam gawked around at the dinky little store while Sam and Dean approached the woman behind the counter.

"Are you... Aura?" Sam asked.

"Oh no. I'm Rosemary." She looked at them both carefully, a little suspiciously. "Aura is my daughter. Have you come seeking her divine truths?"

"Uh yeah," Dean said, trying a smile, coming across as facetious. "That."

"Hmm." Rosemary paused heavily, sounding reluctant, looking at the four of them skeptically. "Let me see if she's accepting inquiries today."

"Accepting inquiries?" Dean repeated incredulously, his sharp tone drawing a slight frown from the shopkeeper.

"We'll wait here," Sam said, attempting a crooked, charming smile, trying to smooth over the rude moment Dean had just created. With another skeptical glance, Rosemary disappeared into beaded curtain that hung in the doorway behind the counter. Sam gave Dean a look, to which Dean huffed impatiently, turned around, glancing around the little shop skeptically.

"Look at all this new agey crap," he muttered. "Crystals, incense, psychic powders? How's this place stay afloat way out here in nowhere land? Who buys this stuff?"

"No one," Alex said flatly and she held up her index finger, which was gray. "Everything is dusty. Everything."

"Hmm," Sam looked around, his eyes narrowing steeply. "Interesting..."

Alex looked at her finger oddly, wiped it on her jeans, drew a breath and let it out heavily, then leaned her hand against a free space on the wall, giving the impression of extreme fatigue. Dean looked at her and grew clearly distressed, looked away, began tapping the counter impatiently. "Dude this is a bust lead," the oldest Winchester muttered. "I can already feel it."

Sam picked up a little jar labeled vervain and squinted at it. "Bobby seemed to think this girl might know something, Dean, give it a chance."

They waited for about five full minutes. Dean grew more and more impatient, casting hooded glances at his sister and brother, not really paying any attention to Adam, who contented himself to poke around the weird shop.

Rosemary finally reappeared alone. "I am sorry to keep you waiting," the woman apologized. "Aura says she's not taking visitors today."

"Not taking visitors?" Dean repeated in what seemed to be offended disbelief.

"I'm sorry, perhaps tomorrow," Rosemary said firmly.

"We're here today." Dean said, poking an index finger down onto the worn out countertop for emphasis.

Rosemary shook her head. "I'm sorry."
Dean looked like he were gathering himself up, about to blast the lady and let her have it—and then the beaded curtain stirred, out came a very young woman, perhaps just out of her teenage years. "It's all right, Rosemary," she said, and her voice was soft, raspy. She looked at the Winchesters curiously, and they stared back at her almost gawkingly.

She was clearly Rosemary's daughter, they had similar features, but Aura seemed wild and strange on a whole new level. She had long and untamed black hair, deeply tan skin. Vivid sky-blue powder was lined underneath her eyes, and it was so thick that it looked like she'd put it there with her fingers. Her arms were smudged with bright powders—magenta, saffron, violet—it looked like she had been painting on herself idly. There were beads scattered throughout her hair, a headband stretched across her forehead, her clothes were colorful and unusual: an Indian sari over some flowing, batik patterned pants. She was barefoot and wore bracelets stacked on her wrists just like her mother. Aura was striking and beautiful, but almost plain at the same time, her nose was large and upturned, her eyes too big for her heart-shaped face. Her steady gaze locked onto Dean. "No."

"Uh… what?" he asked, confused.

She was serene, her hands folded together in front of her as she came forward into the shop, stood at the side of the counter. "I said, no—I don't have the answers you seek. You have my apologies."

A little thrown off guard, Dean looked like he was trying to figure out what had just happened. "Lady, I didn't even ask you anything yet."

She shrugged just slightly. "And you don't need to." She looked at Adam with a note of puzzled curiosity on her exotic features. "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

Adam was confused, not even sure she was speaking to him. "Do I know you?" he asked. She said nothing, just looked at him with an unreadable expression—pleasant, but jarring and deeply knowing. Adam felt really strange all of the sudden, and didn't know if he liked being here right now. Beside him now, Alex seemed more like herself, or more like the self she'd been when they'd been trapped in the beautiful room together. She was standing in front of Adam slightly, and Adam suddenly wondered if she was being protective of him. He didn't need protecting, and he crossed his arms, moved so that he stood beside Alex, equal to her.

Dean looked at Sam, officially weirded out, maybe silently asking for assistance. Sam cleared his throat, looking a little hesitant. "Aura? We came here to see if you can help us." Always the polite one, Sam introduced everyone. "I'm Sam. This is my brother Dean, my brother Adam… my sister Alex."

"I know who all of you are, of course," Aura said simply, further confusing everyone, but she was smiling faintly, as if nothing were strange about her reply at all. She waited for one of them to speak, and while everyone else was growing uncomfortable, she remained completely tranquil.

Sam faltered. "Then you know… about the apocalypse." He looked at her uncertainly.

Aura inclined her head just slightly, half a nod. "Yes. And I know you seek to kill Lucifer."

All four of them were visibly taken aback by her apparent knowledge of what they were there to ask her about. "How… do you know that?" Alex asked.

Aura was silent for a long moment, looking at each of them slowly, poised and graceful, and it was strange, the way she commanded the interaction, how her silences did not allow for interruption. Even Dean said nothing. Finally she spoke, but ignored Alex's question. "It's impossible to destroy good or evil, they will both always exist…" She looked at Sam now. "What makes you think that
you—or anyone—can kill Lucifer, the embodiment of evil?" She asked it simply and with a surprising touch of innocent curiosity, as if she really wanted to know what he would say.

Sam was startled, he cast a quick glance at Dean then looked back at her, wet his lips, shrugged. "I mean... other angels can die, so why not him?"

Her eyes drifted off in thought. "Interesting question," she replied vaguely, eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly as her expression grew thoughtful.

Dean and Sam looked at each other sidelong again, silently arguing about who was going to continue the conversation with the crazy girl. "So can we kill the devil or not?" Dean asked when Sam wouldn't say anything else.

Aura leveled Dean with another contented gaze. "Not quite," she answered cryptically. "But there's something else. Another way."

Finally, some answers. Dean grew a little more urgent. "What is it?"

She hesitated. "You'll find out soon," she said, then tilted her head to the side, looking down and shrugging ever so slightly. "But... not from me."

"Why not?" Dean asked, straining to keep his tone polite. His impatience came through strongly.

Her dark eyes flicked back up to his and she straightened. "It's not time yet. I'm not the one who is supposed to tell you."

"You got to be kidding me," Dean said. "Are you just yanking my chain right now?" He became demanding. "Tell us what you know—a lot of lives are at stake here."

"How true that is," she replied, and she seemed briefly saddened. She looked at Sam, then Adam, then Alex, then back at Dean. "More than you know."

Dean faltered, lost a little bit of his nerve. "W-what's that supposed to mean?"

"I've seen the future," was her reply.

Dean's expression grew mildly suspicious. "What, you some kind of prophet?"

Unfazed, unaffected, she merely blinked once. "Some have said that I am."

Dean's jaw clenched tight, he was getting impatient. "Look... it's kind of important that you tell us anything you know."

She was unruffled by his intensifying tone and glare. "I already told you no," she told him, matter-of-fact. "My answer remains the same." She saw the unpleasant expression on Dean's face. She regarded him with a small smile and mild sympathy. "Patience," she told him measuredly. "Everything will be revealed to you as it should be, when it should be."

Dean was practically seething, but seemed to get that there was no use pushing. "Okay you know what, Miss Cleo? Thanks for nothing. I think we're done here." Dean looked around at his siblings darkly, then brushed past Sam, headed for the exit.

"Just know that the way it will happen is the way that it has to happen," Aura said, and her tone suddenly held a startling note of warning and caution, sympathy. "None of you is to blame for what will happen. This is just... the way it has to be."
Dean stopped, looked back at her with an intense frown, then rounded, came back a couple steps. "What are you talking about?"

Her eyes snapped to his but she said nothing, then she turned to leave, but looked back at them over her shoulder before she disappeared through the beaded curtain. "Be careful on the highway as you travel. Dark spirits haunt the deserts here." Aura looked at Alex cryptically. "Until next time." Her eyes darted to Adam. "Goodbye." And she left.

Rosemary, who they had all forgotten about, indicated a jar of candy bars that looked like they had been sitting for years. "For the road?" she asked. "Twenty-five cents." Dean rolled his eyes and walked out.

"Uh, no, but thank you," Sam answered politely, and gestured for Alex and Adam to follow after Dean.

Back out in the blinding sun, Adam heard Dean, ahead, muttering "Well that was a waste of time," as he yanked open the driver's side door and got in.

The rest of them piled in, too, as Dean stuck the keys into the ignition. "Dude, that chick gave me the heebie jeebies," he complained, starting the car. "Bunch of mumbo jumbo crap." He shifted into gear. "I need a shower. I think some of her hippie got on me."

Adam felt disillusioned and more than a little creeped out, glad to be leaving, feeling less sure of what was going on than before. He felt out of place, more than he ever had in his entire life, and he was trying not to feel that way. He was all to aware that these people—Dean, Sam, Alex—were the only living relatives he had left.

The desert passed by outside as Dean drove them away from the town of Nothing. Adam looked over at Alex, who had her hand in her jacket pocket. He could see a piece of a blue tie sticking out. She was holding onto it in without seeming to realize as she stared at the back of the seat in front of her blindly. Apparently that guy, Cas, had been a big deal to her. The minute Alex had found out about him disappearing, she'd done a one-eighty. He wondered what happened to the badass chick who had kicked his ass and mouthed off to Zachariah.

He thought about how he knew how hard it was to lose someone, and realized he got it actually. He missed his mom so much. Adam's thoughts wandered, his heart sunk a little bit when he thought of her, how much he wanted to see her. Just one more time. She was the only person in the world he felt like he could be himself with.

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**About Twelve Hours Later**

**Grand Junction, Colorado**

Adam woke up suddenly, and for the briefest moment, he didn't remember where he was, all he knew was that he was in darkness... and then his eyes adjusted, he could see his surroundings, hear the sounds of his siblings breathing—was that Sam snoring softly? Adam remembered the day of nonstop driving, about nine hours of it, then crashing at this motel. It had been a weird, tense day overall, exhausting even though they'd done pretty much nothing but drive. Alex and Sam were asleep back to back on the bed next to Adam, Dean was on the floor with a pillow. Adam stared at the ceiling, feeling a gnawing sense of discontentment. It had been strange, when the angels told him that the family he'd never met, his dad's other kids, weren't to be trusted. But they'd been angels, so he'd believed them.

He'd been brought back to life and then the siblings he'd never known had in turn told him angels
weren't to be trusted. And even though that theory had been proven—Zachariah was a frigging 
asshole—Adam didn't feel like he thought he should about Dean, Sam, and Alex. He felt their side 
glances and knew they didn't trust him. That they felt as weird about him being there as he did.

John Winchester had shown up when Adam was twelve, and it had been, in a word, shocking. 
Adam had felt odd about this man suddenly showing up and expressing interest in being part of his 
life. He'd seemed nice enough, had taken Adam to some baseball games, spent time with him. But 
John didn't even tell him about his other kids until the third or fourth time Adam saw him when he 
was thirteen. Learning that he had two brothers and a sister had been strange. He'd imagined them 
a lot ever since John told him. Dean, Sam, Alex... they weren't what he had expected. He wasn't 
sure what he'd expected, really, but they were different than what he'd thought. Not better or worse, 
just different.

Restless, Adam got up quietly and went to the window. Weird, he thought he remembered there 
being heavy blinds across the window. The glass pane was large and uncovered, he could see out 
into the parking lot really well. Someone was walking by on the sidewalk—and then light from 
headlights passing on the adjacent road lit her up briefly and Adam's stomach dropped. Mom?!

Without a second thought, he rushed out of the motel, not even closing the door behind himself— 
she was a few feet away, her back to him as she walked away. "Mom!" he cried out, and she turned 
around, frowning. He could see really well now, the moon was oddly bright.

"Adam?" She asked, dawning surprise in her voice. "Adam!

He rushed to her, overwhelmed by disbelief. He had never hugged anyone so tightly in his life— 
she hugged him back, but it was sort of weak, was she all right? He pulled back urgently, looking 
at her carefully. "Mom, are you okay? How—how are you here? Did the angels—" he felt himself 
go cold with realization and fear, his jubilation was gone as he realized this had to be something 
bad. "The angels."

"Yes, the angels!" came a familiar voice, and Adam whirled, holding his arm out in front of his 
mom instinctively, protectively. He was deeply afraid when he recognized the owner of the voice.

"Zachariah," he growled, his veins hammering in hatred.

"The one and only!" The angel said proudly, chuckling as he approached, swaggering almost. "Did you really think you could get away from me, kiddo?" Zachariah asked, amused. "I mean, I wasn't 
done with you." He stopped, a few feet off. "You and your bitch sister really shouldn't have done 
what you did," he scolded, still acting like it was all a huge, funny joke to him. "Do you have any 
idea how much it hurts to be blasted away to the four corners of the earth?"

Adam felt an overwhelming sense of dread, like Zachariah was getting to a violent, vengeful 
punchline. "Look, I don't know what you want or what's happening, but you leave my mom out of 
it," Adam said acidly, trying to be brave and threatening, but he was scared. He glanced toward the 
motel room, praying that one of his sleeping siblings inside would wake up and see what was 
happening.

"Oh trust me," Zachariah said, seeing Adam's growing fear. "They're not coming to save you this 
time." His air of amusement was gone, and in its place was an eerie calm and focus. "No one can 
save you. Or your mom."

Adam suddenly found himself slammed to the ground without even being touched, hitting back-
first, cracking his head on the pavement painfully. He was stuck, he couldn't get up, and he could 
see his mom suddenly picked up and thrown against the side of the motel, where she stuck as if
glued—and she gagged and gasped, panicking as she began to cough up thick streams of blood.

"Stop it Zachariah!" Adam shouted, struggling to get up, but stuck as if all the gravity in the world weighed down on him. "Dean! Sam!" he screamed, and Zachariah had the nerve to laugh jovially.

Mom cried out in intense pain, and Adam could see her crying, begging—and it was just like when the ghouls had eaten them and everything inside of him said no, no! Don't let this happen to her again, help her, save her!

"Please, stop!" Adam begged, fighting with everything he had, but remaining stuck. "Mom!" he sobbed.

"I can do this all day!" Zachariah said gleefully, and Adam's mom gave another shuddering cry of pain as she coughed out bright red blood.

"Zachariah!" Came a startling, firm, authoritative voice, and everyone looked to see a young, dark-haired man standing where, a moment ago, there had been no one.

"Michael!" Zachariah exclaimed, fear filtering over his features. He shrunk back a step. "I was just—it's not what it looks like!"

Adam looked at the newcomer in confusion—Michael?

"Let Kate Milligan go, Zachariah," Michael said, and there was deep command in the voice. "Now."

Zachariah complied, and Kate dropped away from the wall, fell to her hands and knees even as Adam discovered he was able to move again and scrambled over to her.

"You've disobeyed me for the last time, Zachariah," Michael said coolly. "I told you they were not to be harmed in any way."

"I know, I know, but I just—I got carried away, boss! It won't happen again!"

Michael's chin lowered just a little, a threatening effect. "You're right," he said, and Adam saw the silver blade suddenly slide down out of the long sleeve of Michael's jacket. "It won't."

Almost too fast to see, Michael plunged the blade into Zachariah's chest—and there was a flash of bright blue light, a deafening scream, and Zachariah exploded into light, then was gone completely.

Shocked, Adam helped his shaking mother up slowly, looked at Michael wordlessly. The archangel was pocketing his blade somberly. "I'm Michael. You may have heard of me." There was a slight smile.

Even though the guy had just saved their lives, Adam was suspicious. "Why do you look like my dad?" he asked.

Michael looked down at himself, straightened his jacket. "I'm... borrowing John Winchester's body from nineteen-seventy-nine," he explained. "It's temporary." Adam frowned. He didn't understand—something seemed off.

"What's going on, Adam?" Kate asked, confused. She sounded strange, her cadence was off. But Adam didn't think anything of it, thought it was the fear.

"Just let me handle this, Mom," Adam said, holding her tightly, scared to lose her. He stared down
Michael intensely. "Zachariah told me he was working for you," Adam said. "He lied about everything. Used me to try and get to Dean."

Michael's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "Zachariah does do that. Lie." He paused. "He's not to be trusted. But I'm sure you've figured that out by now. And... clearly, he won't be a problem anymore." Michael's expression grew deeply serious and he came closer. "Adam, I'm weak. This isn't my true vessel, and I'm running out of time. Lucifer is close to obtaining his vessel, did the Winchesters tell you that?"

Adam's mistrustful frown deepened. "No..."

Michael nodded slightly. "Of course not. They didn't tell you Sam is Lucifer's vessel, either, I'm sure."

Adam's eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"Hmm," Michael made a soft, thoughtful sound, seeming to be sympathetic. "They welcome you to the family and yet you know, you can feel it... you're not a part of their family and you never will be. Your mother. She's your family."

Adam looked at his mom briefly as Michael continued. "You were meant for greater things Adam. Brave things, world-changing things." Michael smiled now, his eyes softening, and Adam was stillled, remembering the same look on the same face, only when it had been about twenty years older. "You're not a side character," Michael continued. "You're not the little half-brother. You're important. To me."

"What do you mean?" Adam asked, hesitating, not sure where this was going.

Michael took in a deep breath, thought a moment. "I'm looking for someone who isn't going to let foolish, selfish pride get in the way of this opportunity. Adam, think it over. Together, you and I can kill Satan. If we don't, he'll damage this world beyond repair. I need you."

Adam was beginning to understand, but he was even more confused now than ever. "I thought Dean was supposed to be the vessel."

"He was," Michael said. "But it seems he's not the man I believed him to be. And as I said before, this vessel I'm in... temporary. You're the only option left. My last hope."

Adam stared, speechless, and Michael looked at him openly. "You saw them. Your brothers. They're falling apart. It's only a matter of time before Sam says yes. And when he takes his vessel, when the embodiment of true evil walks this earth... someone needs to be there to stop him. He'll kill everyone, Adam. Lucifer despises humanity. We can save people. Your mother. We can save her."

Adam tightened his arms around his mom, and Michael's voice lowered. "All you have to do is one very simple thing. Say yes. And I take care of the rest. I defeat the devil, with your help. Afterward, I return to Heaven, you return to your life. Your mom is safe, happy, alive. You both get a second chance. I'll even bring back your dad. If you want."

Adam swallowed, heart beating fast, mind whirling. Michael seemed so different than Zachariah: steadfast, noble, good. "It comes down to this, Adam," Michael said softly. "Are you braver than Dean? Are you willing to see this for what it is? A chance to save the world?" Adam looked at his mother, whose eyes searched his, then back at Michael, who waited patiently. "I'm not like whatever Dean has told you, Adam. I have the best interest of the world in mind. I hope you
believe me."

Adam almost made a face. Dean hadn't told him anything like Michael had assumed. Michael had told him more in two minutes than his family had told him all day. Adam thought about everything Michael had told him and felt purpose welling up inside of him, he felt how his mother was watching him expectantly. He pictured himself alive and happy, walking down a street, seeing people who were alive because of what he'd done, he pictured his mom picking flowers, laughing, full of life.

Michael was looking at him patiently. "So what will it be, Adam? Will you be the weapon which defeats the devil?"

And not realizing it had all been a huge trick—that Zachariah wasn't really dead, that the woman who looked like his mother was an illusion, that the entire situation he thought he was in right now was a dream he was having, not reality at all—Adam fell hook, line, and sinker.

Believing he was being brave, believing he was acting selflessly and doing something that would save millions, Adam drew himself up to his full height and looked over to his mother, who wasn't even his mother. She smiled at him, and he felt renewed purpose. Courageous, he looked Michael in the eye, spoke with a clear, steady voice. "Yes." The last thing he would say as himself. And with that single word, it was done.

They would tell stories about him in the future: The boy who died for the sins of an absent father. The boy who was brought back from the dead, drawn out of Heaven only to be pulled down into Hell. The boy whose only mistake was trusting in angels.

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One Minute Ago

Adam was mumbling in his sleep—something like, Mom, no... and Alex tried to listen, but it became incoherent. She couldn't catch any more words. She stopped paying attention, let his little protesting whines and mumbles fade out. She had a hand in her jacket pocket, where the tie stayed, and her fingers tightened around it. She took in a deep breath, let it out very slowly. She thought of Castiel and her heart swelled with so much pain. She felt blank and hollow and yet agonized completely, torn apart everywhere. Her eyes stared straight up at the ceiling and hot tears leaked out of the corners of her eyes and down the sides of her face. She gripped her phone tightly—it was in her other pocket. She wanted it to ring, for his voice to be on the other end. But it was silent as it had been all day.

Sam shifted a little—his back was to her. Alex could hear Dean's slightly wheezy sleep-breathing somewhere on the floor near their feet. Adam was mumbling every other twenty seconds. She was literally surrounded, but Alex didn't know if she'd ever felt so lonely. She felt like she'd lost everything. How the hell was she supposed to live feeling this way? She still couldn't even really grasp what had happened. She kept replaying finding Castiel's abandoned blade in the warehouse. Gone? Gone?

He couldn't be gone. And yet he was.

"Michael," she thought Adam muttered, and Alex turned her head fast. Michael? Adam had gone silent, and she held her breath, listened hard. But Adam made no more sounds. She tried shutting her eyes, but couldn't keep them shut. She was wide awake, too tired to be tired, which made no sense. She felt her chest constricting, hopelessness overpowering her.

Suddenly, she heard Adam speak loudly, clearly. "Yes."
Wha—her ears rang oddly then, and the ringing increased, suddenly blasting through the air piercingly, and even as Alex was clapping her hands over her ears, she saw that Adam glowed bright before the room was washed out completely in a blaze of light that was nearly blinding.

She heard Dean yelling, felt Sam moving, she was sitting up, felt Sam manhandling her sort of, she wasn't sure what was happening—he was pulling her to him tightly and pulling her away from the bed Adam had been in. The three of them stood there in sudden darkness, breathless.

"Adam?" Dean looked around the room in a panic. "W-where did he go? What just happened?"

"He was… muttering about Michael." Alex said, and looked at both of her brothers, not sure what had just happened. "And then he said yes really loud." She looked at the bed blankly, numb. Sam's arms tightened around Alex almost painfully, like he thought if he had her good enough, the angels couldn't take her again, too.

"How'd they find us?" he asked breathlessly, anxious. Dean shook his head, already springing into action.

"We're outta here, now, before more come back," Dean said, and Alex felt herself leaving the room, floating, dazed.

Next thing Alex consciously realized, she was in the back of the stolen car again and her brothers were talking in low, intense tones in the front seat. She didn't hear what they were saying. One by one, everyone in her life was disappearing. She looked out the window and streetlights flashed by, the overhead light flickering over her face at an unsteady rhythm as the car sped down the road in the dead of night. Her throat hurt painfully, an impossible lump there at the base of it. Her eyes flickered back and forth over the darkness outside.

*Where are you, Cas? Where are you?*

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**Saint Bernard Parish Hospital**  
**Chalmette, Louisiana**

Nurse Katie Cooper looked up from the patient's chart, straightened her glasses, and scrutinized the John Doe patient who'd been admitted earlier that day. She'd heard a few of the other RN's talking about his mysterious circumstances—apparently this guy had been found on a shrimping boat off of Delacroix, bloody, unconscious, without ID and unresponsive. He'd been rushed in and was on life support now, showing close to no brain activity.

His face was messed up, he had a huge gash over his eyebrow; there was bad bruising along his jaw and the side of his temple. He looked like he'd been put through the ringer. Katie's co-workers had been talking about some kind of bizarre cuts on his stomach, and curious, Katie peeked, was stunned by the jaggedly carved up flesh that covered his chest and torso—*holy shit!* Who would do this to the poor guy? Who would do this to anyone? The weird, bloody symbol etched into his skin wasn't one she recognized, but it looked distinctly occult to her. Was this some kind of creepy ritual murder attempt?

Just looking at him, he didn't *appear* like the kind of guy who would be involved in that kind of stuff. *Hmm.* Even though he was in a coma and his face was devoid of any expression whatsoever, he looked... nice. Katie put his chart back into the holder on the end of the bed, wondered what kind of trouble he'd gotten in to that had gotten him messed up like this. She wondered if he belonged to a gang, or maybe a cult, or perhaps some weird religious group.
His personal effects were in a clear plastic box beside the bed, and curious, Katie looked through them. She saw a box cutter, a ruined cell phone, a couple coins, a lone silver whistle. There were some photographs, too, three of them. They were water stained, distorted, wrinkled, creased from being folded, they were hard to make out. But right away, Katie could tell from their abysmal quality that they had been printed from a cell phone camera. She picked up the first two, which were stapled together, side by side... weird... the pictures were of two guys in their late twenties or early thirties. The picture on the left was of a guy glaring sullenly into the camera like he didn't want his picture taken—the picture on the right was another guy with longer hair, his mouth open and a forkful of food hovering halfway inside, his eyes half-shut as he blinked. Why would someone carry these two pictures around with them?

Katie set down the pictures and picked up the third photo. It wasn't stapled with the other ones—and it was more wrinkled and creased than the one of the men, like maybe it had been handled more. The picture showed a dark-haired girl in maybe her mid twenties looking into the camera with a surprised, deer-in-the-headlights expression. Katie glanced at the patient's face. Hmm. More than ever, she wondered what his story was. Who these people in the pictures were.

"Katie—" the sound of a male voice startled the nurse, who turned, caught, to see Doctor Griffin looking at her scoldingly. "How many times do I have to tell you not to go through the patient's personal effects? I need you to come see to Mrs. Tucker, she's overdue for a dressing change."

"Sorry, Doc," Katie said, and she hurriedly stuck the picture back into the box, embarrassed that she'd been caught again. "On my way."

She glanced back one more time at the man in the coma. She hoped that someone was out there looking for him.

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**Four Weeks Later**

**Muncie, Indiana**

The rain beat down hard and fast in sheets, making it almost impossible for Dean to see the road ahead. He had slowed the Impala to an agonizing crawl, he had the wipers going as fast as they would. A few miles back they'd been detoured off of I-90 and the county road wasn't lined with street lamps like the freeway had been. "Damn," he commented as rain continued to pummel the car noisily. "Is it just me or does this little rainstorm say 'sign of the times' to you?"

Sam glanced Dean's way briefly, tense. "Yeah."

There was a short silence. "She still sleeping?" Dean asked. He didn't want to chance taking his eyes off the road to check on her himself.

Sam turned around, craning his neck to look at their sister. She was leaned into the side of the car, her hands crammed into her jacket pockets, one of her shoulders bent up awkwardly as a makeshift pillow underneath the side of her head. Even though she was asleep, her eyebrows were drawn together slightly—she was resting, but not peacefully. "Yeah, still sleeping," Sam said, turning forward again, heaving a tired sigh.

"Good," Dean said, then chanced a quick sidelong glance at his very tired-out looking brother. "Should probably get some shut eye yourself, Sammy. You've barely slept at all the past few days."

"Yeah I know," Sam said wearily. Dean could tell he was really worried about something. He didn't have to wonder too much about what—take your pick, pretty much. Sam was silent for a
couple more seconds, then let out a frustrated little huff. "What are we gonna do, Dean? We can't keep going like this."

"Sure we can, as long as I get nearly lethal amounts of caffeine every few hours," Dean said jokingly, and Sam gave an exasperated sound.

"That's not what I meant." He paused, and his voice dropped lower, the concern grew more pronounced. "I'm worried about her, Dean. Like, really worried."

Dean was sobered by his brother's statement. Sam had a way of doing that to Dean—cutting through to the issues and undermining his ability to act like everything was fine. And nodding, grim now, Dean let a heavy, troubled sigh escape. "Yeah. Me too."

The brothers fell into a tense silence.

It had been a horrible month. First Adam came back, then he was stolen away after apparently saying yes to Michael. It made no sense. It made them all deeply uneasy, and to Dean, it was yet another person he'd let down. He regretted so much how little he'd spoken to Adam the two days he'd been alive. He knew Sam felt the same. Maybe they could have stopped that from happening. Talk about a guilt trip.

The three of them had searched for answers this past month, traveling nonstop, trying to find anything that would help them figure out a way to gank the devil. The whole hippie chick Aura thing had pretty much set the standard for what they discovered: a whole lot of jack squat. It was discouraging, to say the least.

Cas was still missing and at this point, Dean was pretty sure that meant he was dead. They didn't talk about it, not really. Especially not around Alex.

Their sister was the worst part about this past month. She hadn't been herself ever since Van Nuys—she was struggling and fatigued, barely able to sleep, barely able to eat. She had grown eerily withdrawn and quiet, she hardly said a thing, and when she did, she mumbled apathetically or said something crass and crabby. She wasn't there, she was doing crazy stuff like almost getting hit when she crossed the street yesterday—Dean had grabbed her hard, yanked her back, saving her life. She'd been confused, shaken up. He'd caught her wandering out of the motels they'd stayed in at odd hours of the night and just sitting on the Impala, not wearing a jacket, looking at the sky pleadingly. Other nights, Dean had woken up to find her awake and staring out the window.

He knew it was because of Cas and he had no idea what to do, what to tell her, how to react. He felt bad. Seeing Alex the way she was was like watching a half-crazed grieving widow or something, and Dean regretted his heartlessness to them, even though he still didn't think the relationship was the best idea in the world—but from the way his sister was acting now, he knew that she really... he could barely bring himself to even think it... loved Cas. And damn if that hadn't been something powerful that had driven Castiel to sacrifice himself like that for her. Dean couldn't call it love because he didn't think angels were capable of emotions and love like humans were but... it was close, that was for sure.

Mostly, they avoided the subject of Cas like it was the plague. But honestly, pretending the dude was coming back was what Dean wanted to do, for all their sakes. He couldn't live with himself if Cas really had died for them back there after the shit they put him through—especially Dean. But it had been four weeks. And every day he felt less and less hope that they'd ever see the angel again.

Every time Dean looked at Alex, he saw his baby sister begging him help me. And he didn't know how. He wasn't a shrink or a therapist or anything... he was just her idiot big brother. She deserved
so much better than him. Dean was running himself ragged trying to take care of his family and was doing a shit job, he hated himself for everything he'd done lately, but he was trying harder than ever to be a good big brother. His sister, however, didn't seem too interested in her efforts. She seemed absent, vacated. Missing even when she stood right in front of him. She was functioning, but in a robotic way.

Dean had a thousand worries… the apocalypse, Dad's warning about Azazel, Sam's increasing depression, Alex's delicate state, Cas's disappearance, Lisa, Ben… he was under impossible pressure from all sides, he was struggling, he was feeling half insane some days. Of course, he buried it all deep down under sarcasm and jokes and his who gives a fuck attitude.

But he was reaching a breaking point. And maybe the biggest thing that had to change soon was Alex. He couldn't deal with much more of of his sister's crazy behavior, not now. It was too much on top of everything else, he couldn't be everywhere at once, and he was deeply worried about her. And after she was almost hit by that car yesterday… after he almost missed grabbing her by the space of a second—he'd lost it, let her have it, chewed her out, given her an ultimatum.

"Hey, so," Dean glanced at his brother again, cleared his throat, brought it up, trying to feel his brother out for possible solutions to how to deal with it. "I meant what I said to her yesterday, Sam. If she keeps up this crap she's been pulling… if she almost gets herself killed again, I'll take her to Bobby's, no questions asked."

Sam frowned at Dean. "What, dump her off somewhere? Dean she needs us right now."

Dean shook his head a little, explained. "What she needs is to get herself together, Sam. I'm not trying to be a dick but… you saw what happened yesterday, right?"

Sam was silent and pensive, brooding.

"Besides," Dean said. "I was thinking it might be better for her to stay in one place awhile. You know, rest up, get her mind off… all this."

"Divide up now, after everything?" Sam sounded really unsure. "Do you really think that would be best?"

Dean let out a heavy sigh. "I don't know what's best anymore, Sammy. I got no clue."

"I think the last thing she needs right now is to be alone," Sam said quietly.

There was a long silence. Dean didn't think so, either, but he felt like keeping her in the action was bad for her. Damned if he did, damned if he didn't.

Sam spoke again, but in a hushed tone. "Do you really think he's coming back, Dean?"

Dean stared straight ahead, his outlook bleak. He didn't answer for a long moment. "You were there. He didn't think he was coming back."

"So why do we keep telling her that we're gonna find him?" Sam asked. "I don't think she believes it Dean." He expelled a heavy breath wearily. "I don't think I do either."

"Yeah, well," Dean tried to say it out loud so that he could believe it, too. "I haven't given up hope."

Sam sat back, confused, thinking, then looked at Dean almost accusingly. "I don't get it. He was here and you couldn't wait to get rid of him and now you're hoping he comes back?"
Dean's mouth was in a hard line. "It's complicated, okay?" he asked, then cut the subject short with a cranky comment as the rain beat down even harder than before. "This storm is friggin' ridiculous. *Come on!*"

Ahead, he could see a glowing sign, and whatever it was, Dean had already decided he was pulling in. This rain was getting dangerous, plus he was going about ten miles an hour. Was it a gas station? Store? Even better. "*Yes,* motel," Dean said mostly to himself, pulling into the parking lot as he recognized the structure. "*No wait—* hotel! Nice."

Sam protested. "Dean, we shouldn't stop."

Pulling into a parking space, Dean gave him a crazy look. "What, you wanna wash away with the flood? No thanks." He squinted through the watery, distorted windshield. "Looks nice, too."

Sam looked perturbed, but Dean ignored him, turned around in his seat, stretching backwards, shaking his sister by the shoulder. "*Hey! Sleeping beauty! Wake up.*"

She started awake, disoriented for a second, and then she saw him, looked at him grumpily, silently, groggy. Dean tried not to show how he really felt—sad as hell—because her silence these days was like all those years ago when she'd been mute. He always had to take two steps ahead back then, guess what she was thinking, because she wasn't saying. Today was the same, and he tried to cheer her up. "I know, I know. I suck," he said jokingly. No response, she just rubbed an eye with the heel of her hand. "You can go back to sleep once we're inside, okay?" She glanced at him, then squinted out of her window peevishly. Dean could see how much she needed the sleep he'd just woken her from. Sam glanced sidelong at Dean in mild disapproval, unhappy about stopping.

One big, happy family, Dean thought cynically as he turned back around to face forward. He briefly looked into the rearview mirror and saw Alex glancing discreetly at her cell phone. He knew she was checking it for missed calls. She did that constantly now, and Dean didn't have the heart to tell her she should probably stop checking… that Cas probably wasn't coming back, that she shouldn't expect a call.

*No. Not yet.* He wasn't going to give up hope on that just yet—he refused. He cleared his throat and peered up at the hotel sign, *The Elysian Fields Hotel.* The place looked really ritzy, like they might have a kickass buffet inside. He was starving. He looked at the main entryway—it was close, but they would probably get soaked running through the downpour.

He cracked a crooked grin at his siblings, trying to get them to lighten up, cheer up. "Now or never, chumps," Dean said, and grabbed the door handle, preparing to get very, very soaked.
Three dripping-wet Winchesters burst into the hotel lobby, catching their breath as they came in out of the pouring rain. As soon as they were inside, they could see that the place was nice. No, scratch that, it wasn't just nice—it was downright swanky. The lobby was sleek and modern, artfully lit—a stone fireplace was roaring across from the front desk. Fluffy white area rugs stood out against the expensive looking hardwood floor, the lounge area looked like it was straight out of an Ikea catalogue. There was a full-service bar across from the check-in counter, and beside it there was a sign that said Pool & Gym This Way.

Dean made an impressed face, hardly believing their luck. "Wow... nice digs for once."

He looked at his siblings who both appeared to be thrown off by how nice.

Lounge music played softly, there were a lot of people milling around. Apparently the storm had drawn a crowd. Dean hefted his bag a little better and then led the way to the desk where the attendant glanced up at them and gave them a quick smile.

"Checking in?" he asked. He was a small, pale man with dark hair swept neatly into a side part.

"Yeah," Dean said, leaning a wet elbow onto the counter.

"Just a moment," the attendant—Chet according to his name tag—said. He typed rapidly on the keyboard of his computer, and Dean looked around again, unable to believe how great this place was. Also, how full of people.

"Busy night huh?" he asked.

"Any port in a storm, I guess," Chet said, chuckling pleasantly as he slid some paperwork over to Dean. "If you could just fill this out, please."

"Yeah." Dean took the form, started on it, filled in total lies, laughing at his own inside joke. Name? Fred Gwynne. Address? 1313 Mockingbird Lane. Beside him, he heard Sam give one of those little huffs and he knew what his brother was thinking: grow up, Dean.

Dean slid the paperwork back across the counter with some cash, and Chet looked at him closely, like he saw something out of order. "Sir, I think you got a little..." he pointed to Dean's neck. "Shaving nick there." He produced a tissue out of nowhere with a flourish, smiling genially, motioning for him to take the tissue. Dean did, a little confused—he hadn't shaved in a day or two, how would he have a nick? But sure enough, the white tissue came away from his neck with a bright red blood stain. What the hell...?

"Your room key," Chet said, holding out a dangling silver key.

Dean reached out and took it, a little out of sorts. "Oh, uh. Thanks."

Beside him, he felt Alex moving oddly, tensing up—he looked and saw that she was yawning widely. He chuckled briefly, and looked back at Chet. "Hey, you wouldn't happen to have a coffee shop, would you?"
"Buffet," Chet said, and indicated left of himself. "All you can eat. Best pie in the tri-state area." Dean felt like the clouds had opened and sunshine was pouring through—this guy was speaking his language! "And coffee, too, of course, for the young lady." Chet said, and winked, good humored. Grumpy as hell, Alex just gave him a look like *bite me*.

"Food," Dean said urgently to his two siblings. Need he say more? He led the way into the dining room, too hungry to care about going to their room first to change clothes. What awaited them at the buffet was better than Dean could have imagined. It was like out of a dream: colorful, fresh food lined the buffet—he saw fried chicken, ribs, chicken-fried steak, burger and hot dog fixings, several kinds of pasta, salad, corn on the cob, rolls, french fries, an assortment of fresh fruits, grilled vegetables—there was a dessert bar, too. He admired the spread almost lovingly, turned his head toward Sam slightly but not taking his eyes off the food. "Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?" he asked.

Dean piled a plate high for himself, saw the coffee station, and stopped by it before going to the table Alex had sat down at. She seemed tired and blank, she hadn't gotten any food, she was hunched over the table like a friggin' old lady. With a thunk, Dean set down a mug of coffee in front of her and she looked up at him, a little startled. "Drink up, sleepyhead," he commanded cheerfully, trying to kickstart her. "And sit up straight, would you?" She straightened a little, but it was a weak effort. Dean felt his heart sink a little. He was waiting for her to come back to herself, to start being normal again. But from the look on her face, today didn't seem like the day it was going to happen.

She looked at the coffee he'd brought her unenthusiastically, watched the steam rise, vapid.

"Hey, you want me to get you something?" Dean asked, motioning toward the buffet. Her eyes slid up to follow the direction he was gesturing towards. "They have mac 'n cheese…" he said, wiggling his eyebrows at her. It one of her favorite things to eat, had been since she'd been a kid, but she just looked down at the table.

"Not hungry," she muttered, and he could barely hear or understand her. Dean sighed and gave up, not sure if he were frustrated or hopeless or mad. He went to go get himself some water. What was he supposed to do, cram food down her throat? He couldn't *force* her to eat. Was he supposed to tell her *stop being depressed or else*?! The most worrying thing, to Dean, was her withdrawn nature. It was sort of like she was refusing to let herself feel the pain she obviously carried. And sooner or later it was all going to explode out of her and cause some major damage.

Maybe he was a fool, but Dean was hoping that Cas would show back up and everything would just be... *okay* again. He did a mental double-take at himself. Like it had *ever* been okay to begin with. Dean scoffed at himself, shook his head.

When he came back to the table with two waters—one for him, one for her—Sam was sitting beside his twin, picking at a plateful of vegetables and chicken. Alex had a dinner roll—Sam must have given it to her—she was chewing on it autonomously, completely glazed over. Dean and Sam exchanged a look, said nothing. Dean forcefully pushed his thoughts aside and dug in to his food, forgetting about everything except how good the gravy slathered chicken-fried steak was. For a minute, the savory, crunchy heaven on his fork helped him ignore he all the things that were wrong with the world.

Sam scrolled around on his phone, trying to find out about where this storm front had come from. His cell barely got a signal in here and he was getting fed up with the unresponsive internet access. He spent several minutes trying to get it to work with no luck. The page would load halfway or not at all. Sitting across from him, Dean finished inhaling his dinner and got up, gleefully exclaiming
something about how many kinds of pie they had here. Sam was a little annoyed. How could Dean think about pie at a time like this?

Beside him, Alex shifted a little, set the half-eaten roll down. "You okay?" Sam asked her. He set his phone down for a second, turning to look at his twin carefully. Her hair was damp, sticking down to her head flatly. She looked pitiful, like a wet kitten, but more than that, she looked exhausted, and he knew she could use more sleep—hell, so could he. Glancing at the unfinished roll, he wished she would eat more. He was almost at the point of pulling a Dean and forcefully demanding you finish that roll now, but he held off, knowing that wouldn't end well. "Do you wanna go to the room?" He asked her. "I can get the key from Dean if you're too tired to stay out here."

She turned her head toward him a little, she shook it no and looked up at the exit, where some of the hotel lobby was visible. Her eyes narrowed just a little, and Sam couldn't tell what she was thinking. She had both of her hands in her jacket pockets. They hadn't left her pockets much this past month at all, come to think of it. "No I'm… I think I'll go check out the pool." She said. She stood, her chair scraping the floor loudly.

Sam did a slight double-take, looking up at her. "The pool?" he asked, confused. "To swim?"

"No, not to swim," she said, as if his suggestion was ridiculous. She walked off, didn't take her bag—he was pretty sure she didn't own a swimsuit, anyway.

"Don't wander off," he called after her, a little uneasy for reasons he wasn't sure of. He didn't want to crowd her, but he also wasn't sure if she should be alone right now. He fought with himself for a few seconds, not sure if he should follow her or what. You're being ridiculous, Sam. Anxious, he returned to scrolling through his phone, trying to get the damn weather page to load. He needed to do something, anything useful.

He was going stir crazy, every day that passed he had to fight himself not to give up completely. That, and every day that passed he remembered what Dean had told him in the panic room: that Dad met Alex in Heaven and he'd said something about Azazel's plans… how the danger wasn't past. Total dread filled Sam every time he thought about that. Because all those years ago… the dreams he'd had… he shuddered slightly. He thought he didn't have to worry anymore. Quickly it flashed across his mind: scorching flames, a soul-shattering scream, the most wretched and vile feeling he'd ever felt. And he suppressed the memories of the dreams fast, too afraid to dwell on them any longer. He didn't want to remember, not even for a second. He didn't want to believe that the dreams Azazel had put inside of him could ever come true. You need to tell Dean, the still, small voice of his conscience said. And then immediately after, you can never tell Dean—you can never tell anyone. Just make sure what you saw never happens. Sam's teeth were grinding together painfully. How?

"She go to the bathroom?" Dean's voice startled Sam, he looked up to see his brother arriving back with a plate full of pie.

"No, uh, the pool," Sam said, distracted, and trying to refocus on his phone.

Dean paused, like he'd misheard. "The pool. Okay…" Dean sat down, stared at Sam for a couple beats. "Sam, unpucker, man. Eat something, Jesus! Both of you on the air diet or something?"

Sam ignored the comment. "We should hit the road, Dean."

"In this storm?" Dean protested. "What, it's, it's—"
"It's biblical," Sam cut him off, setting his phone down a little harder than he needed to. "I-it's friggin' Noah's ark out there, and we're eating pie."

Dean looked at Sam closely, and Sam disliked how clearly his brother could see through him. "How many hours of sleep did you get this week?" Dean asked, cutting to the chase. "What? Three? Four? You're tired, you're jumpy, you're not taking care of yourself." He shook his head, displeased. "You and Alex, I swear." He huffed heavily, tried a different approach when he saw Sam's face. He tried to be a little more understanding. "Bobby's got his feelers out, okay? We have talked with every hoodoo man and root woman in twelve states."

That might have been true, but Sam wasn't going to be okay until they had answers. "Yeah, well, I'm not giving up," he said, and Dean reacted viscerally.

"Nobody's giving up," Dean said, anger flashing across his features. "Especially me." A tense silence stretched between them. "We're gonna find a way to beat the devil, okay? Soon. I can feel it." Dean was getting a little excitable, but almost in an indignant way. "And you know what else? We will find Cas, we'll get Adam back somehow. But you are no good to me burnt out. I got one sibling making life hard for me right now, I don't need you to pull the same woe-is-me crap."

Sam looked at Dean, slightly huffy, getting ready to mouth off—but Dean held up a hand for silence, seeming to regret his choice of words. "I only meant..." he said slowly, softly, "that I need you to be strong, Sammy. Cuz she's falling apart. And some days I think I am too, you know? So... don't you do that too." There was a vulnerability there, a deep sad uncertainty that Dean didn't show very often. And Sam was scared by it. But he tried to look supportive and agreeable.

"Yeah," he said, trying a little smile even though he was feeling less sure and stable than ever. "Yeah, okay."

Dean, back to his lofty, good-humored self, spread his hands, a little sly smile on his face. "Come on, we've actually got the night off for once. Let's try to enjoy it. There's like twelve kinds of pies up there, I mean, jackpot!" He chuckled and sliced his fork down into his pie, carefree for the moment.

The hotel had an Olympic sized indoor swimming pool and a heated spa next to it. Several guests splashed around in the pale blue water—there were some young kids in the shallow end with a woman who must have been their mom, there was an elderly man doing laps across the deep end. The room was warm and humid, echoed loudly, smelled like chlorine.

She thought it would have been empty in here, and it wasn't. But it was empty enough. Alex checked her phone, pacing along the back edge of the room. She had this insane paranoia that the second she put her phone down or wasn't paying attention, he would call. So she checked it obsessively. She called his number several times a day. It went straight to voicemail each time. It had been thirty-two days he had been gone.

She selected his name off of her contacts list, hit call, her stomach dropped in the most agonizing anticipation she had ever experienced—hope that instead of clicking straight over to voicemail, it would ring this time. That he would answer.

Click. Her heart sank. "You have reached the voicemail box of..." said the smooth, robotic voice of the voicemail system, and then the voice Alex loved, missed, needed to hear again played: "I don't understand—why do you want me to say my name?" She shut her eyes, the sound of his voice doing painful things to her. Beep, beep, beeeep. The keypad buttons he'd hit as he'd tried to end the recording. Her face contorted painfully as another, final beep sounded, indicating that she record a
message. She hit end, stared at the pool unseeingly, stock still. She heard a kid laughing. Splashing. Someone calling *cannonball*!

Angels... weren't supposed to die. And all this time, *he* had been afraid *she* would be the one to die. Maybe somehow it got switched. She thought about the hollow, broken shell of a man Castiel had been in 2014. She understood now why he'd been so destroyed. She felt that way, too.

She remembered once reading *it's better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all.* What a fucking bunch of *shit.* It would be better not to feel this pain. It would be better not to long for something you could never get back. It would be better if Castiel had never met her at all—he'd probably still be *alive.* It would have been better to have never loved him at all.

And at the same time her spirit screamed that knowing him, opening herself up to being loved like he'd loved her... was the best thing that had ever happened to her, ever. She thought of him warm and against her, showing her love in a way words didn't measure—she thought of him protecting her, guarding her, always trying to understand and help her. She loved him *then* and she loved him *still* and it ripped her in half.

So why did it have to end like this? Why would she fall so deeply in love only to have it ripped away when it had barely just begun? She realized she was growing short of breath.

The answers didn't come to the questions her entire soul strained for. In her hand, she squeezed her phone so hard that some of the plastic casing cracked.

She couldn't bear to think of him too much or she felt like she would break apart. So she shoved her feelings away, stomping them down before she could really *feel* them.

Alex looked at the pool again, and was suddenly struck by the utter silence. Everyone was gone. The pool was empty and still, the entire place was empty, deserted. No one was left. *What the hell?* Had she spaced out again?

There was a sudden, sharp little sting on the side of her neck and she jumped, startled, a hand clapping to the place where the pain originated. She felt something wet underneath her fingers, drew her hand away—saw a small amount of blood.

Suddenly feeling a lot more alert than she had for a long time, Alex put her phone away, looked around suspiciously, her heart hammering, her adrenaline picking up. Quickly, quietly, she slipped out of the pool room.

Dean and Sam walked down the hallway a couple floors up, scanning room number plaques for room 102. When they found the room, they heard a loud giggle—in front of the doorway to the room next to theirs was a very excited couple was making out—the woman giggled again, *loudly,* and Dean chuckled, leered, pointed, as the guy pulled his jacket off, bumping the woman up against the door simultaneously.

"What are you, *twelve?"* Sam asked at Dean's juvenile reaction, but he couldn't hide his little amused smile either.

Dean gave Sam a good natured scoff as he unlocked their room. "I'm young at heart!"

The door swung open and Dean whistled in low awe as the two of them went in. "Wow," he commented, looking around at the deluxe room, well pleased. "Look at this. We're like Rockefellers." There were two beds made up with expensive looking red duvets, and each bed had a little candy bar nestled on the pillow. "Chocolates! Ooh." Dean picked one up, delighted, then
glanced at Sam. "You want yours?"

Sam shook his head—he was looking around in increasing puzzlement. He had a weird feeling. "Knock yourself out… think I'm gonna go find Alex."

Dean's next discovery halted Sam. "Whoa." Dean picked up the little information display that was on the nightstand. It was mounted to a wooden block, and Dean held it out to Sam. "'Casa Erotica Thirteen' on demand." From Dean's excited expression, you'd think he'd discovered a lost treasure. Sam scoffed slightly, then stopped, deep in thought and Dean's smiled faded. "What?"

Sam shrugged, gestured vaguely. "Isn't this place... in the middle of nowhere?"

Dean was uninterested. "So?"

"So... what's a four-star hotel doing on a no-star highway?"

Dean shrugged, obviously thinking don't know, don't care. On the other side of the wall of their hotel room, they could hear the couple again—a high pitched shriek of laughter and then a pleasurable moan—Dean snickered again, ever the mature one—they heard a thump, and then there was a very, very loud thud—and then the wall shivered, shook—the flatscreen TV almost fell off the wall as it cracked and plaster dust went flying. Sam and Dean looked at each other wordlessly, then hurried out of the room and over to the room next door—which, coincidentally, was labelled Honeymoon Suite.

Sam opened the door, they barged in, only to find—nothing. No one. The room was empty. The large king-sized bed had rumpled blankets on it, but other than that, there was no sign that anyone had even been in the room at all.

"Hello?" Dean called, walking into the room slowly, cautious.

Sam checked the bathroom. "No one," he said as he came back out.

Dean had knelt down at the foot of the bed, was picking something up from the shag throw carpet—a silver engagement ring with a solitaire diamond. "Something's not right here," he muttered as he stood up, looking at the ring closely.

"You think?" Sam whispered tensely, looking around nervously.

Dean pocketed the engagement ring, his earlier happy-go-lucky mood completely gone. "Okay, you know what? We need to find Alex, pronto."

"Agreed." Sam nodded, swallowed, looking around the room and then following Dean out.

Once they were in the hallway, they saw a familiar face heading toward them—their sister, and she looked—different. She looked both alert and present, and the brothers paused as she marched up to them. "Something weird is happening here," she hissed, whispering, seeming to be as suspicious as them.

"Hey, what happened to your neck?" Sam asked, seeing a small bloody gash on her neck.

"That's what I wanna know," she said. "Also, why everyone just... disappeared from the pool all the sudden."

Dean and Sam exchanged a wary glance. "Disappeared, huh?" Dean asked.
"Yeah, you guys seen anything weird?" she asked.

Dean chuckled sort of cynically, he put an arm around her, turning her around the other way. "Walk with me," he said.

"The, uh, the room next to ours—the couple that are, uh, joined at the lips—have you seen them?" Dean asked Chet. They were in the lobby once more.

"Mr. and Mrs. Logan—the... honeymooners?" Chet asked. He typed on his keyboard yet again, almost too fast to be humanly possible. The screen was turned too far away for Alex to see what he was typing. He turned back to them, smiled politely. "They checked out. Is something the matter?"

"They... checked out?" Sam repeated.

"Mm-hmm. Mm, just now."

"Really? It sort of seemed like they were, uh..." he paused for meaning. "...in the middle of something."

Chet shrugged deeply, that smile of his never leaving his face.

"Yeah, it's kind of weird for honeymooners to, uh, check out without this." Dean held up the engagement ring, and Chet looked mildly surprised.

"Oh, dear," the hotel attendant said, and then reached out, took the ring from Dean. "I'll just put that right in the lost and found. Don't you worry. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

Dean was looking at the guy with thinly veiled mistrust. "Uh, no. No, we're good."

Chet's eyes slid from Dean to Sam to Alex, and his smile was becoming downright unnerving. "Super fantastic!"

All three Winchesters gave him an attempt at you betcha smiles, but as they turned around, put their backs to Chet, each of their expressions became more like what the fuck is going on?

"Creepy," Sam commented in a low voice as soon as they were a few steps off and out of earshot.

"Twilight zone creepy," his sister put in.

"Yeah, just a little bit," Dean agreed quietly, and glanced back at Chet, who was going through some papers, his back to them. "All right, well. I'll scope out the joint, you two keep an eye on Norman Bates over here." Dean seemed a little annoyed. "I mean, one night off. Is that too much to ask?" He sighed, resigned, said "watch your backs," as he walked away.

Sam shrugged, Alex sat down on one of the couches and picked up a magazine, pretended to read it, watching Chet carefully as Sam paced around, leaned against the fireplace, seeming to be really nerve-wracked overall. A couple of hotel guests came and went, about five minutes passed. Chet unexpectedly went out from behind the desk and headed down a hallway. Sam straightened from where he'd been leaned against the fireplace, Alex stood up.

"I'll follow him, you check out the computers," he said, and she nodded. Sam hurried off at a brisk pace, following Chet down a side hallway and then around a corner.

Alex looked around, made sure no one was watching as she approached the front desk. She went to the main computer, hit the space bar, expecting the screen to wake up. Nothing happened. She
looked around at the back of the computer, realizing that it wasn't plugged in to anything. The hell? There were a few more computers lining the check-in counter, and she realized none of them were plugged in, either—like they were just props or something. She picked up one of the phones, heard nothing. No dial tone, nothing.

Getting weiried out and fast, Alex turned, glancing around before she began to page through the files that Chet had been looking through a minute ago—and she quickly discovered that they were all blank sheets of paper. This was getting creepy as hell, and Alex stuck the files back in the box they'd been in, came out from behind the counter… and realized that no one else was around. The dining room, which she could see when she craned her head to the left, was empty. The bar across the way, empty and unattended. Something felt very, very wrong. She went the way Sam had gone, quiet, feeling like she needed to be careful, like she needed to be discreet.

She rounded a corner and she and Sam practically ran into each other.

"Ah geez, you almost gave me a heart attack," Sam said, and Alex looked around worriedly.

"Where's Chet?" she whispered.

Sam shrugged, seeming to be at a loss. "I dunno, he disappeared, then I got this." He pointed at a little nick on his neck and Alex looked at him funny. The elevator dinged beside them.

"Yo, bozos," came a familiar voice, and they looked to see Dean coming out of the elevator. "No EMF to speak of, but there were elephants. Well. An elephant. Singular."

The twins looked at each other, then Dean, simultaneously. "What?" they chorused.

He shrugged, explaining matter-of-factly. "I was walking past some room, I saw an elephant, I looked again, it was just a dude."

He began to walk back toward the lobby and his siblings were hot on his heels. Alex was looking at him like he might have lost his mind. "So… you think you saw an elephant."

"I did see an elephant," he insisted.

"An elephant?" Sam repeated. "In the hotel."

Dean gave them both growing impatient looks. "Yes."

"Like, an elephant elephant?" Sam asked.

"Should I say it in Spanish?" Dean asked, mildly irritable. "Yeah, it was an elephant. Like, full-on Babar."

"Okay. So. Elephant. What the hell is…" Sam trailed off as they came into the ghost town lobby. It was eerie, and the lounge music was still playing, making it eerier. His voice dropped a couple notches in volume, he seemed to think of something. "I haven't seen anyone but us in like, at least ten minutes. Where is everyone?" Sam glanced around, then went over and tried to lobby doors—but they didn't open.

"Let me guess—it's locked." Dean was grim and on edge now. "So what—the roaches check in, they don't check out?"

"Think about how we got here," Sam said slowly, dawning realization in his voice. "That detour on I-Ninety? The friggin' hurricane?"
"You saying we were led here?" Dean asked.

"Like rats in a maze."

"But by who?" Alex asked, and she was feeling a familiar sick worry in her stomach again. "Angels? Demons?"

"At this point, no telling," Dean said. "What I wanna know is where did all the guests go." He looked around, trying to decide what course of action to take next. "Come on. We're gonna check the kitchen. Maybe some staff is still in there."

They went through the empty dining room, noting some tables weren't cleared off, some plates looked unfinished, like the people who had been eating had left in the middle of their meals unexpectedly.

Not good.

The Winchesters went into the kitchen and found that it was deserted, too. There was a huge pot of red liquid bubbling on the stove and Dean went closer to it, cautiously. "Please be tomato soup. Please be tomato soup…" he lifted up the ladle, and with it came human eyeballs. The three of them all turned away, queasy, making grossed out sounds as Dean declared "Motel hell."

"Yeah that's disgusting," Alex muttered even as Sam was looking with interest at the freezer—it was locked, and he wondered why, walked over to it slowly. He peered into the little glass window, and suddenly jumped back when a hand slapped up against the other side of the glass.

"Help us! Get us out!" a panicked man cried—a hotel guest they had seen earlier in the dining room. Sam yanked on the handle of the freezer just in case, but it was locked tight, and he took out his lock picking kit, shakily jammed one of the picks into the lock.

"Hurry up!" Dean urged.

Sam turned to look at his brother. "I'm going as fast as I…" he trailed off. Oh no. "...as I can."

Dean recognized the look on his brother's face and his shoulders fell slightly. "There's somebody behind me, isn't there?"

Dean was grabbed roughly by strong, large hands, yanked backwards, even as a tall black man darted forward and pulled Sam away from the freezer.

"You're coming with us," said Dean's captor—a short, overweight Asian man.

Sam was confused, looking around the kitchen for Alex. "Where's—" he started.

"Shh," Dean cut him off sharply, giving him a look. He wasn't sure how, but she must have gotten away or hidden. "Easy, easy!" Dean complained, as the guy holding him began to shove him forward.

The two brothers were manhandled out of the kitchen, across the dining room, and into the grand ballroom, where a roomful of elegantly dressed men and women looked at the new arrivals curiously. The fancy ballroom was set up for a banquet, two long tables facing each other. An ice sculpture of a dolphin was on a back table, elegant glasses filled with champagne surrounded it.

Sam and Dean stared, not so much at the room but the people in it—the name tags on the people in the room were very familiar and disconcerting—Ganesh, Odin, Kali, Baron Samedi, Baldur, Meili
"Something tells me this isn't a Shriner convention," Dean said, breathless.

From back behind a partition, Chet—now wearing a name tag that said Mercury—wheeled a serving platter in. He stopped and lifted up the silver covering from the platter to reveal a severed human head surrounded by entrails and vegetables. "Dinner is served!" Mercury announced, and there was polite applause from the rooms occupants even as Sam and Dean shrank back in horrified disgust. A sudden blinding spotlight came on, and the brothers squinted, jumped. "Ladies and Gentleman, our guests of honor have arrived," said the man with the name tag Baldur. He was a handsome man looking to be in his mid-thirties. He work an expensive suit; he had dark hair and eyes, strong features.

Sam and Dean looked at each other, shocked and unsure what was going on. "If everyone will please take their seats," Baldur continued in his softly accented voice, picking up a flute of champagne, smiling charmingly. "We'll begin."

The men who held Sam and Dean shoved them roughly into chairs at the end of the table. Dean gave Sam the be cool sign, and the two of them waited, watched, vigilant.

Everyone sat down, there was the low buzz of conversation. A woman in a striking red dress stared at Dean and Sam with a cool, superior expression on her face. She looked of middle eastern descent—she was very beautiful and young, alluring—but there was something distinctly terrible and ominous about her. Her name tag read Kali.

Baldur clicked a fork to his champagne glass, calling for quiet. "Ladies and gentleman, thank you for coming. In all my centuries, I never thought I'd see this." He had a pleased smile on his face. "This many gods under one roof."

"Gods?" Sam repeated in a whisper only Dean could hear. The brothers were looking at each other like holy shit... not good.

"Now," Baldur continued, looking around at the occupants of the tables. "before we get down to brass tacks, some ground rules. No slaughtering each other. Curb your wrath." He smiled almost coyly now. "Oh, and uh, keep your hands off the local virgins. We're, trying to keep a low profile here."

Beside Dean, Sam shrunk down in his chair a little as his eyes flickered frantically over the occupants of the room. "Oh, we are so... so screwed," he murmured.

"We all know why we're here," Baldur said. "The Judeo-Christian apocalypse looms over us. I know we've all had our little disagreements in the past... but the time has come to put those aside and look toward the future. Because if we don't, we won't have one. Now we do have two very valuable bargaining chips." Baldur looked straight down the middle of the table at Dean and Sam, pointed a finger. "Michael and Lucifer's vessels."

Everyone at the tables turned to look at them, and suddenly Sam and Dean understood... these gods meant business.

Baldur paused, suddenly narrowing his eyes at the boys, then looking to Kali as if something were not as he had expected. "I thought there was a sister."

"There is," Kali confirmed in a low, bored voice. "But who cares? She's not important. She's not a vessel."

Mercury stood up halfway. "I can go get her, if you'd like."
"No," Kali said, her voice carrying more commanding this time. "Like I said. She's not important, at least not right now. I only bound her too because I don't want her running away to get help or some nonsense like that."

"Bound her?" Dean asked quietly to Sam, who shook his head, unsure.

But just as soon as Sam had shaken his head I don't know, he grew still in realization. "Our blood," he said, thinking about how they had all gotten little nicks on their necks. "Somehow... our blood."

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One second she was in the kitchen gagging over the thought of blood soup, the next she was suddenly in a random hotel room. She turned around and her eyes went wide in recognition when she saw who stood there smiling at her idiomatically.

"Hiya!" Gabriel said.

"You!" Alex exclaimed accusingly.

He shrugged in false modesty, his arms wide. "Me!"

Alex grabbed the first thing her hand found—a wooden Casa Erotica display piece—and threw it at his head.

Gabriel ducked it easily, laughed. "Hey, easy tiger! You forgetting something?"

"Oh no, I haven't forgotten a damn thing!" she told him angrily, remembering what he'd made her go through the last time she'd seen him.

He rolled his eyes dramatically. "No not that." He looked at her chidingly, told her what she'd forgotten: "I'm an angel... you can't hurt me, silly."

What he said stilled her, she felt a great deal of her anger fade away. "That's not true. Angels can get hurt."

Acknowledging that she had a point, Gabriel pulled a thoughtful face. "Touché." He smiled at her almost sympathetically. "Truce?"

Alex looked at him weirdly. Was he high? A truce? "No. Why did you pull me out of the kitchen?"

The second she asked it, a thought struck her; she suddenly felt afraid that she knew exactly what was going on, and she looked around the room, trying to figure out if it were real or not. "Is this more of your fucking mind game crap right now? This hotel?" She grabbed him by his jacket demandingly. "What did you do with Sam and Dean?"

"Whoa, whoa!" Gabriel looked almost insulted, and his face wrinkled up in distaste. "I didn't touch them. Uh-uh. I'm not behind this. In fact, just the opposite." His eyebrows raised up, he spread his arms out widely, he grinned and his eyes twinkled. "I'm here to rescue you."

Alex scowled at him and she let go, suspicious and sarcastic. "Is this the part where I'm supposed to say you look a little short for a storm trooper?"

Gabriel gave her a look like he thought she was being cute, he put his hands on his hips. "Ah, two nerd points for you." His smile faded. "All joking aside, your brothers are in serious loads of ca-ca right now and the only one who can help any of you is me."

"What are you talking about?" Alex asked, getting more and more frustrated by the second.
"Downstairs, at this very moment," Gabriel said, walking the space in front of her, "a bunch of petty little gods are gathered to sell your brothers, the 'all-important vessels,' to the highest bidder." He paused, shrugged, made a squinty, thoughtful face. "Sell them or kill them."

"Gods?" She repeated.

"Yup! Gods. May have heard of a few of them. Odin, Kali, Ganesh, Mercury—the gang's all here!"

"Wait, Ganesh… the god with the elephant head?" Alex's eyes slid down at to the side in thought. So Dean wasn't nuts. "Huh."

"That's the one." Gabriel chuckled. "Down in the ballroom there's pretty much every god a kid could ever hope to meet. All except the one who we'd all really like to see, right?" Gabriel sighed with dramatic, false sadness. "My dad's a no show, as usual."

"So you're saying a bunch of super-powered deities have Sam and Dean and you're… here to save us?" Not buying it, Alex narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

Gabriel chuckled. "Do I need a reason?"

Alex looked at the archangel like he was a moron. "Hmm. Let me think. Yes."

Gabriel threw his hands up in exasperation. "Why do I always have to explain everything?" He complained dramatically.

Alex folded her arms, set her gaze on him condescendingly. "Really?" She asked, because he had to be some kind of idiot to ask her that.

He rolled his eyes again, huffed. "Okay, you know what, I'm sorry," he said mockingly. "What I did to you was wrong."

Alex gave him a bitch face that would have made Sam proud. "And the academy award for biggest jackass goes to you."

Gabriel looked at her with a small amount of genuine frustration now. "Look, I did what I did. Okay? And now, I'm here to help you." He shrugged, nonchalant. "I have my reasons, and they're legit, believe it or not." He canted his head to the side. "Alex, I grabbed you up outta that kitchen before those pious dickholes could get to you, doesn't that count for something?"

She looked at him in suspicion, trying to figure out his angle. In turn, he looked at her with something akin to fascination or maybe that was contempt. She couldn't tell. "You don't trust easy, do you?"

A cold, cynical little smile came across her face. "Mm. Not the best idea in my line of work."

Gabriel became annoyed and blunt. "Look. Here's the deal. Those gods down there, sure, they bound you and your brothers by blood but the punchline is that you—" he poked a finger into her shoulder roughly, "you're not important to them. It's Sam and Dean they want. So right now, you and I have an opportunity."

"You and I?" Alex repeated.

"Yeah!" Gabriel gave her a crazy look. "You gotta be nuts if you think I'm gonna mount this rescue effort by myself!"
Alex leaned a little closer for emphasis. "And you gotta be nuts if you think I'm gonna work with"—she poked him in the shoulder just like he'd done to her a second ago—"you."

Gabriel looked a little surprised. "You're gonna go up a bunch of gods by yourself then?"

Alex shrugged, made a face. "Why friggin' bother? Everyone keeps telling me this is how it ends. So let it end." She was surprised to hear herself say it out loud, and surprised at how little she felt when she actually said it. "Let it end," she said again, realizing she was perfectly okay with the thought of everything just being over and done with, finally.

Gabriel looked like he'd never heard so much bullshit in his life. "Oh my dad you're pathetic. Get over yourself! Oh geez boo hoo. What is this, Twilight?! Your little boyfriend disappears and you fall apart and lose the will to live?! Come on!"

At the mention of him, Alex bristled. "You know what, isn't this kind of what you wanted? Weren't you telling them to… 'play their roles' just a few months back?"

"I've had a change of heart," Gabriel said simply, and came a little closer, intense. "You're in over your head here Alex. You can listen to what I'm trying to tell you and we can get your brothers the hell outta dodge… or you can sit up here feeling sorry for yourself and not doing a damn thing to change it."

She said nothing, trying to control herself. Everything he was saying was making her so frigging mad. She just kept her mouth clamped shut, looked away.

Gabriel seemed angry, too. "You know, I don't remember thinking the story would end this way, that the heroine would just… give up and piss away all the hard work she and her family put in." He was judging her harshly, and it came through in his tone, words, and demeanor. "I thought you were supposed to be a strong female character, Al."

She looked at him indignantly. "This isn't a book, this my life and it's hard as hell and you know nothing about what you're saying to me!" She snapped loudly. "What I'm going through!"

"Finally, some emotion! Geez Louise!" Gabriel exclaimed, back to his goofy, stupid personality. But then he reigned it in a little. "Hey, for the record though… that's where you're wrong. I've loved and lost, just like you. My dad? Gone, absent. He doesn't give a shit about me. My brothers? Those two idiots are gonna end the world over their petty disagreements and daddy issues. And the one I love? Ah. Let's not even open that can of worms. So don't tell me I don't know what you're talking about. Because I do."

"Oh good for you, Gabe," Alex said rudely, making a face.

Gabriel gave her a sort of suggestive look. "By the way? It was high time Cas got laid if you ask me." At the sharp, angry look she gave him, he raised his hands as if in surrender. "I'm just saying!" He smiled, raised his eyebrows. "And hey, you know what? He's a tricky little bastard. Maybe even trickier than me. I wouldn't be surprised if he shows back up again."

Alex wanted to punch him in the face, because that's what her brothers kept saying—that Cas would come back—and she couldn't take hearing that false hope much more because every time she heard it, she believed it less. "Shut up," she growled, trying to control herself and not think about him. "Don't talk about him to me."

"Hey, sorry," Gabriel said, chuckling now. "Didn't mean to overstep my bounds."

"Okay, you know what, go away Gabriel!" Alex barked, getting riled up. "I'm not helping you
"Come on, Alex," Gabriel said, looking at her in growing condescension. "You're gonna let those gods do whatever to your brothers? I'm disappointed!"

Alex gave him an oh please look. "Like I care about how you feel."

Gabriel sighed with an exaggerated huff, supremely annoyed. "Well, didn't wanna have to do this but…" Gabriel suddenly slapped her across the face—not hard, but startlingly. "Snap out of it!" he commanded.

"Ouch, hey!" Alex exclaimed, a hand on her stinging cheek. And without even thinking, she hauled off and slapped him right back.

He didn't even blink—but it seemed to be the thought that counted. He looked shocked at what she'd done. "What was that for?!" he asked her with innocent, wounded eyes.

"You slapped me!" Alex told him.

"You're damn right I did, did it work? Did it knock some sense into you?" She said nothing, and Gabriel pointed at her authoritatively. "Listen, headcase: get yourself together, get over the fact that you don't like me. There's still work to do."

Her cheek stung, her blood was pumping fast. And it was the first time in weeks that she'd felt anything like life.

"Last chance: do you want to save your brothers or not?" Gabriel asked.

Alex didn't want to work with this clown, but she realized it was probably her best option right now. She pushed her stubborn pride down, looked at Gabriel reluctantly. He was right and she hated to admit it. She knew for a fact that she couldn't go up against a bunch of gods by herself. "Just..." she sighed heavily, couldn't believe she was agreeing to this. "Tell me what to do."

"Well I say we kill them!" Zao Shen shouted loudly, banging his fist down on the table, giving Sam and Dean a furious glare.

Ganesh laughed. "Kill 'em? What, so the angels can bring the back again?"

The brothers looked at each other sidelong. This was pretty horrible, listening to a bunch of gods argue over what to do with you. "I don't know what everybody's getting so worked up about! I don't just a couple of angels having a slap fight!" Odin said, vaguely disinterested. "There's no 'Armageddon.' Everybody knows, when the world comes to an end, the Great Serpent Jörmungandr rises up, and I myself will be eaten by a big wolf!" He belly laughed.

Zao Shen rolled his eyes and sighed. "Here we go..."

"Oh yeah?" Odin asked, looking across the table at the other god with disdain. "And why is that? Because your beliefs are so much more realistic? The whole world's getting carried around on the back of a giant turtle? Ha! Give me a break!"

Zao Shen didn't react well to the insult. "Don't mock my world turtle!" he exclaimed indignantly.

"What are you gonna do about it?" Odin asked, standing suddenly, leaning across the table and staring Zao Shen down menacingly.
"I'm gonna send you packing to Valhalla!" Zao Shen retorted, wagging his finger at Odin.

"You watch your mouth when you talk to me, boy!" Odin said, angrily pointing his finger right back at Zao Shen.

Sam and Dean looked at each other, and Dean nodded slightly, they quietly got up. "Boy?" Zao Shen repeated, clearly insulted. "I'm older than you!"

The brothers moved quietly toward the door, hoping the argument would cover their escape. "No one's ever proved that," Odin said, cranky.

There was a loud crash and Sam and Dean jumped back from the chandelier that had just plummeted down without warning in front of them.

"Stay," Kali said, her low voice ominous and commanding, and the Winchesters turned back around to face her, not seeming to have a choice but to comply. She looked at them a second longer, then turned her attention to the gods and goddesses in the room. "We have to fight. The archangels—the only thing they understand is violence. This ends in blood. There is no other way, it's them, or us."

Mercury, sitting at the end of one of the tables, spoke up, raising two fingers for attention. "With... all due respect, ma'am, we haven't even tried talking to the archangels." Kali looked at him sharply, and simultaneously, Mercury began to choke up blood. He grabbed his collar, panicked and struggling.

"Kali..." Baldur said waringly, stopping the goddess from killing the other god outright.

Mercury collapsed forward, able to breathe again, and Kali seemed mildly amused, looked at Mercury coolly, who was panting and looking at the goddess in fear. She raised a single eyebrow at him. "Who asked you?"

The two doors of the grand ballroom suddenly swung open and in came Gabriel, arms stretched wide. "Can't we all just get along!" he asked with an air of grand theatre.

Dean and Sam looked at the newcomer in shock. "Ga—" Dean started, but was cut off, unable to say a thing, he looked at Sam, who seemed to be similarly incapable of speech, moving his mouth oddly, soundlessly.

Gabriel tsk-tsked at them. "Sam... Dean..." he smiled almost like he was amused. "It's always wrong place, worst time with you muttonheads, huh?"

"Loki," Baldur said, greeting Gabriel as if he knew him. Sam and Dean looked at each other in complete confusion when Baldur called him by that name.

"Bal—" Gabriel replied, pretending to be glad to see him, but it was clearly facetious. "Good seeing you too." He walked forward past Sam and Dean, made a face. "I guess my invitation got lost in the mail."

"Why are you here?" Baldur asked, ignoring the comment about Gabriel's—Loki's—invitation.

"To talk about the elephant in the room," Gabriel said, and Ganesh began to stand up, indignant. "Not you," Gabriel said, and his tone became serious. "The apocalypse. We can't stop it, gang." He held up a finger, smiled brightly. "But first things first." He turned back to Sam and Dean, gave them a little wiseass smile, looked at them pretentiously. "The adults need to have a little conversation. Check you later!" He held up his hands, snapped his fingers, and Sam and Dean were
no longer in the grand ballroom.

"Okay. Wh—did that just—holy crap!" Dean commented, totally beside himself, looking around at the hotel room they were suddenly in.

"Yeah, tell me about it," Sam said, similarly shocked. "By the way, next time I say let's keep driving, uh... let's keep driving!"

"Okay, yeah," Dean said, and put a hand on his head, looked around the room, still a little stunned. "Next time—now where the hell is our damn sister?"

"I'm right here," Alex said, and both of the brothers turned, startled, as she came into the room, slammed the door behind herself. She looked pretty sullen and was carrying a crowbar.

"What are you doing with that?" Dean asked, and she threw it down onto the floor with a loud clatter.

"Gabe had me run a little errand for him but guess what? It was a bust." She looked at both of them closely, getting apprehensive. "Is it true? A bunch of gods downstairs?"

"Yup, all arguing over whether to slit our throats or not," Dean said, feigning enthusiasm.

"Oh. Well. That's... just perfect," Alex muttered.

"Our thoughts exactly," Sam said, ran a hand through his hair, looked to Dean. "Alright, so what's our next move?"

Dean seemed a little bit out of his element. "I-I-I... I don't know. Grab those poor saps outta the freezer, I guess? Bust 'em out? Gank a few freaks along the way if we're lucky?"

"And when are you ever lucky?" Gabriel asked, and all three of the Winchesters turned fast to see that the angel was now in the room with them, seated casually in an arm chair, his leg crossed over his knee.

"You know what, bite me, Gabriel," Dean suggested gruffly.

Gabriel's eyebrows wiggled and he uncrossed his legs, stood up. "Maybe later, big boy."

Dean went to him, grabbing him with one hand. "Listen, after that shit you put my sister through, you and I are gonna have words."

"Cool your jets, Hulkster," Gabriel said, and took Dean's hand, removed it easily—Dean cringed and shrunk under the strong grip. "We don't have time for the melodrama, and anyway, she and I have spoken our piece. We're good."

Dean looked at Alex for confirmation. She just made a face, like I guess so. Dean shook his head, looking at Gabriel mistrustfully, darkly. "I should've known, man. I mean this had your stink all over it from the jump."

Gabriel looked severely let down. "Geez, you too? That's what she said. Look, I'm only gonna say it one more time: I'm not behind this. I'm the Costner to your Houston. I'm here to save your ass."

"You wanna pull us outta the fire?" Dean asked, incredulous.

"Bingo!" Gabriel confirmed. "Those guys are either gonna dust you, or use you as bait. Either way, you're uber boned."
"Wow, cuz a couple of months ago you were telling us that we need to 'play our roles.'" Dean said. "You're uber boning us!"

Gabriel shook his head, chuckled. "Ohh... the end is still nigh. Michael and Lucifer are gonna dance the lambada, but not tonight. Not here."

"And why do you care?" Dean asked suspiciously.

Gabriel looked at Alex in annoyance—Dean was asking the exact same things she had. "I don't care," Gabriel said. "But, me and Kali we, uh, had a thing. Chick was all hands. What can I say? I'm sentimental." At the untrusting, skeptical looks he was getting, Gabriel got exasperated. "I have my reasons, okay?"

"Listen, do those gods have a chance?" Sam asked quietly. "Against Satan?"

"Really, Sam?" Dean asked in surprise, turning to look back at his brother for an explanation. Alex looked startled by Sam's question.

"You got a better idea, Dean? I mean, we've been looking for options, right? Maybe this is one."

Gabriel shook his head. "It's a bad idea. Trust me, Lucifer's gonna turn them into finger paint. So let's get going while the going's good, hmm?"

He looked at Alex with an expectant smile and she just give him a sullen side eye. "We can't."

Dean didn't like to be told that kind of stuff—he stared Gabriel down threateningly. "So what do we do to get outta here?"

"Yours," Gabriel explained. "Kali had one of her little errand boys, probably Mercury, get blood from each of you. Sorry to break it to ya, but you're bound to her until the end of time... or until she decides to let you go."

Dean made a face. "Okay, yeah, whatever you gotta do. But we're gonna take the hors d'oeuvres in the freezer with us, okay?"

Gabriel shot him down immediately. "Uh no. Forget it. It's gonna be hard enough sneaking you mooks outta here."

"They called you Loki, right?" Dean asked, and Alex looked at her brother in confusion. "Which means they don't really know who you are?"

"What? Loki?" Alex asked, and looked at Gabe, who shrugged modestly. "Told you. I'm in witness protection."

Dean smiled coolly. "Okay, well then how about you do what we say, or we tell the, uh, legion of
doom about your secret identity?” He asked. "They don't seem like a real pro-angel kinda crowd."

Gabriel's confidence had faded a couple degrees. "I'll take your voices away."

"We'll write it down," Dean countered.

"I'll cut off your hands," Gabriel retorted.

"We'll do an interpretive dance," Alex put in sarcastically, drawing a sharp look from both her brother and the archangel. "Come on Gabe. Do us this one solid, help us save those people. Or... I'll stab you in the chest."

The brothers both looked at Alex sidelong at her casual but sincere threat.

Gabe chuckled. "Like that would..." he started, but trailed off when she pulled her jacket aside to reveal the hilt of an angel blade sticking out from the top of her pants.

"Don't think I won't," she told him, dead serious. And they both knew that maybe she wouldn't be fast enough to actually pull one over on him—but she was crazy enough to try it.

"You kept his blade," Gabriel said in soft surprise, his eyes flickered up to hers, he got one of those stupid smiles on his face. "And you keep it in your pants. Kinky."

At the I'm gonna kill you glare Alex shot at him, Gabe relented, seeming to be annoyed that his fun kept getting cut short. "Fine," he said. "I'll help you guys get those saps out of here, but it's a bad idea, and if this goes south—your fault, not mine."

He straightened his jacket smartly, smoothed his hair down for show. "Now. I'm gonna go lay on the charm with Kali, get the blood, zap us out. You have five minutes to get them out of the freezer."

The three Winchesters hurried downstairs, then had to duck back when they heard a man screaming—two of the gods—Zao Shen and Odin—held down one of the guys from the freezer, a cleaver held high. "No! N-No! No! Please! Gah!" Dean made to move forward, but Sam stopped him abruptly.

"It's too late," Sam whispered frantically, even as they heard the sick sound of flesh being split open. The screams stopped. The lounge music played pleasantly.

The gods took the decapitated man into the grand ballroom, presumably to eat him, and the Winchesters slipped across the open space and into the kitchen entrance. All three of them rushed to the freezer, and when those trapped inside saw them, they began to shout and pound the door. Sam again began to pick the lock—Dean and Alex were suddenly grabbed from behind in tandem and sent flying backwards across the kitchen and into some metal shelves by Zao Shen, who had blood on his mouth.

He grabbed Sam by the neck, pinning him against the freezer door. Sam struggled, protesting in painful groans as the god lifted him high until his feet dangled off of the ground. Dean was trying to get up even as Alex, a little faster to get on her feet, was whipping out Castiel's blade.

"No, Alex!” Dean protested, holding a hand out uselessly. But she took the angel blade in both hands and stabbed it hard into Zao Shen's back—the god let go of Sam, screaming in pain as Alex yanked the blade back out. He fell over, dead, and Sam nodded a brief thanks to his sister, began to work on the lock again, rushing as Dean and Alex stood side by side, tense as they waited for Sam.
Dean stared at his sister in surprise, then the blade in her hand. "That thing can kill gods?"

"Apparently it can kill that one," Alex said, but she seemed as surprised as he did, staring at the blade in her hand with an odd expression on her face.

"And what if it didn't?" Dean asked her, his tone bordering on accusing.

She shrugged, her expression and gesture seemed to ask what does it matter? "Where the hell is Gabriel?" Dean asked.

"Not coming," said a deep voice. There stood Baron Samedi, Meili, and Ganesh.

Dean, who had turned fast, was blocking the view of Alex to them—and subsequently the view of the blade in her hand—and he made a big show of standing there with his hands on his hips as he said, "Hi, guys."

And Alex knew enough to take the opportunity he was purposefully giving her to put the blade away before it was seen. So she did, shoving it back into the waistband of her jeans just in time. Ganesh grabbed her, pushed her out of the kitchen. Sam and Dean were being forced along right in front of her. They were taken into the grand ballroom where Gabriel sat, Kali staring down at him.

Great. Foiled again—his romantic conquest seemed to have failed.

"Who is this ugly small boy?" Odin asked, looking at Alex.

"The sister," Kali said simply, and Odin made a repelled face. Alex gave him a bite me face.

"How long have you known?" Gabriel asked Kali.

"Long enough," she replied quietly. There was a dangerous quality to her poised calm.

"How's the rescue going?" Dean asked the archangel sarcastically as he and his siblings were shoved down into chairs at the table this time. Gabriel gave him a dirty look. On either side of Dean, his siblings looked at him like what are we gonna do? He just shrugged helplessly, feeling cornered, backed against a wall. They were outnumbered, bad.

"Well, surprise, surprise," Kali said, addressing the occupants of the room. "The Trickster has tricked us."

"Kali, don't," Gabriel begged softly, so quietly that Alex could barely make out the words.

"You're mine now," she said to him softly, and sat on his lap at this point, seductively. "And you have something I want." She ran her hand down his chest sensually... reached into his jacket... and pulled out his angel's blade. "An archangel's blade," she said loudly. "From the archangel... Gabriel."

She stood up even as all of the gods in the room looked at Gabriel with new levels of mistrust. Gabriel seemed to realize he needed to head off his impending execution and he nervously raised his hands in mock-surrender. "Okay, okay! So I got wings, like Kotex. But that doesn't make me any less right about Lucifer."

"He's lying," Kali said. "He's a spy."

"I'm not a spy. I'm a runaway. I'm trying to save you." He leaned forward, serious and intense. "I
know my brother, Kali. He should scare the living crap out of you. You can't beat him. I've skipped ahead, seen how this story ends."

"Your story," Kali said, and there was a quiet anger underneath her placid exterior. "Not ours." She shook her head. "Westerners, I swear. The sheer arrogance." She looked at Gabriel with loathing. "You think you're the only ones on earth? You pillage and you butcher in your god's name. But you're not the only religion, and he's not the only god. And now you think you can just rip the planet apart? You're wrong. There are billions of us," she said, and she leaned closer to him. She still held his blade. "And we were here first. If anyone gets to end this world..." she put a seemingly tender hand against Gabriel's face, held his gaze. "It's me." The blade glinted as she moved it back slightly. Her voice and face softened inexplicably. "I'm sorry."

Gabriel's face filled with shocked betrayal as she stabbed him with his own sword—and maybe Alex imagined it, but it looked like the goddess had tears in her eyes. Gabriel screamed and blue light exploded from behind his eyes and out of his mouth, his entire body jolted, and he went limp, slumped in the chair. Dead.

The Winchesters looked at each other in doubled horror, realizing things were getting out of hand and fast.

"This is crazy..." Mercury said softly, even as the other gods looked on, seeming to be thinking the same thing.

Sam and Alex looked at Dean, who sat between them, freaking out—his knee was jumping up and down in nervous energy, his eyes were darting back and forth across the room. The twins looked at each other, and both of them had the same we're screwed expression on their faces.

Kali straightened away from Gabriel's limp body, her expression like stone again. "They can die," she said, and looked around the room meaningfully. "We can kill Lucifer."

Beside Alex, Dean stood up without warning. "All right you primitive screwheads, listen up."

In unison, Sam and Alex looked up at their big brother. "Are you outta your mind?" Sam whispered.

"Dean, what are you—" Alex started in a whisper through clenched teeth.

"I'm outta options," Dean cut her off, speaking low enough for only his brother and sister to hear. He looked at them both very briefly, as if to tell them just trust me on this one.

Dean looked up at the gods who were all looking at him in distaste. He smiled cockily, took in a deep breath, began to talk in a confident, commanding voice as his siblings both watched with slack jaws, no idea what their big brother was up to.

"Now on any other given day, I'd be doing my damndest to, uh, kill you," Dean said to the gods, and he swaggered over a few steps to the right, looking the gods in the eye in turn, his demeanor filled with condescending smugness. "You filthy, murdering chumps," he added in for good measure and chuckled, turned on his heel, began to casually amble up toward where the drinks were. "But, uh, hey, desperate times." He turned, swept the room with a cynical smile, being leisurely. Very angry faces stared back at him. "So even though I'd love nothing better than to slit your throats... you dicks..." he pointed at them with both index fingers like it was their lucky day. "I'm gonna help you!" He turned around, grabbed a decanter of some dark liquor, began to pour it even as the twins looked at each other in complete, utter bafflement. Alex shrunk down into her seat, wishing she could just disappear. Dean finished pouring his drink. "I'm going to help you ice
the devil." He turned around, liquor in hand, that false smile still plastered across his face. "And then we can all get back to ganking each other like normal. You want Lucifer, well, dude's not in the Yellow Pages. But me and Sam, we can get him here."

"How?" Kali challenged.

"First you let those main courses go," Dean told her. "Then we talk. We can either take on the devil together... or you lame-ass bitches can eat me." His smile wavered slightly. "Literally." He took a huge gulp of the dark liquid in his glass.

Kali looked at him closely, assessing him, trying to decide whether or not to do what he'd said. Finally, she smiled just slightly. "Fine," she consented. "I can always get more. Go let them out. But... your brother and sister stay with me."

Dean set his drink down, gave his brother and sister a be cool look, and marched out of the room, a man on a mission.

Kali watched him go, then turned and looked at Sam, her dark eyes not seeming to miss anything. Alex watched, out of the corner of her eye, as Mercury slunk out of the room, looking shaken up and shifty.

"So, Lucifer's vessel," Kali said, then her eyes slid over to look at Alex. "And the sister. We have no further use for you."

She raised her hand, snapped her fingers and Alex was gone.

In the lobby, a hand hit against the service bell, and Mercury turned around to greet the new guest—he was startled momentarily to see how fast his call had been answered.

"Checking in," said the newcomer. His face was worn, pale, peeling off in places.

Mercury smiled politely, but there was an apprehensiveness behind the expression. "Lucifer. Thanks for coming."

Lucifer smiled mildly. "Oh, you did right calling me."

"It's just..." Mercury looked to his side, speaking in a hushed tone. "The way the talk is heading in there, it's... it's insane." He chuckled nervously.

Lucifer smiled, looked down. "You know, I never understood you pagans, you're such..." he wrinkled his nose up, his smile became more of a loathing expression, "petty little things." Mercury's little smile fell in confusion as Lucifer continued. "Always fighting, always happy to sell out your own kind. No wonder you forfeited this planet to us." Lucifer pointed a finger at the god. "You are worse than humans. You're worse than demons. And yet you claim to be gods." He smiled again as if in amusement, even as Mercury faltered, seeming to regret his choice to summon Lucifer. At the same moment that Mercury realized his mistake, Lucifer's smile faded, the finger he was pointing at Mercury twisted with sudden and violent speed. Mercury's neck snapped, he fell over dead before he even knew what had happened.

Lucifer looked down at the dead god apathetically. "And they call me prideful."

In the elevator, the lights flickered, and Alex looked up, frowning. That was never a good sign. Impatient, she mentally urged the elevator to go faster, wished she'd taken the stairs. Kali had sent
her away to a locked room on the top floor, but Alex had broken her way out, using a nightstand to destroy the door hinges enough that she could kick the door down—desperate times, desperate measures. She had no idea what she was going to do once she got downstairs again, but she wasn’t sitting this one out.

The elevator dinged pleasantly, the doors slid open, Alex stepped out and looked up—and was met with a horrifying sight. The hallway in front of the elevator was a bloodbath—dead gods lined the floor, their blood spattered the walls—and in front of her, as if he’d been waiting, Lucifer, covered in the blood of the ones he’d slain.

"Hello, Alex," he said pleasantly even as she stumbled back. The elevator doors had closed and her back pressed into them as she stared at him in horror. "It's been awhile," he remarked conversationally, looking at her with a soft, pleasant smile. "You been doing all right?" He looked even worse than he had last time she'd seen him, like he was diseased to his core. He took in her horrified expression.

"Is it my face?" he asked her in what seemed like genuine concern. "I know... it's a little frightful to look at. I promise you... I'm the same sweet-hearted guy deep down."

He cupped her chin in one of his bloody hands and she tensed, she thought of her angel blade. He was staring at her deeply, as if he could see her thoughts. "You look like there's something you're dying to ask me," he said softly, coaxingly. "...I'm all ears."

She found her voice, even though she could barely breathe, asked the first thing she could think of, even if it was just to buy time. "Are you here to take Sam?"

Lucifer smiled, his eyes crinkled up, he let go of her face and gave her an amused look. "Well he'd have to say yes for that to happen now wouldn't he?" He sighed, folded his arms in an effeminate way, a thoughtful finger on his chin. "I just don't know what I'll do if I can't get him to comply."

There was a note of implication in his voice that spurred Alex to look at him closely, and she thought of how Adam was now Michael's vessel... she swallowed, tried to remain detached and not let him see through her. "Is he... your only vessel?"

Satan almost smirked. "Why? Are you offering?"

"No, I—" Alex halted mid-sentence. She'd answered before she'd even heard his question. Her stomach churned. "Would that work?" she asked slowly.

Lucifer raised a single eyebrow, came a bit closer to her. Too close. "Would you like to try it and see?" he asked her teasingly, and his smile was unnerving. His eyes flickered up and down her inappropriately. "I'm not against... experimentation." He leaned a little closer to whisper in her ear. "But how would Castiel feel about another angel being inside of you?"

He drew back and chuckled at the look on her face. She was disturbed on every level, barely able to keep herself from shaking in the revulsion and anger she felt. And looking Satan in the eye, she saw how smug he looked, how sure of himself, and she felt herself getting brave and stupid. "I won't let you have Sam," she told him, some of her fire returning, some of her anger. "Not now, not ever."

She grabbed the hilt of the angel blade, but Lucifer's hand shot out and grabbed her wrist hard, painfully hard, stopping her. He looked at her coolly. "Loyalty. I can respect that. You love him very much." He seemed pleased, looked at her in a way that made her feel completely intimidated. "Enough to do anything for him, I'd imagine..." he smiled, his chapped, discolored lips stretching
across his peeling face ghoulishly. His hand still held her wrist tightly. "I have a previous engagement—I think I'm being rude, keeping them waiting. Care to join me?"

Alex wasn't sure if it were a real question or not. "No, thank you."

Lucifer's head tilted slightly to the side, he looked at her in dark amusement. "I was just being polite, of course. I'm afraid I have to insist."

And never letting go of her wrist, Lucifer pulled her along with himself, down the hall, over the bloody ripped remains of three or four gods and goddesses. Alex cursed herself, knew she couldn't reach the handle with her left hand fast enough or well enough to have a chance to do what she'd wanted to do: stab him through the frigging heart.

Lucifer dragged her around a corner and into the grand ballroom, where four people turned to look at the newcomers.

"Alex!" Sam exclaimed in horrified surprise, moving toward her by instinct—but beside him Dean grabbed him by the jacket, rooting him to the spot.

Baldur and Kali stood together next to the brothers, looking shocked to see Lucifer, who smiled, an eerie effect. "Sam, Dean, good to see you again. Alex, dear, be a good little girl and go to your brothers. Go on."

She looked at him in disbelief—he was just… gonna let her go? He did just that, but before she could grab for her angel blade, she found herself sliding across the floor like she was on ice, bowling into Sam and Dean, who caught her, righted her. The three of them, grabbing onto each other, looked at the devil in disbelief.

He raised his arms slightly, cringing apologetically. "So sorry about the mess, everyone," he said, dusting his hands off for show.

Baldur's fury blazed on his face, and he stepped forward toward Lucifer even as Kali protested, told him "Baldur, don't."

He ignored her. "You think you own the planet?" He asked angrily. "What gives you the right?"

He rushed toward Lucifer, who abruptly stabbed his arm and hand through Baldur completely. Gasp in shock and pain as he died, Baldur looked at Lucifer with wide eyes.

"No one gives us the right, we take it," Lucifer murmured softly, and yanked his arm out of Baldur, threw him to the ground.

Enraged, Kali's stared at Lucifer as her arms suddenly bristled in flames. Lucifer smiled at her coyly, and she raised an arm, lobbed fire at him—and the Winchesters threw themselves over the edge of an overturned table for cover, as flames filled the room. Flames shot over their heads, blistering heat making it hard to breathe.

When the flames faded away, Lucifer smiled at Kali. He was unaffected. He advanced onto her, hit her, sent her flying. Above and behind the devil, part of the ceiling and wall had caught fire.

Behind the overturned table, Sam ducked his head back down, looked at his sister. "You okay?" he asked, and suddenly Gabriel appeared next to Dean.

"Not really," Gabriel said. "Better late then never, huh?" He slapped a Casa Erotica DVD up against Dean's chest. "Guard this with your life."
"How the hell are you alive?" Alex demanded, looking at the archangel in shock.

He smiled at her charmingly, shrugged humbly. "They don't call me the Trickster for nothin'!" He stood up, his angel blade in hand, and Lucifer, who was about to stomp on Kali, was blown back through the grand ballroom doors.

He collapsed down onto the ground, looked up at Gabriel, an unreadable expression upon his face. Gabriel stared at him challengingly, walking toward him and staring him down. "Lucy! I'm home."

Lucifer stood, rolled his neck, advanced into the room, and Gabriel held his blade high, stopping Lucifer in his tracks. "Not this time."

Realizing that his brother stood against him, Lucifer fell back a little, his expression cold. Gabriel backed up, holding his blade high, offering his other hand to Kali, helping her up. "Guys!" Gabriel called, not taking his eyes off Lucifer. "Get her outta here."

Taking the cue, Sam, Dean, and Alex jumped up, hurried over. Dean grabbed onto Kali, escorting her out as Gabriel covered their exit. A few embers fell from the ceiling above. The fire Kali had started was spreading. "Over a girl," Lucifer commented lowly as Kali and the Winchesters disappeared through the ballroom door behind Gabriel, who blocked Lucifer from pursuing. "Gabriel, really? I mean I knew you were slumming, but…" Lucifer made a disgusted face. "I hope you didn't catch anything."

"What did you just say to me?" Lucifer asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Look at yourself! Boo hoo! Daddy was mean to me, so I'm gonna smash up all his toys," Gabriel said derisively.

"Watch your tone," Lucifer said softly, warningly.

Gabriel ignored his brother's command. "Play the victim all you want. But you and me? We know the truth. Dad loved you best. More than Michael, more than me. Then he brought the new baby home and you couldn't handle it. So this is all just one big temper tantrum." Gabriel's face grew serious, he pointed his blade at Lucifer. "Time to grow up."

Beside them, the wall was catching fire.

"We're just leaving?" Alex demanded, stopping just a few feet outside of the lobby doorway. Ahead of her, Dean, Sam and Kali stopped, turned around, looked at her. The Impala was a few feet off in the dark parking lot.

Dean seemed to think she was crazy. "Yes, what, you wanna hang around for happy hour or something?! We gotta get out of here now."

Alex looked at him like he was the crazy one and she pulled out Castiel's blade, gestured to it. "Lucifer is in there right now, I have this, we can kill him!" she practically shouted.

"Uh, no, I don't think so, get in the car," Dean said, his tone indicating that's final.

She thought about it a second, turned back around, headed back toward the hotel. Behind her, Dean
grabbed her by the jacket, whirled her around. "What the hell are you doing!?" he demanded, aghast at her behavior.

"I am gonna go in there and kill Lucifer!" she retorted angrily.

"It's suicide!" Dean almost shouted.

"I don't care!" she roared, pushing him, grabbing his arms roughly, fighting him, trying to get away. Out of nowhere, Kali reached out and touched Alex, who slumped forward in Dean's arms, unconscious. He looked at the goddess in a mixture of appreciation and disbelief.

The goddess just gave him a contemptuous look. "Bitch at me later, let's go."

Inside the grand ballroom, embers fell down like lazy snow flurries and the two angels faced each other down. "Gabriel, if you're doing this for Michael…" Lucifer said in a gentle, reasoning tone.

"Screw him," Gabriel retorted. "If he were standing here, I'd shiv his ass too."

Dismay and then loathing filtered across Lucifer's face. "You disloyal—"

"Oh, I'm loyal," Gabriel said. "To them."

"Who?" Lucifer questioned. "These so called gods?"

"To people, Lucifer. People."

Lucifer looked at his brother in disbelief. "People?" he asked, the word laced with disdain.

"Yes. Determined, stubborn, pain-in-the-ass, imperfect people." Gabriel spread his arms out a little. "The scenery around here is great, but human nature? Beats everything I've seen here or anywhere else."

Lucifer began to pace, slowly, back and forth in front of Gabriel. The fire was growing—three walls were licked by flames now, and the roof was beginning to char. Parts fell off onto the floor below. "So you're willing to die for a pile of cockroaches," Lucifer said. "Why?"

"Because Dad was right," Gabriel said. "They're better than us."

Lucifer took that as personal offense. "They are broken. Flawed! Abortions." He spat. "Our father failed when he created humans."

"Failed? No. Damn right they're flawed. But you know, that's what I like," Gabriel said. "And a lot of them try. To do better, to forgive." A playful smirk played on his lips. "And you should see the Spearmint Rhino!" Lucifer was growing quiet, looking at his brother in utter devastation. "I've been riding the pine a long time," Gabriel said. "But I'm in the game now, and I'm not on your side, or Michael's. I've decided I'm on theirs."

Lucifer shook his head, pained. "It's not too late," he told his brother softly. "If you can stop being such a nearsighted fool, you can join me. I'm going to win, Gabriel. You know I am. Be part of the new earth I'll create. Be part of the splendor of what's to come when I fix what our father destroyed."

Flippant, Gabriel made a face. "Mm, yeah, how about no."

Lucifer's expression was filled with pain, and around them, parts of the flaming ceiling began to
fall more rapidly. "Brother, don't make me do this," Lucifer asked softly, a final chance for his brother.

"No one makes us do anything," was Gabriel's reply.

Lucifer, knowing what was to come, knowing his brother's tricks and style, looked at Gabriel, dispirited. "I know you think you're doing the right thing, Gabriel... but I also know where your heart truly lies." He smiled sadly at his brother—and then whirled, catching Gabriel—the real Gabriel, who had been sneaking up behind him—by the wrist, stabbing Gabriel's blade down into his own chest.

"Here," Lucifer said, and Gabriel's expression was shocked, betrayed as he gasped in pain. Behind him, the illusion Gabriel had cast of himself disappeared, vanished into thin air. "Amateur hocus pocus," Lucifer whispered. "Don't forget, you learned all your tricks from me, little brother." He drove the blade as deep as it would go, and Gabriel screamed, exploded in blue light, fell down to the ground. This time, it was not a trick. Black wing marks spread across the ground that was littered with flaming debris.

Lucifer stood over Gabriel's body for a long moment, a bitter expression on his face. Around him, the room collapsed in parts, flames consuming the structure. Lucifer turned slightly toward the back of the room, addressed a corner that was covered by a thick, flaming partition. "You know, it's rude to stare," he said softly.

A tall, pale man with dark hair and fierce, brooding features came out from behind the flaming structure, looked at Lucifer without a word. He wore faded jeans, a black leather jacket, a hard to read expression.

"Hezion," Lucifer greeted. "The angel of shadows and night... are you here to try and kill me, too?"

Hezion came forward slowly, his eyes dropping to Gabriel and then coming back up to Lucifer. "No. I'm here to offer my services."

"Offer your services," Lucifer repeated, then paused cynically. "It's kind of a bad time."

Hezion ignored the comment. "Michael's obtained a vessel, I'm sure you've heard." Lucifer just raised his eyebrows slightly, indicating Hezion get to his point. "Adam Milligan is small. Weak. Incapable. Against you, against Sam Winchester... he's sure to fail."

"The point, Hezion."

Hezion's expression didn't waver. "I'm here to sign up for the winning team."

Lucifer looked at his much younger brother without bothering to hide his repugnance. "You've always been like this, Hezion. Disloyal, apostate." His lip curled up slightly. "Do you know how I find those qualities to be?"

"I'm not disloyal," Hezion said, matter-of-fact. "I'm like you. I'm self loyal. I do what's best for me."

Lucifer looked him up and down. "And you think that siding with me, Heaven's number one enemy, is what's best for you."

"Yes. Because I know Michael doesn't stand a chance."

Lucifer looked at Hezion silently. The other angel was looking at him closely, taking in the peeling
skin, the sores. "Your vessel is weak," Hezion said. "You're probably finding yourself a little
capable of doing things you really need done." He stepped closer, raised his chin slightly, his
mouth curving upwards just slightly on one side. "I can help you get your true vessel, Lucifer. And
in return, you'll give me a place in your new world."

His eyes narrowed slightly, and Lucifer almost smirked. "You're an odd one, Hezion. Always have
been." Lucifer paused, thinking back. "Though I don't suppose you remember all of it... so many
things do tend to get lost in the mix..."

Hezion's expression faltered slightly as if in puzzlement and Lucifer smiled elusively. "There is
something I need a little help with, actually," he said thoughtfully, then wagged his finger at
Hezion with a small smile. "You might be just the angel for the job." He felt himself smiling
slowly as he thought about it and looked at Hezion thoroughly. He didn't trust Hezion and he never
would. But he wouldn't hesitate to use him. Lucifer held out his cracked and peeling hand,
indicating the other angel take it.

Hezion put his in, and the angels shook hands. Hezion's dark eyes met Lucifer's, and Lucifer smiled
ominously. Around them, the grand ballroom began to collapse in flames, beams breaking in half
and snapping like twigs. "It won't be long now," Lucifer said. "Not long at all."

As soon as his sister woke up again, Dean yanked the car over to the side of the road and he got
out, pulled Alex's door open. "Get out, now!" he demanded of her. She looked at him hesitantly,
but got out slowly. She looked like she was shutting down again from the weird way she moved,
the way her eyes had dulled and lost their sparkle. Sam got out at the same time that she did and he
was clearly worried and unsure what was happening. Kali sat still, watching silently.

"What the hell was that back there huh?!!" Dean demanded, clearly scared and pissed alike. "You
fucking crazy?!"

"Leave me alone, I'm fine," Alex said hollowly, looking down at the ground, avoiding his gaze.

"You—are not—fine!" Dean bellowed, looking at her, his chest heaving in distress and anger. "I
mean all the nuthouse crap you've been pulling this past month and then tonight you just decide to
waltz in and kill the devil, get yourself killed? Have you lost your mind?!" He stared her down,
emphasized his words with his hands. He wet his lips, attempting to calm himself. He was angry,
but he attempted to speak to her understandingly. "Listen, if this is about Cas—"

A switch flipped at the mention of Cas, total enraged grief suddenly struck Alex's features like
lightning. "Cas isn't coming back!" She practically screamed. "Stop telling me he is!" And there it
was; all of the horrified grief and fear and sadness that she'd been hiding or maybe pushing away
for the past four weeks—it was written across her face clearly. She was shaking badly. Sam now
stood beside Dean, and Alex looked between both of them with shining, tear-filled eyes. "I am not
letting either of you get taken from me, ever!" she raged, seeming to be overwhelmed to the point
of near insanity. "If I have to die trying to save you I don't care! I can't live like this anymore, do
you understand?!"

She hit the side of the Impala with the palm of her hand, teeth gritted, pained tears leaking out of
her eyes, and a wretched sob tore out of her throat. "He's dead," she said, and shook her head,
looked down, shoulders slumped in defeat. A hand came up to cover her face. "He's dead." She
practically wailed at that point in painful misery, and Dean moved toward her, attempting to
comfort her, but she reacted like an angry, caged animal, shoved him away. "Get away from me!"

The brothers looked at each other briefly, neither knowing what to do. She looked like she were in
physical pain, she wrapped her arms around her middle and bent forward—and she was pitiful, helpless. She choked on her sobs, groaning as she screwed her eyes shut and took horrible quaking breaths. "It hurts, it hurts, it fucking hurts so bad I can't breathe or think anymore!" She shrank back against the Impala, and she didn't seem to see them or anything else, she just stared blank and unblinking with wide eyes at somewhere near Sam and Dean's knees. Her voice had gone faint. "I am in hell every day and I can't look at myself in the mirror, I can't stand the things I think," her voice suddenly raised to a panicked shout and she looked at them, her expression screaming for help—"I can't DO THIS anymore!"

Sam tried reaching out for her arm but she yanked herself out of the range of his grasp, backing up, shaking her head, eyes squeezed shut again, sobs wracking her body. She was becoming hysterical. "It's too much, it's too much! All of it!" She looked up at them, and her expression was full of some ominous quality, like she was about to do something crazy—she seemed livid on a level they'd never seen. "I don't want this!"

And with a shriek of rage or grief, it was hard to tell which, she threw herself down to the ground. Blind to everything except the red she was seeing, Alex wildly bashed one of her fists into the pavement repeatedly, screaming in pain and anger alike even as her brothers sprung forward and grabbed her up, struggled to physically restrain her.

Her wailing screams echoed through the foggy night.

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**At That Same Moment, Saint Bernard Parish Hospital  
Chalmette, Louisiana**

*It was dark. There was nothing but endless drifting.*

*But he was aware of himself again. And aware of something else, too. It wasn't physical pain that he sensed, it was despair and hopelessness screaming through the thick silence. And somehow he knew it was hers. Immediately, he tried to reach up, to pull himself out of the darkness and to her, but he was unable.*

*He fought harder, panic squeezing a fist around him—he needed to wake up now. He was needed, and he knew it—and nothing was more important in the universe than rising out of the darkness and finding her... but his will was overpowered by his body which was weak, powerless.*

*And there was a vague memory of her hand beside his, and he tried to reach out and take it, because maybe if he could do that he could reach her. But he felt darkness darker than night closing in again, and even though he resisted, he still faded out, slipped away into the place where he had no thoughts at all.*

Nurse Katie Cooper paused, squinting at the vitals monitor—she thought she'd heard a sound indicating a spike. Sure enough, brain activity was up—way up. John Doe's finger twitched, his eyebrows moved together for a second—a worried kind of expression. And just as quickly as it had happened, it ceased. The brain activity died down again, his face went still and calm.

Katie's shoulders sank down from where she didn't realize she'd been holding them. For a second, she thought the guy was going to come out of the coma.

She sighed softly and looked at him sadly.

Not yet.
Wide Awake

"I never meant to wither; I wanted to be tall. Like a fool I left the river, watched my branches fall."
- Lights

Five Days Later

She stood in an overcast graveyard. Alone.

There were many bare-branched trees dotting the surrounding area. The grass was dead and gray. Half-rotted wooden crosses were staked into the ground every few feet; overhead the grey skies felt oppressive and heavy. She heard crows calling distantly. It was cold and the ghostly breeze carried a misty sheen of rain. Where had Sam and Dean gone? They'd just been with her, hadn't they?

She thought she heard them calling her, but when she listened hard, all she could hear was the harsh whistle of wind across the land.

Trying to get her bearings, Alex looked around, noticing how everything seemed to become two-dimensional and blurred at her peripheral. About thirty feet off, she noticed a large, square hole in the ground—an open grave. She went over without a second thought—her legs seemed to have a mind of their own. She got to the edge of the grave and peered down into it. At the bottom of the deep grave two lifeless bodies lay, their glazed-over eyes staring up unseeingly. And when she recognized them as her brothers, she stumbled back in horrified shock.

She whirled to find herself staring into the face of Sam—but it wasn't Sam and she knew it right away. He was cold, soulless, evil, dark, strong, taller than he'd ever been and bigger, too. It was Lucifer, she knew it on instinct, and he smiled at her. She backed up immediately, only thinking get away from him now, forgetting where she stood. She almost fell back into the grave when the heels of her shoes sank into the crumbling dirt at the edge. She flailed backwards, Lucifer caught her by her arms, and his grip was bone crushing. He smelled like smoke and ash, and she saw the reflection of orange light dancing in his eyes, was shocked when she looked down and saw that the ground beneath his feet was on fire. "You could have saved them," he told her in a velvet whisper—Sam's voice—his eyes were cold, his mouth was twisting up into a sneer. "But you didn't." The flames underneath his feet were spreading out like water might flood flatlands—and the entire graveyard which had been so cold a moment ago was now engulfed in blistering heat, was burning up completely.

"Whatever choices you make, whatever details you alter..." he leaned terrifyingly close, his voice was barely audible, that dark smile was impossibly gleeful. "I win." And Lucifer let her go with a shove, she screamed, falling back, trying to catch hold of something, anything. She fell forever, for what felt like miles and miles, and then landed hard on her back even as heavy burningly cold dirt began to rain down over her. She was stuck in place, and all she could see was Lucifer smiling down at her in victorious contempt, wearing Sam's face. Around him, the world was burning now, even the sky. Alex could hear screams of dying men, women, and children who she hadn't been strong enough to save. The dirt that fell down onto her was heavy, each clump that struck her was like a kick to the gut, her eyes burned out of their sockets, her chest was tearing apart, she was burning to death and freezing solid even as every limb in her body was turning to liquid and she was gasping for air and screaming no, no, no!

"No!" she shouted and her eyes snapped open even as she rocketed up from where she'd been
laying. She was breathless, disoriented, breathing hard, panicked, in the dark… and then realizing
where she was as her eyes adjusted. Bobby's house. The sheer terror abated: It had just been a
dream. Another vivid, shocking, terrifying dream.

She wasn't in a graveyard—she was in the attic. She'd been curled up on the bed. She must have
fallen asleep as she laid there in the place she and Cas had been together last.

Her feet hit the floor as she sat up better, she held on tight to the edge of the bed, leaning over her
knees. Feeling crazed as she reeled, Alex put a shaking hand to her forehead, telling herself it was
okay. That none of that was real. But the images remained so vivid, burned into her mind's eye.
She could still see Lucifer smiling cruelly at her as he wore her twin's face. She could still feel the
obscene heat from the inferno he'd spawned. Her heart was still racing sickeningly fast and she
shut her eyes a moment, just trying to steady herself.

Maybe the dream hadn't been real, but the fear of losing her brothers, the fear of seeing them dead,
of seeing Sam as Lucifer… that was real, was something she couldn't escape from in dreams or
reality. And almost every time she fell asleep, ever since escaping from the Elysian Fields she'd
dreams just like that. Where Sam or Dean were dead, where Lucifer crushed her beneath his heel,
where he taunted her, hurt her, killed her and burned the world of life entirely. She felt haunted and
hunted, unable to escape from her inner fears. And most of all, she was afraid the dreams would
come true. They were always different, but the ending was the same—her brothers, dead. Lucifer
smiling as he killed her, too.

Alex looked down at the bed she sat on—it was sometime in the middle of the night, but the light
from the full moon illuminated the attic well. She'd come up here to get a box of books for Bobby,
had seen the bed, had remembered everything she wanted to forget (it hurt too much to remember).
Still, perhaps a glutton for punishment, or maybe reaching out for any small ounce of comfort that
still existed, she'd curled up onto her side on the center of the bed, laid her palm down onto the
empty bed beside her. That's where he had been. She'd shut her eyes slowly, tried to remember
what Cas had felt like that afternoon over a month ago—when she'd held a piece of the only heaven
she'd ever known there in her arms, not known how close the two of them were to being torn apart
completely.

He was gone. And she still couldn't get herself to fully believe it—and she didn't want to. It had
been almost forty days but her heart, mind, soul couldn't let go of the desperate need to see him
again. She caught herself, sometimes, forgetting he was gone at all, expecting at random moments
to look up and see his frumpy outfit and dark hair and the face she'd loved so much. She hated
herself for how much she missed him, how deeply losing him had hurt her. She couldn't find a way
out from underneath it. Why did he do that? Why did he sacrifice himself like that? Her life wasn't
worth his and she was angry at him for getting himself killed. Angry. And sad. So sad.

She didn't feel worthy of it, not even for a second, and had never understood why he looked at her
the way he had, why he'd cared about her so much, why he'd wanted her, why of all the people in
the world, he'd loved her. Look where all of that had gotten him: dead.

Her misery was increased tenfold because she was beginning to forget his face. Her mind strained
to fill in the details, but he was fading. She couldn't hold on, even though she tried so desperately
to. She didn't even have a picture of him. Not a single damn picture. A hot tear spilled out now onto
one of her cheeks as she squeezed her eyes shut tighter, trying to remember him, cursing herself.
The sadness was too heavy and she was nearly broken from carrying it. When would life be
bearable again?

Alex forced her eyes open, sniffing, trying to get herself together. If nothing else, she was glad her
brothers weren't here to see her like this.

She looked down at her scraped up right-hand knuckles—at the huge scabs from where she'd punched asphalt in a fit of incredible rage and sadness. Alex still didn't know what the hell had made her do that. She remembered flying into fits of rage as a kid and doing crazy destructive things when she was frustrated—she'd knock things over and ruin stuff and break things on purpose as a way to express her anger. But she'd never intentionally hurt herself like she had five days ago.

But in that moment, when she'd been unable to hold everything she felt inside, not even for a second longer—she'd been so angry at herself, so to blame for what happened to Castiel, so livid with herself for being weak and affected by the pain of losing him… it had all made her want nothing more than to beat herself into the ground and make herself feel all the pain she deserved to feel. All the everything she'd felt was what she'd been slamming her fist into repeatedly. For a second she hadn't even known she was pounding her fist into the pavement. She'd just known it was her fault Cas was dead.

Her brothers had yanked her up, physically preventing her from continuing her hysterical antics. And even though she'd resisted them for a minute, kicking and screaming and sobbing like damn crazy person, the fit passed and she'd been left deflated and shocked, one of them holding her by either arm. When she'd taken in the shocked, alarmed concern written across her brothers faces, the anger had been overcome with bitter shame. She'd given up, cried herself hoarse there on the side of the road, finally letting someone comfort her after a month of refusing to even acknowledge that she needed help. By the side of some random highway in the absolute dead of night, her oldest brother had hugged her close, hesitantly at first, while her twin pat-patted her back and kept a hand on her shoulder. She had never felt so wretched or low, so weak and so ashamed of herself as she'd cried into Dean's shoulder, as she'd clenched a handful of Sam's jacket in her hand.

She remembered sobbing "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," over and over again, not knowing what she was sorry for. Unable to look at either of them, she'd been so mortified to need her brothers to hold her like she was eight years old again. She remembered snatches of things they'd said like "not your fault" and "will be okay" and she'd cried even harder to hear those things, those lies that were meant to make her feel better. In that moment, Alex had felt like she would never feel better, that it would never be okay ever again.

When she'd finally calmed down, when she had become too exhausted to cry any more, they had realized that Kali had disappeared. Apparently (and hopefully) she'd released them from the blood spell. At that point, none of them had really cared. Alex remembered very little about the rest of that night.

Vaguely she recalled Sam grabbing his laptop out of the car, setting it on the roof and muttering something about "better watch that DVD before we forget." What DVD, she'd wondered. She remembered her oldest brother helping her sit in the back seat. She slumped there, exhausted, as Dean and Sam watched the Casa Erotica DVD Gabriel had handed to Dean after telling him to guard it with his life.

On it, Gabriel had recorded a message. It had gone something like "If you're hearing this message it means I'm dead and you have no hope of killing Lucy without me. But... you can trap him, put him back into the cage you got him out of." Gabriel had explained how the horsemen of the apocalypse each had a ring, and if all four rings were brought together, they created a key to the cage. And the Winchesters, well they already had two—War and Famine's rings. After Gabe let that little piece of information slip, the recording had become a little more X-Rated and Sam had slammed the laptop shut with a sound of disgust.
"Okay, you know what, this is good," Dean had said. "It's a long shot, but it's better than nothing, right? We got two rings. Collect all four, Satan's back behind bars."

"You make it sound so easy," Sam had retorted sarcastically.

"Easy, no, a plan... yes." There had been a long pause.

At that point, Alex had been so exhausted she wasn't able to keep her eyes open. She felt delirious almost, going slack against the car door, trying to shut the world out. Her brothers, maybe thinking she'd fallen asleep, proceeded to have a whisper-fight about what to do with her.

Dean's voice had lowered several notches. "You get that she can't come with us on this one, right? Not now, not the shape she's in."

"So what, we ditch her at Bobby's and burn rubber, Dean?" Sam had whispered back indignantly. "Go after these horsemen without her, just leave her behind when she needs her family the most?"

Dean sounded furiously intense, like he'd been thinking about it a lot and was everything from worried to pissed regarding the subject. "She hasn't slept in weeks, Sam, not more than a couple hours at a time, she's not eating, the dude she was into is dead, her brothers are Heaven and Hell's most wanted, she's one damn step away from the friggin' nuthouse... and I am telling you, this is gonna kill her if we keep going like this!"

There had been another long pause. Sam sounded torn. "Look, I know she's not doing so great, but I still don't think it's a good idea to just... to just leave her!"

"I know it's not, Sam, but what other option do we have? And listen, if you don't think it kills me to see her like this, you're wrong." Dean had shot back in an angry hiss. He'd paused, then sounded a lot less angry, just... torn apart. "But we just don't have any time left. We got to stop the apocalypse. And as soon as we do, I promise you, this family will stick together like we used to. We'll make sure she's okay, gets whatever help she needs. But for now, what she needs is to be in one place, safe, resting, somewhere that isn't with us. Bobby can take care of her. It's too dangerous here with us, and what if she loses her mind like that again? In the middle of the job or something? We can't risk it. This is how we keep her safe. Now let's go."

Sam had been silent. Alex hadn't cared one way or another. In fact she felt too ashamed to say a damn thing to them the rest of the ride. She tried to sleep. But rest didn't come. So she kept her eyes closed, pretended to be asleep. She hadn't been able to even think about looking her siblings in the eye.

They'd driven twelve hours to Bobby's, arriving early afternoon. Sam and Dean had tried to take their sister aside once they were there, explain themselves and why they'd taken her there. But she'd just told them, cold and detached, that she understood why they were doing what they were doing, that they'd better be on their way. That she'd be fine. They'd looked at each other warily, clearly not believing her completely. But they'd nodded, let it go. Dean looked like he wasn't sure what to do, and ended up just squeezing her gently on the shoulder, telling her "take it easy, kiddo." He hadn't hugged her since he'd hurt her a month ago. Well, except for on the side of the road that same night. He was standoffish, looking at her like he knew how bad she hurt and was ashamed of himself for being any small part of it.

Sam had looked like he felt guilty when they left. He'd hugged Alex hesitantly, for a second almost looking like he was going to argue against the decision to leave her there. But he'd stayed silent. And then she'd watched them go, remaining stone faced until the Impala disappeared down the driveway. Then she'd gone inside, shut herself away on the second floor the rest of the day, crying
and miserable with herself. She had just wanted to get away. From what? From everything, honestly. But knowing that with each passing second her brothers were getting further and further away from her, she'd felt despair washing over her anew. Knowing how useless and what a burden she'd been on them the past month was shameful. Her life was wrecked, any semblance of normalcy gone. She felt uprooted, scattered in the wind.

After all these years, she should be stronger than this, and she knew it, but she couldn't find the strength anywhere. Life was running her over repeatedly, sadistically. She was exhausted, drained, depleted. She felt sick physically and mentally, her brothers weren't here with her, she couldn't bear to think of Castiel, or the apocalypse, of anything with any real weight to it.

Alex forced herself to stand up, wipe her face off, and go find the box Bobby had sent her up here for who-knows how long ago. She looked through the stacks of boxes for the one labeled "Mayan volumes"—there were about a zillion shelves up here full of boxes and weird old dusty gadgets.

She and Bobby had always had this understanding, and it was the same now. He gave her enough wary, concerned looks to last a lifetime, but he hadn't asked her even once why she was there or what was wrong. He'd treated her like normal, which she appreciated, even though she could tell he knew she was having a rough time. She figured Dean must have told him over the phone—she'd seen him make a call as he fueled the Impala up back in Janesville.

She was trying, whether consciously or subconsciously, to remain aloof and cool around Bobby. Mostly she hated inconveniencing him—even though she sort of got the feeling he'd been lonely recently and frustrated with his wheelchair-bound status. She wasn't exactly the best company though. Either way, helping him with in-town errands and around-the-house chores had been a good distraction from her jumbled emotions.

Alex found the box she'd been hunting for and she clomped down the stairs, through the second floor hallway, and then down more stairs, rounding the corner to the study where a dim light came from. She could hear him talking on the phone.

"Yeah, well, you better get to drivin'," Bobby was saying. "Hello? ...hello?" he asked listening hard for a second. He gave up after a minute, ended the call. "Musta lost signal," he muttered, and looked up at Alex as she carried the box into the study. "You just missed a check-in from Tweedledum and Tweedledee," he said as she set the box down on the desk.

The mention of her brothers caught her attention and also laid the softest strain of guilt across her heart again. "They find anything?" she asked, hoping Bobby wouldn't see through her.

"More of the same—swine flu—but no Pestilence," Bobby told her, sounding mildly frustrated by it as he threw an errant hand up into the air. Sam and Dean were trying to track down the horsemen Pestilence to get his ring, but they kept getting a cold trail. She and Bobby had been working on this end to try and figure out where Pestilence would strike next from the pattern he'd been establishing: dropping large amounts of swine flu in an eastward sweep. Maybe it should have felt good to be helping in that behind-the-scenes way, but Alex felt pretty useless. Bobby could have done that without her help, Sam and Dean were obviously managing fine… it was sort of depressing. "So what, didja get lost up there?" Bobby asked her, stirring her out of the thoughts. He was watching her out of the side of his eye as she pulled the books out of the box and stacked them on his desk.

"I fell asleep, sorry," she said offhandedly, trying to avoid the subject and his gaze both.

Bobby sat back a little in his wheelchair, looked at her in that knowing way he had. "You all right?"
Alex tried to look at him, but could only bring her eyes up to his shoulder. "I dunno." She focused on pulling the heavy books out one by one. "Not really."

"Quit that," he said, and she stopped unloading books from the box, frowned, not understanding.

"What?" she asked.

"Feelin' sorry for yourself," he said matter-of-factly.

Suppressing a knee-jerk outburst at his blunt, unexpected command, Alex's mouth went into a thin line, she tried to stay calm. Bobby was trying to be helpful, but he really had no idea what he was talking about—and she didn't want him to know, either. "I should be with them," she said tensely, and began to unpack the rest of the books with new purpose, not looking at him.

"You sure about that?" he asked slowly, and his tone wasn't challenging, it was honest—but she didn't like that he was implying she wasn't all right.

"I'm fine," she insisted, slamming the final book down onto the stack. She stared at it, reconsidered grudgingly, her eyes flickering up to Bobby's briefly. "Or, I'll be fine. I don't have time for this right now. The friggin'… end of the world is here and I'm… acting like it's a good time to have a breakdown." She folded her arms, scowled at the ground, tried to reign in some of her misdirected anger. "I shouldn't be just sitting around on my ass, you know?"

"How you think I feel?" Bobby asked, motioning to his wheelchair. If he was trying to make her feel bad for being ungrateful, it worked. He had fixed her with a perceptive, hard stare. "Kid, let me tell you something. I know fine. And you ain't." He relented a little, looked at her with a mixture of understanding and sympathy. "And what's more is you shouldn't be. Hell, these times we're in… it's a wonder any of us is hangin' in anymore. Don't be so damn hard on yourself." He sighed tiredly. "You're just like your two idjit brothers, you know that? Always first in line to knock yourself down a notch or ten."

Alex knew he was trying to cheer her up in his own way but she just looked down, feeling tense all over, cagey, dissatisfied and pitiful. "I should be with them," she repeated in a mutter. "You know I should." Because she didn't belong here, she knew that much. And if not with her brothers, where else did she belong in this world?

Bobby was giving her a challenging, no-nonsense look. "Well, you ain't with them." He pulled a book off the top of the stack she'd made. "You're with me. And I could use a hand with this stack on Mayan end time prophecies."

He looked at her expectantly, pretty much closing the subject, letting her know he wasn't going to listen to any more of the whining. And Alex looked at the books, nodded reluctantly, chastised. He was right, of course, but… she just wanted nothing more than to just shrivel up and die from the relentless unhappiness. But Bobby wanted some help. "I'll… make us some coffee," she said wearily, and pulled the empty box off the desk, set it down onto the ground where it would be out of the way.

"And for what it's worth…" Bobby said, stopping her as she was halfway out of the study to the kitchen, "it'll get better in time. Manageable at least." He looked at her sadly, his kind features soft with empathy. "The pain of losing someone you care a lot about."

Affected by the way he said it and the things it made her think about, Alex nodded, said "yeah" really tersely and turned around to go to the kitchen before her emotions got the better of her. Thankfully, Bobby didn't bring it up again. She made them some coffee (Bobby put whiskey in his,
offered her some… surprising herself, she said no). It was back to business as usual: hand me that book could ya, where did I put my damn magnifying glass, does your text say anything about goat sacrifice?

For about an hour, they tried to find a connection between what the Mayans had predicted and the actual apocalypse that was currently happening. Not much seemed to line up. It seemed sort of useless, but they dilly dallied with it. There wasn't really anything else to do, after all.

Alex's phone buzzing in her pocket startled her, for the briefest second, as always, she hoped she'd pull the phone out and see "Cas" displayed on the incoming call screen. But it wasn't Cas. It was her twin.

"Hey Sam," she answered, a little deflated.

"Hey," his voice said, and the one-syllable word was said in a way that made Alex sit up straighter.

"What's wrong?" she asked. Bobby glanced up.

"It's Dean," Sam said, and he was deeply upset. "He's gone off with Crowley and just left me here."

"What?" Not what she had expected to hear, and she was confused. "Crowley? Wait, wait. Lemme put you on speaker." She switched the phone to loudspeaker, put it down onto the desk between herself and Bobby. "Bobby's here too," she told him.

"Hey Bobby," Sam said heavily. He sounded off.

"Sam," Bobby greeted neutrally.

"Are you... drinking?" Alex asked, realizing that her brother didn't sound just off, he also sounded a little tipsy.

"Uh, yeah," he confirmed, and they heard him take a drink—straight out of a bottle it sounded like. Bobby and Alex exchanged an uncertain look. Sam didn't drink that often, not like Dean did.

"What happened, kid?" Bobby prompted, and Sam sighed gustily.

"Okay, so Crowley just shows up in the damn car out of nowhere, says he wants to help us. And while I'm trying to gank him, Dean's actually listening to him. "Like how the hell does Dean get off acting like—"

"Wait, back up—Crowley wanted to help with what?" Alex asked.

"Finding Pestilence," Sam replied impatiently. "He swears up and down he can get the guy, he knows the demon who'll know Pestilence's exact location…" he trailed off, disgusted.

"So lemme get this straight," Bobby said, "after handing the Colt over to you however many months ago, knowing it wouldn't work to kill the devil, he's trying to screw you over again—and Dean just went along with it?"

Sam chuckled sarcastically. "My point exactly. Crowley said he didn't know the Colt wouldn't kill Lucifer, Dean believed him, I guess." He let out another windy sigh. "Anyway, so Crowley says all we need to do is get this demon who's in with Pestilence and from there we can figure out where he is… but Crowley wouldn't let me go with. Maybe cuz I kept trying to kill him, but that's beside the point, right?"
Bobby and Alex looked at each other again. Sounded like Sam and Dean were having an interesting night. "Right," Bobby agreed.

"So the two of them left to go get this demon together, bring him here and get Pestilence's location out of him. Dean just… went off with that demon, left me here." Sam almost sounded like he could be pouting. "I mean, it's crazy, right?"

Bobby took a second, thinking about it. He took a sip of his coffee-whiskey combination. "Well, look, Sam, I got no love for demons, and, yeah, this whole thing is crazy, but… I don't know. After a year of chasing up zilch, maybe it's time to go crazy."

There was a reluctant pause. "Yeah, maybe..." Sam replied grudgingly. "Maybe it's the whiskey talking or the idea that now's the time to go nuts but… I'm… I'm starting to get a pretty crazy idea."

Alex didn't like the sound of this. "How crazy? What is it?"

Sam paused. "Uh… Bobby, you remember that time you were possessed?"

"Yeah," Bobby replied, and he made an uncertain, confused face and glanced at Alex. Where was Sam going with this? "Rings a bell."

"When Meg told you to kill Dean, you didn't," Sam said. "You took your body back."

"Just long enough to shank myself, yeah," Bobby said, and he and Alex frowned at each other across the phone again.

"Well, how'd you do it?" Sam asked. "I mean, how'd you take back the wheel?"

Bobby and Alex sat forward on opposite sides of the desk at the same time. "Sam. You... you aren't suggesting what I think you're suggesting, are you?" Alex asked in disbelief.

They could hear him taking another swig from his bottle. "Say... we can open the cage. Great. But then what?" Sam asked. "W-we just lead the devil to the edge and get him to jump in?"

"Sam..." Alex cut in warningly, seeing where he was going with this. Sam continued anyway.

"So what if you guys lead the devil to the edge and I jump in?" Bobby and Alex looked at each other in mutual shock as Sam continued. "It'd be just like when you turned the knife around on yourself, Bobby," Sam said, and he sounded like he was getting intense, emotional. "One action— just one leap."

"Are you idjits trying to kill me?!" Bobby demanded angrily.

Hot on his heels with a reaction of her own, Alex had her hands in the air, staring at the phone in incredulous anger. "That's insane, Sam, no way!"

"Guys, I—" Sam started.

"We just got done talking your brother off the ledge, your sister's a holy wreck from hell and now you're linin' up to say yes?" Bobby thundered in disbelief.

"I'm not… it's not like that," Sam protested emphatically. "I'm not gonna do it, not unless we all agree. But I think we gotta look at our options."

"This isn't an option, Sam!" Bobby insisted. Alex was sitting back in her chair, an arm folded over
her ribs, her opposite elbow resting on her arm—a hand on her face as she shook her head, at a loss, unable to speak for the moment.

"Why not?" Sam asked.

"You can't do it," Bobby insisted. "What I did was a million-to-one, and that was some pissant demon I was brain-wrestlin'! You're talking about taking back control from Satan himself."

"Yeah," Sam said flippantly. "Yeah, I am."

"Do you even hear yourself?" Alex asked, finally speaking up, gesturing angrily at the phone. "There's no way, Sam, no friggin' way that would ever work!"

"But maybe it would," Sam replied. "I'm strong enough."

"What are you smoking?" Alex demanded, standing up now, upset.

"You ain't strong enough," Bobby said, his alarm raising several levels. "He's gonna find every chink in your armor, Sam, and use it against you—your fear, your grief, your anger. And let's face— you're not exactly Mr. Anger Management. How are you gonna control the devil when you can't control yourself?"

There was a long pause, and Sam sounded disappointed, slightly annoyed when he spoke. "Look. Yeah. Maybe you're right. It's a crazy idea. I get it."

"I don't think you do!" Bobby protested even as Alex was snatching the phone up and switching it onto regular speaker, holding it against her ear.

"Does Dean know you're thinking about this?" she demanded, exiting the study without a word to Bobby, heading outside.

"Did you take me off speakerphone?" Sam asked.

"Yes, now answer the damn question." The door slammed behind her, she began to pace a small area on the dark porch.

"No," Sam told her quietly. "No he doesn't. I haven't told him yet."

Alex ran a hand through her hair, pursing her lips in frustrated anger as she struggled to find the words. "You realize, don't you, that even if that worked somehow, and that's a big if, Sam that... that you would be going into the cage, too, right? That you'd... basically be killing yourself?"

"Saving a lot of people in the process, too," Sam said bluntly, then paused, sighed. "Listen, it's just... an idea, okay? A last resort if we can't figure out anything else."

"I hate this idea," she told him sharply, emphatically, without hesitation, shaking almost, remembering all of her nightmares. "I hate it a lot."

"Alex—" Sam started.

She stopped pacing. "No, I'm tired of everyone I know trying to sacrifice themselves!" her voice was high and loud with emotion, with fear. "There has to be another way, you hear me?! You can't do this!" He was silent on the other end, maybe stunned at how emotional she'd just gotten. She sat down onto the stairs, put her head in a hand, elbow on her knee. She thought about telling him about the dreams, but realized she would come off as insane. "Just... just promise me you won't do
anything crazy," she pleaded faintly, realizing all she could do was beg. "Please, Sam. Not you, too."

He grew quiet for a couple beats. "Like I said before," he told her, gentler now, more empathetic. "I won't unless everyone agrees. I promise, okay?"

She was silent for a long pause. Ironic—she now trusted Sam more than she did Dean. And when he said that he wouldn't do it without everyone else's consent, she was able to feel a little set at ease. "Okay," she said softly, and let out a tired, frustrated sigh, her hand still on her head.

"So other than all of that, you, uh, you doing okay?" he asked her hesitantly.

Was she doing okay? What a joke. But, considering everything… at least she hadn't signed herself into a mental ward or jumped off a cliff. "I guess so," Alex answered, shrugging even though he couldn't see. "I don't know. I'd be better if I wasn't me, you know?" she was attempting to lighten up the conversation, but her attempt at humor rang true and just made her feel more miserable.

"I'm sorry, Al," he said, and it was weird hearing him use the nickname. He didn't do that very often. "I really feel like we shouldn't have left you there."

"I'm fine, really, I am," she insisted, trying to convince herself of it, too. And even though she didn't buy it, Sam seemed to. Maybe because he needed some good news, he'd take whatever he could get, even if it were a lie.

She could hear some amount of relief in his voice. "Good. Good. We're probably gonna head back to get you in a day or two anyway, after we get Pestilence's ring, if you're feeling up to it?"

Alex was startled—was she really ready to get back on the road? She feigned enthusiasm. "Yeah good, good. It'll be, good, to get back out there." She wanted her brothers to think she was strong, capable, that she'd just needed a few days to take some deep breaths and get her head back together. And maybe by the time they actually got back to Bobby's, she would be doing better. All she could do was hope.

She hear him taking another swig of his drink. "Hey, do you realize our birthday is pretty much next week?" he asked.

Alex frowned. She hadn't—but sure enough, today was April twenty-something, wasn't it? She absently scratched her hairline for a second. "It is, isn't it?" She smiled slightly, tried to pretend to be in a good mood. "I got you a pony."

"Damn, you're always one-upping me," he joked back. "I got you a book of stamps."

Alex made a face, genuinely amused now, cracking a little smile for the first time in forever. "A book of stamps, Sam?"

He chuckled—he knew how stupid his reply had been. "Yeah, uh, first thing that popped into my head," he admitted tiredly, sheepish. They were both quiet for about three seconds. Sam sounded introspective and sad when he spoke up again. "Do you... ever miss the way things were?" he asked her faintly, his tone soft with reminiscence and longing. "I mean not everyth---ing, obviously, just... before it was us trying to stop the whole friggin' world from ending. It seems like everything was simpler."

"Yeah, it was simpler," Alex said, nudging at a leaf with the toe of her shoe distractedly. "But it was still hell."
She heard Sam breathe out softly. "Yeah, it was hell, but… it was a better hell. For me, anyway." He sounded lonely and sad, like he was holding in how freaked out he really was. She felt so sorry for him, so helpless to assist him in any way. "You don't know the half of what it's like, having Satan want you," he said softly, and she could just picture how he looked when he said it—eyes squeezed closed with a horrified, tense expression on his face. He'd never said much about this to her, and hearing him talk about it was terrifying for her. "I used to think that, that maybe the angels or Dean could save me, you know? But I'm starting to think that maybe no one can save myself but me. And that maybe even I can't."

"Sam…" Alex said, not sure what else to say. She thought of the terrifying dreams she'd been dreaming where her twin was being used by Satan, and the familiar hazel eyes so like her own had been cold, dark, evil. She swallowed, scared. Telling him about the dreams didn't seem like a good idea—not now when he was so obviously scared shitless. "Don't give up," she told him. Both a request and a command. *Because I've seen what happens if you do.*

"I'm not," he said. But she wasn't sure if she believed him. "Hey, I—uh, do you remember when I used to have those dreams?" he asked, changing the subject abruptly, startling her because of what she'd just been thinking.

Slightly alarmed, she faltered. "What dreams? Like the weird vision dreams? The Azazel stuff? Yeah..."

"Did you?" He asked. "Ever have crazy premonitions or dreams back then, I mean."

The alarm was no longer slight. Alex was staring straight ahead of herself, not sure how to answer. She'd always had nightmares growing up, but… these that she'd had recently seemed different than any other dream she'd ever had. "Uh, no," she told him, attempting nonchalance. "Can't say that I ever did." She cleared her throat, concentrating hard. "What—what were they like, Sam? The dreams you had?"

Sam was silent for a couple seconds. "Uh… hazy. Just… weird glimpses of stuff strung together," he said. That didn't sound like the dreams she'd had… "It's not important," he hedged, sounding eager to drop the subject now. Something about his weird, anxious tone made her feel a strange sense of dread in the pit of her stomach. "I just..." he began to ramble. "I dreamed lots of weird stuff and… some of it… there were some that I never, that you… I dunno. I'm sorry. I'm kinda drunk. I don't know why I brought that up." He cleared his throat loudly.

"Are you okay, Sammy?" Alex asked, getting even more worried than before.

"Pssh. I'm fine," he insisted and she could hear how trashed he was with the overly enthusiastic *don't worry about me* way he said it. She rolled her eyes at that point. Maybe she was worried about nothing.

"Yeah, you're fine," she retorted sarcastically. "And I'm great."

She heard him give a short air laugh. "Yeah," he agreed. "Pretty much." He paused heavily, she heard him settling the bottle down onto a hard surface. He hesitated for a couple beats. "Hey, I just want you to know that I'm… I'm really sorry things ended the way they did for you two."

The abrupt mention of Cas caught Alex off guard, and for a minute, she was too startled and shocked by the sudden rush of emotion to reply. "Yeah. M-me too," she finally managed to reply. She felt the familiar ache of tears filling her eyes and she looked up into the cloudy night sky, wishing she could see the stars. "I miss him," she admitted waveringly. They were both silent for a few seconds. "I can't believe that… that he's… that he's just gone."
"Yeah," Sam said softly, understandably. "You spend hours and days hoping you're just in some nightmare," he murmured hollowly. "That you'll wake up and realize it was all just a horrible dream. But it never is." And Alex knew he was thinking of Jess. She could hear how close to tears he was now, too. "Losing someone you love... it hurts more than anything."

She swallowed painfully, screwed her eyes shut, scrubbed her forehead with the palm of her hand. "H-how did you get through it?" she asked him quietly, wishing someone could tell her the answer, the way out of where she was right now.

"Honestly? Trying to get revenge."

Alex was silent a long moment. Revenge. Did she want revenge? Yes, but... what she wanted most was Cas back. "Revenge, huh?"

"Yup," he said. "But... no amount of killing ever got me what I really wanted. Azazel's dead now, but... so's Mom, so's Dad. So's Jess." He was quiet for so long she almost thought the phone call had been cut off, was about to ask hello when he suddenly spoke again. "I really loved her, Alex. No one else has ever come close." She heard him breathe out shakily. "I wish so bad I could get her back."

"I mean, honestly, I'm still not over her. No other girl has ever really compared. She was the one. She was it, ya know?" She heard him sniff and clear his throat. Yes, she did know. "Jesus Christ," he commented, chuckling forcibly. "Listen to me, all drunk and pathetic."

She was struck by the urge to respond to him genuinely, to try and comfort him—but she didn't even know how to do that right then and she felt too emotionally weak to be a shoulder to cry on—everything he'd just said had struck a chord in her, had resounded completely, and she felt raw and cut open. So instead of deepening the conversation, maybe selfishly or in cowardice, she covered and backpedaled with a forced joking tone. "Yeah Samantha, making me a little uncomfortable over here."

He chuckled softly, taking her cue. "Sorry Alexander," he said, and she heard how he was suppressing his pain, too. She made herself laugh softly. It was a wooden, false sound.

Alex cleared her throat. "Okay, so... call me when Dean gets back, okay? Keep me updated."

"Will do," he said.

She hesitated, wishing she were with her brothers. Wishing she knew how this was going to end. Wishing she knew she wouldn't always feel so bad inside. "Be careful, Sam."

He paused, sounding every bit as heavy and afraid as she felt. "You too."

Alex ended the call. Looked at the screen a second, restless, apprehensive. Would Sam really say yes to Lucifer? Would the things she'd seen in her dreams come true? How could she stand by and just let that happen if that's what was ahead? There was no way Sam was strong enough to overcome Lucifer—no way. They would have to find another way to trick the devil back into his cage. Because Sam saying yes to Lucifer, for whatever reason... would end badly. She knew it beyond understanding, in every cell of her body.

She looked up into the night sky, breathed in some of the chilly air, wasn't sure why she still did this but... she looked back down at her phone, went to recent calls, scrolled down one. Hit the call button. Click—straight to voicemail. "You have reached the voicemail box of..." said the recording. "I don't understand—why do you want me to say my name?" Beep.
Every time she did this, called his phone and listened to the message, it made her sadder. But she didn't seem to be able to stop herself from doing it. *He's not coming back... stop hoping he will.* She hit the end call button, stood up, and with a frustrated cry of anger she threw her phone as far as she could. Heard it clunk against an old car somewhere off in the darkness.

Two seconds after she threw the phone, she realized that she really shouldn't have done that—and cursing under her breath, she went inside to find a flashlight.

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**A Few Hours Later**

Alex realized it was a dream right away, because she'd had this particular dream several times recently. Unlike the other dreams she'd had of fire and the devil and the end of all things, this one was good. Well, maybe not *good*. But better than the other ones.

In the dream she stood in Bobby's attic, looking out the window, where the dark landscape below was a low, endless grassy field. Above it the velvet blue sky was scattered with millions of brilliant stars, and it was so bright and beautiful she could cry. But she turned, knowing that what was beside her was even more beautiful.

On the bed, Castiel laid on his back with his arms at his sides, by all appearances asleep. Every time she had this dream it was the same—him laying there. He never woke up no matter what she tried to rouse him.

Just knowing it was him—the sight of the trench coat, the tie—was enough to break her heart and fix it all at once. She went to the side of the bed, sat down gently, tried to see into the shadows, tried to see his face, but she could barely see anything. His face was becoming harder and harder to see, because she couldn't remember. Soon his features would be lost in total darkness. She touched a hand to his cheek, heart breaking in two because she couldn't *feel* him, either. "Why are you always sleeping?" she asked in a whisper. "Why won't you wake up?"

She laid her head onto his chest, but he was cold, not warm—and it was like laying her head against a stone. She began to cry and it began to rain in the room, flooding the attic rapidly. She held onto him tighter, desperate, even though it wasn't him. All she wanted was for him to wake up, to be alive again, to be real.

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**The Next Day**

Mid afternoon. Alex was on the porch again. She'd slept a few hours last night but not well, not enough—after dreaming of Castiel, the nightmares had returned. It was cruel: The dreams of Cas were so blurred and indistinct, hard to remember at all; the nightmares of her brothers and Lucifer were so vivid and inescapable.

Today she'd tried all day to busy herself. Sharpened her hunting knife, rearranged Bobby's pantry, taped her half-broken phone back together, swept the basement and found an old punching bag in storage—she'd put it up and beat it until she was shaking and weak. She'd actually worked up a solid appetite for the first time in recent memory and fixed her specialty: cereal and hot pockets. It was nervous, anxious energy that kept her going. But as the hours dragged on and no calls came from her brothers, she'd taken a turn for the worse. She was sullen and annoyed.

Currently, with a cigarette between her two fingers, she squinted out into the salvage yard angrily, took a drag. Sam hadn't called—his phone was *off* when she tried to call him—Dean wasn't answering—what the fuck was going on?
"Nasty habit, that," came a smooth dark voice beside herself.

Alex whipped her head up, her free hand automatically going to where her knife was. And then she saw who it was. "Crowley," she said, and let her hand fall away from near to the knife. She looked at him through narrow eyes, not sure how to react. She settled on demanding an explanation. "What are you doing here?"

"Now let's not be rude," he teased with a smile. "It's nice to see you too. Did ya miss me?"

Annoyed, Alex pivoted her chin downwards, stared at him coolly. "What do you want?" She took in another huff from the cigarette.

"To kill the devil," he said, as if she should have known as much. "You know this. Or did you forget about our little chats?"

"Can't say that I have," she told him, and purposefully blew smoke out onto his face, smiled at him contemptuously when he made a face and wrinkled his nose. "Sam told me about your little offer to help find Pestilence," she said. "Seems to good to be true."

"S'not though, is it?" he asked, waving the smoke away from his face in distaste. He seemed a little shorter on patience now.

Alex looked at Crowley down her nose mockingly, her cigarette forgotten momentarily, hovering near her face in her fingers. "You know my family's track record with trusting demons, don't you?"

He matched her attitude blow for blow. "Darling, you're not one to talk about trust issues—I find you completely untrustworthy. It's actually why I came. I'm here to say thanks, personally."

She brought her cigarette to her lips, took in a lungful of smoke. "For what?"

"For, hmm... how do I put this..." he asked softly, and then flew into a fit of rage. "For completely and totally mucking up a chance to kill the devil!"

Unfazed, Alex raised an eyebrow, looked at the ground and half rolled her eyes. "I was hoping you wouldn't bring that up," she said sarcastically.

"Perhaps you recall a small detail about little old you having a chance to off Lucy, mm?" Crowley asked in clipped, low tones. "Remember how I was going to see what I could find, see what I could uncover? Well. I've got answers now but what's this: You couldn't do the one thing you needed to do and keep it in your pants!"

Alex looked at him in silent hatred. "So there goes that little option," Crowley ranted, "and now I'm stuck doing all this bothersome legwork myself. I find it quite tiresome, especially because the moosey one keeps trying to kill me!" He sighed impatiently. "I hope it was worth it, your little sexual awakening," Crowley wiggled his eyebrows up once—not amused, just inconvenienced. "Tell me, was Cas a good lay then?"

Alex tossed the cigarette down, crushed it underneath the heel of her boot, pointed a threatening finger at the demon. "Watch your tone with me," she snapped. "I'm this close to stabbing you in the throat."

He held his hands up in mock-surrender. "Touch a nerve, did I?" He lowered his hands, narrowed his eyes. It was his turn to look at her with contempt. "You don't seem to realize the magnitude of the chance you've pissed away."
Alex was losing patience, fast. "It was just some rumor, Crowley, a rumor of a rumor."

"No, dearest, it wasn't," he said soft and low, one of those unnerving smiles on his face. "Oh the demons I tortured to find what I did... and just in time for you to tramp it up with Heaven's most recently fallen angel."

Alex gave Crowley an impatient evil eye, warning him to hurry up and explain himself.

"Bear with me now," Crowley said. "Come to find out, you're..." he pulled an overly thoughtful face, "satanic kryptonite, if you will. The demon I tortured went on and on about you and Sam and genealogy cack and DNA rubbish I couldn't quite wrap my head around, but..." he took in Alex's you have lost your damn mind expression and held up a finger, as if to tell her wait. "But, what I did understand was that the prophecy about Michael and Lucifer was misinterpreted."

Alex prompted him silently with a doubtful expression as he began to pace slowly back and forth in front of her.

"See, downstairs they foretold that Lucifer's vessel—Sam—would be dark and twisted by demonic forces—Azazel, the demon blood, etcetera etcetera, we all know this story don't we. Sam's the vessel—he was prepared for it since conception, practically. And in him, Lucifer is at his most powerful. Are you with me so far?" He smirked. "See 'cause this is where it gets good. The prophecy also said that the one who would defeat Satan would be blood-related, starkly similar and yet the total opposite of the devil's vessel—a pure soul capable of destroying all Lucifer should seek to create. And see everyone always thought that was Dean—Michael—who the prophecy spoke of. No, no. That, my dear, was you."

"And you think that why?" Alex asked slowly.

Crowley made a face. "Dean, a pure soul? Please." He rolled his eyes at that idea. Alex looked down, thinking hard as Crowley continued. "It's a story as old as time. You and Sam, it's like Yin and Yang, the two of you. The good one—you—the dark one—Sam. Polar opposites... a boy, a girl. What's more opposite than that, aye? And yet starkly similar. Twins."

Alex looked at him uncertainly, not knowing what to make of all of it. And Crowley chuckled. "Starting to regret that roll in the hay yet, love?" Jaw clenched tight, Alex looked at him spitefully. It didn't seem to bother him in the slightest. "I haven't even told you the best bit."

"Basically, from what I gathered, if you'd gone to Lucy with your sweet, shining pure soul and gotten him to say yes... he'd die. It wasn't clear how, demon wouldn't tell me no matter how much I..." he chuckled fondly, "twisted the knife, so to speak. But my guess's Lucy'd be so weak and useless with you as a vessel, Michael would win by default. You're so scrawny and that, Dean, even Adam as Michael would be able to win easily. Or who knows, maybe he'd explode the second he moved into Chalet Alex."

"What was clear was that Lucifer would die." He took a deep breath, paused for effect as if thinking of something. "And well, you would too, but small price to pay, am I right?"

Alex shook her head. Something was off. "How would the angels not know about this, huh? How would Lucifer not know?"

Crowley shrugged, blasé. "Beats me, but apparently he doesn't." He smiled coolly at her, raised an eyebrow slightly in contempt. "Does it even matter anymore? You've gone and cocked it up, after all."
"It does matter, because something's wrong about all this," Alex said. She had the distinct feeling that this was a load of crap, but Crowley seemed convinced and some parts did seem to make sense, but... "Why would he even want me a vessel when he could have Sam?"

"Ah, I wondered that too. He wouldn't. But he'd see it as an opportunity to blackmail Sam into doing what he wanted. Think about it. You'd play him while he thought he was playing you. He wouldn't even have known what hit him. 'Course you'd have to get your oaf brothers to agree to that and I suppose that would never happen, would it? They couldn't bear to part with their precious, sweet sister, let you die to save the world." He looked uncomfortable, like he was grossed out. "Your family is the most ridiculous display of Hallmark sentiment I've ever come across."

She ignored the would-be insult, trying to make sense of all of it. Crowley continued.

"Is it any wonder Azazel tried to skank you up with demon blood, love? Take away your little squeaky clean soul status? Not only did he do that but he pushed your mute button, tried to make you helpless. He must have known you were a threat."

She hated to admit it, but everything Crowley was saying sounded more and more likely. She was shocked, guilty, confused. "Makes sense now, doesn't it?" Crowley asked softly. "You were a weapon all this time and didn't even know it. And of all things a friggin' angel came 'round and ruined it for us all." He scoffed. "Maybe that's why God put a guardian angel on you, aye? To keep you alive long enough to kill the devil. Except you and good old Cas—had to go and ruin it all, randy sods. Can't say I fault you so much, he is easy on the eyes, but blimey Alexandra. The chance you flitted away."

"I don't understand..." Troubled, Alex was staring hard at somewhere to the left of herself, pensive. She struggled with whether or not to believe what the demon had told her. "I wish I'd known sooner," she muttered.

"Yes well. Wishing doesn't do us much good now does it," Crowley replied. He was being a real wiseass and Alex wanted another cigarette, bad. "We have one option left," Crowley said. "One. And it's a long shot from hell, if I say so myself. I need you and your two whiny brothers to cooperate with me if you're going to let me help you put Lucy back into time out."

Alex scoffed, chuckled, covering over her conflicted emotions with cynicism. "We don't need your help."

"Keep telling yourself that," he said smugly, and straightened his suit lapels. "Well. I'm off to go knock over a nest of demons. S'all part of my clever little plan to get us Pestilence's locale... care to join me? Get some aggression out? I mean it is your fault I'm having to do this, after all."

"Screw off." She told him rudely.

He looked like he'd expected as much from her. "Suit yourself." He moved as if to leave, then changed his mind, as if he had one last thing to say. He held up a finger for a moment. "Did you ever stop to think... that perhaps you don't have a Heaven... because your soul is destined for Hell?"

Alex looked at him wordlessly. "Of course you have," he answered for her smoothly, cooly. "It's the only logical thing to assume. But now, knowing these things I've just told you... do you wonder if perhaps your sweet little soul was supposed to be destroyed completely, wiped out of existence when you killed Lucy?" His mouth quirked up into a little smile. "Mysterious, isn't it. Mind boggling." He leaned closer, tapped her chin with his finger, getting a warning scowl from her. "Perhaps, somehow..." he all but whispered, "You still have a part to play in this, hmm?" He
stood back, shrugged nonchalantly, smiled cheekily. "Stranger things have happened."

And without warning, he disappeared into thin air.

Discouraged and frustrated, not to mention shocked, Alex spread her hands wide apart as she leaned heavily onto the porch railing. What—the—that hell! For a minute she just tried to breathe, tried to think straight. Talk about a bomb being dropped on her. Holy shit.

How could any of that be true? Was Crowley telling the truth about everything? Her eyes scanned back and forth rapidly on the ground below as her mind spun around and around. It did make some sense, or at least the idea of it. Sam was huge, strong, beefed up on demon blood—she was small in comparison. When she'd been younger, she'd cursed her petite build—she was strong, capable—but next to her big brothers, she'd felt small. Was her comparable weakness to her siblings actually a strength or part of destiny somehow? Was Crowley right, that God had tasked a guardian angel over her to keep her alive long enough to kill off the devil? That she'd had no heaven because in the future her soul wouldn't even exist at all? Was Dean the one who was supposed to walk away from the apocalypse?

So many questions. She thought back to Lucifer, when she'd been face to face with him in the hotel and he'd been so teasing and dark—and she wondered if maybe he were thinking even then about trying to use her to get Sam to say yes.

Alex would spend the rest of the day mulling over the things Crowley had said to her.

Wondering if by being with Castiel she'd messed up a chance to kill the devil. Realizing she would never take that back, ever, no matter what.

Wondering if maybe she still could somehow play a part in killing Lucifer, even if she wasn't exactly what the prophesy had called for—a pure soul. That was a load of crap anyway. What did losing her virginity have to do with anything? What Crowley had said was true—she was physically smaller than Adam, Michael's vessel. She hadn't been prepared since birth like Sam had been, which also made her weaker.

For once, her weakness seemed to be a strength, and all she could wonder was what did she have to lose? If there were even a chance that she could turn the tide in this... she would take it. The question she asked herself: was there a chance?

That Night

She was in the dream where Cas laid sleeping nearby. It was the same as always: Bobby's attic, the stars out of the window, Cas obscured by shadows on the bed. She looked in his direction for a few seconds, then leaned against the window and looked out of it, wondered where the sudden gust of chilly breeze came from—and looked up, saw that the roof was missing. She wandered into the center of the room as she gazed upward. Overhead, she could see all the stars shining down. And snow fell gently, slowly. Snow? That was new. She shivered, glanced over at the bed… and was shocked to see that it was empty.

Where had he—

"Alex?" came the familiar gravelly voice behind her, and she turned fast, saw Castiel—saw him in perfect vivid detail standing there in front of her. He was looking at her oddly, confused, like he didn't understand.
She almost fell over. "Cas—you're awake?!" she was overcome with shock and awe alike, unable to believe that he was there. Snow fell around them. Why was the dream changing?

"No... I'm not awake," he replied, looking at her like he couldn't believe what he was seeing, like he was confused but also amazed. "I'm sleeping," he told her, and she frowned now, too. "But I'm... less asleep than I was." He tore his gaze away from her, glanced around briefly, frowning ever so slightly. "Is this a dream?" He looked at her with one of those careful frowns that was so familiar. His head canted to the side in an inquisitive tilt. "Are you a dream?"

His question struck deep sadness into her. "No, I'm real," she said heavily. "You're the dream." He seemed puzzled by her statement. She looked into his eyes, went closer, wanted to cry, because he was so clear to her now for some reason. "I can see your face again," she said softly, and cupped it in both of her hands, trying to memorize the details. She was surprised that his skin was warm beneath her fingers, that she could feel the rough stubble underneath her fingers. "How can I see your face again?" She asked softly, mystified, becoming a little worried. Their eyes locked. He looked so real, especially since everything around them was so indistinct and unrealistic. He looked at her with a curious, slightly troubled frown on his features, as though he were confused as to why she was amazing to see his face. "I'm... forgetting what you look like," she explained faintly, ashamed. As she looked him over, her eyes went to the bruise along his temple and the scab above his other eyebrow. "What's wrong with your face?" she asked, frowning, touching the cut just slightly. That seemed like an odd thing to dream, and he'd never had a cut there before, so it wasn't a memory...

He touched a hand to the scrape above his eyebrow, feeling it, frowning. "I don't know," he said, then looked at her, squinting. "Did it work? What I did? Dean and Sam... they rescued you and Adam?"

"Yeah, it worked," Alex said bitterly, looking away.

Cas frowned, seeming to be putting together pieces in his mind. "How long have I been gone?" he asked. He seemed intensely concerned.

"Thirty-eight days," she told him, tried to smile and shrug, wrapping her arms around herself. "But who's counting?"

"Thirty-eight days?" he repeated, stunned. "I don't understand..." he trailed off. "And what's... what's happened to you?" he asked, looking at her carefully now, concerned. "You look unwell."

Alex felt ashamed again. "I uh, haven't been doing so great, I guess. Since you..." she couldn't say 'died.' "Left."

His expression wavered with guilt. "I'm so sorry," he told her, and in the cruelest trick of fate, he touched the side of her face, then brushed her hair back a little, and the touch was achingly tender. She began to cry softly at the ghostly touch, and she squeezed her eyes closed. **This was too much.** None of it was real, but she wanted it to be **so badly.** She felt his other hand on the other side of her face now. His hands were warm, they felt real. She opened her eyes, looked at him, her hands coming up to grasp either of his wrists firmly. She never wanted to let go of him, ever.

"I miss you," she whispered, agonized and miserable. "Why did you do this to me?"

He responded by becoming intensely frustrated with himself, and she thought offhandedly about how well her subconscious had constructed him. He was very believable. She was going insane, wasn't she? Losing her mind? But she didn't care. She wanted to keep dreaming this dream for as long as possible, even if it hurt. She could feel a tear rolling down her cheek even as she thought
"I'm asleep and I can't wake up," he said, and he sounded desperate as he held her face gently in both hands. "How do I wake up?"

"Why do you keep saying that?" She asked him, searching his bright blue eyes for understanding. "That you're asleep?"

"Because I am," he insisted, and his eyes went to her cheek. He moved his thumb, brushing the tear away.

Alex didn't understand why he would insist he was asleep—maybe, she thought, maybe this was some kind of metaphor for how she felt about Cas. This had to be a lucid dream, it made too much sense to be anything else. She shrugged—he was waiting for her to answer. And she couldn't bring herself to say 'you're dead.' She decided to play along. Pretend. She felt so defeated and she looked down for just a second. "If you're asleep, just... wake up." She looked back up at him, mourning his loss all over again. "Wake up."

Snow fluttered in the air around them.

"Just… wake up," he repeated, thinking hard about it. And he looked so real, he sounded so real, his touch felt real, he was insisting he was asleep and for the past few weeks as she'd had this recurring dream, he had been sleeping, unreachable. Why was this time different? And Cas had come to her in dreams before, hadn't he, and what if this really were him somehow, what if he were stuck somewhere oh my god! Her heart began to race as hope blindsided her and she began to lose the ability to breathe. "Are you… are you real?" she asked him, her eyes flickering wildly between him. She grabbed his arms tight, suddenly feeling frantic. "Is this really you somehow? Are you still alive?"

He opened his mouth to reply. But before he could say a thing, abruptly, he disappeared from her grip, leaving her panicking. "Cas?" she turned in a circle. "Cas!"

The snow began to fall heavily now, cold, whipping around her like a blizzard. She called his name again, but there was no reply.

And Alex suddenly woke up, sitting in the recliner that Bobby kept in the second floor bedroom. She blinked a few times, realizing where she was, that she'd been dreaming again.

The window was open, and cold night air seeped in, a breeze gusting into the room. That's where the wind had come from. She got up slowly, automatically, blank and hollow inside. She shut the window, absently rubbing her arms with her hands. Even though she was wearing a long sleeve flannel, she was still cold. For a few minutes—maybe five—she stared out the window. She really was losing her mind, thinking Cas was still alive and coming to her in dreams again. But he had before, she protested internally, desperately. Why would it be different now?

Because he's dead, you stupid girl.

She sat back into the recliner, crossed her arms, nestled down into the uncomfortable old chair, reached for her jacket, which laid on the floor beside the chair. In the pocket, his tie. She'd read somewhere that part of letting go of someone was getting closure… symbolically burying or cremating the remains of a loved one if you had no body to put in the ground. And it was almost like this tie was making it harder for her to let go of Cas.

She should burn it, she thought sadly, like they burned haunted objects to release ghosts into the void. He was haunting her, and she was letting him. But she couldn't bear the thought of parting with his tie, his blade, his memory. As much as it hurt to hold onto Castiel, letting go and trying to move on seemed worse. She held the stupid tie in her hand, closed her eyes, pictured his face. She
could see it again. A small mercy.

Her phone suddenly rang loudly, and startled, her eyes snapped open. Sam or Dean, finally. She fumbled for the phone—it was in the other jacket pocket. She reached for it, knocked it out and onto the floor, had to feel for it a couple seconds. The poor phone had death wish—the screen was cracked and distorted from her fit of rage the other night. She squinted at the screen—the incoming call had a 504 area code. Wasn't that New Orleans? She almost didn't answer, because she knew no one there and it wasn't one of her brothers like she'd been hoping. But with a heavy sigh, she figured *why the hell not* and hit the answer button.

"Hello?"

And she almost dropped the phone when she heard his voice on the other end. "Alex," he said.

"Cas!?"

"Yes, it's me," he said. "I woke up, like you told me to. Are you—"

"You woke up?" Alex repeated, a hand on the side of her head, her mouth hanging open as she stood frozen, unable to believe this. Was she still dreaming? "W-what happened? Where are you? Are you all right? You're alive!!" She pinched herself, hard. Ouch, *son of a bitch*, holy shit! Tears sprung to her eyes again, but this time they weren't because she was sad.

"Yes, of course I'm alive. I'm at a hospital," he was saying. "I'm told I've been in a coma. You thought that I was dead?"

She was buzzing with euphoric amazement, pacing back and forth, unable to contain herself as she tried to calm herself down. "What? A *coma*? I don't—can you come here? Shazam yourself over?"

He was quiet for the shortest moment. "Uh… no. I tried but… I seem to be… powerless. Completely."

She stopped pacing, worried all over again, suddenly wondering if he were laid up in a hospital paralyzed or near death. "What? Powerless? Are you okay?"

"I don't think so," he said, and he sounded vexed. "I feel… a lot of things. Everything hurts and itches and I think I'm… thirsty."

"You're, you're thirsty?" she asked, and she was having to smile through tears now. "But you have your legs and arms and you're not dead or dying, right?"

He was quiet for another second and she could just imagine him frowning, looking down at himself to check and see if he did have his legs and arms. "Yes, I'm all in one piece," he replied.

Alex was already grabbing up her jacket, her wallet. "What hospital are you in, I'm coming there right away," she said, yanking her jacket on practically as she shoved her wallet into her back pocket.

"The hospital bracelet says Saint Bernard Parish Hospital. In Chalmette, Louisiana," he said. Alex could hear another voice in the background where Cas was as she descended the stairs at almost a run. "The nurse is insisting I get off the phone now," Castiel said, sounding grumpy about it.

Alex's mind was a million places at once, too high on relief and joy to think straight. "Okay that's fine I can… a flight in just a little bit, umm I…" she stopped at the foot of the stairs, overcome suddenly, leaning against the wall there, barely able to believe it. "Oh *my god*, Cas," she said,
suddenly breathless from emotion. "I thought you were dead."

She could hear how worried he was. "Are you all right, Alex? What happened after I left?"

"I'll tell you everything when I get there," Alex said. "And I'll be there soon," she told him. "Not long at all, okay?" She was turning in a circle, not remembering where she'd put her shoes, she'd taken them off down here earlier, hadn't she? "Just uh, uh, give me a little bit and I'll be there. I can't—I can't think straight, holy crap," she exclaimed, unable to believe what was happening.

"How long?" Castiel asked. He sounded anxious. "I want to see you."

She almost ran out of the house without her shoes when he said that, it made her so much more desperate to see him. She thought fast, calculating travel time hurriedly in her mind. "A few hours, maybe? I dunno. A-as soon as I can. I'm coming now. I'll find you, okay?"

"The nurse is insisting," Cas said, then lowered his voice, like he were trying to be discreet. "She wants to talk about… insurance." He sounded like he had never heard of such a thing and was wary of it.

Alex found her shoes beside the front door, where she'd left them. She shoved her feet in haphazardly. "Stall her, I'll take care of all of that when I get there, okay?"

"Yes, good," Cas replied. He sounded reluctant to end the call. "I'll... see you soon."

Alex stopped again, smiling in absolute overjoyed disbelief. "Yeah. See you soon."

Cas grimaced as he shifted in the hospital bed. He was… tired. And sore. It was a strange sensation, and the nurse's constant questions were not helping. It had been almost three hours since he'd woken up and called Alex. The nurse had left a few minutes after he'd gotten off the phone with her. Castiel had feigned illness and had told her he was too unwell to answer questions. She'd seemed to believe him and had left him after telling him he would need several types of therapies after his month-long coma. His senses were dull—he couldn't remember what exactly she'd said now. He did remember her telling him how he'd been found on a shrimping boat off of Delacroix, bloody, unconscious, unresponsive. How the police would be coming in the morning to interview him about whatever incident had caused his assault.

She'd told him he was on a painful pain medicine and would need to continue to take it for awhile. He wasn't sure if the medicine were working. He was highly physically uncomfortable. Things ached that never had, especially his head.

The nurse was back now, asking him questions, trying to fill out a form. She'd reappeared about ten minutes ago with her clipboard and her questions. Stall her, Alex had said. Not something Cas knew how to do, exactly.

And it didn't help that all Castiel could think about was Alex. He kept looking to his right, where he could see out the open doorway and down a hall. Every part of him was anxiously anticipating when she'd appear, finally. When he could see that she was safe with his own eyes. He couldn't believe how long he'd been gone, how tired and thin she'd looked in the dream. He wondered how that had happened—how they'd been able to meet there at all...

"You said your… wife was on the way to get you, Castiel?" the nurse asked him, looking at him over the clipboard through thick-rimmed glasses. Castiel looked back at the nurse—her name was Katie Cooper—from where he'd been staring at the empty hallway. For a moment, he was confused. His wife? And then he remembered telling the nurse that earlier—because he'd recalled
when he had taken Alex to the hospital after Gabriel, that she'd told him only immediate family and spouses were allowed to stay with patients during non-visiting hours. She'd claimed she was his wife back then, too, so that he was allowed to stay with her. So he'd done the same thing this time. Alex would be proud of him for remembering that and for applying it again.

"Earth to Castiel?" the nurse prompted at his silence. "I asked you if your wife was coming to get you."

"Yes," he said, trying to focus. But he was reflecting on how strange it was to refer to Alex like that, even if it were just for cover. It wasn't an unpleasant strange, though. "She is."

This nurse had been asking him a barrage of questions, what was his name? Castiel. What was his last name? He didn't have a last name. How old was he? As old as the planet, if not older. But the body he inhabited was thirty-seven years old. The nurse had become increasingly confused with his honest answers. Currently she was staring at him in growing frustration she attempted to hide. Her pen hovered unmoving on the clipboard. "Well does she have a last name?"

Castiel almost said Winchester, then remembered that Alex and her brothers were wanted in multiple states. He glanced around the room, then beside himself at the heart rate monitor device. The name brand on it was Nellcor.

"Nellcor," he answered the nurse, smiling just slightly. Alex would be proud of him for thinking of that, too.

"Alex... Nellcor..." The nurse looked at him oddly, her eyes slid to the heart rate monitor, but she said nothing and went to the table on the other side of the room, sorted through her files. Castiel thought he heard her mutter something about "shock, maybe amnesia or delusion..."

Castiel looked back down the hallway. His stomach felt strange. Everything felt strange. Why was he powerless? He couldn't help but think of the future he'd glimpsed where he'd been human, weak… was this how it had happened? It worried him.

He felt so much, not just physically. His emotions, which he had thought were loud before, seemed to be screaming at him. He felt too much. It was intense. And every time he looked to the right and saw no Alex, he felt even more. Too much to hold. He was overwhelmed.

Alex had never been so anxious in all of her life, ever. Flustered and excited and nearly jumping out of her skin, she'd woken up poor Bobby, rambled off where she was going, told him she was taking one of his old junkers hope he didn't mind—she'd then driven herself to Sioux Falls Regional Airport, gotten a last-minute flight to New Orleans, realized she'd packed nothing, oh well. The flight was fast, only about an hour and a half. But it might as well have been a thousand years for her. She'd driven the guy sitting beside her insane the whole flight as she'd tapped her foot and checked her watch repeatedly and drummed her fingers and chewed ten sticks of gum right after the other.

After disembarking the flight, she'd gotten a cab to the hospital and she was now, finally, in the intensive care ward, barely able to see straight—she went to the first person she saw, a male nurse. Being this close to finding Cas was making the anticipation even worse. She couldn't stand it.

"Yes ma'am, can I help—" the nurse started to ask her, and then Alex happened to see a familiar face peering up from the room behind the orderly and she forgot her manners and everything else. Just ran.
Nurse Katie Cooper looked across the room at this Castiel guy suspiciously, her eyes squinty. He claimed to have no last name, said his wife's last name was Nellcor, told her he was as old as the planet…? He was either lying or he was crazy or maybe pulling her leg. That plus all the other weird, halting answers he'd given her… something was fishy. He seemed anxious, the minute he'd woken he'd started asking for a phone before he even knew why he was there. She wondered if he were afraid someone was coming after him. She was convinced now, after his shifty behavior, that he was either suffering from delusion, insomnia, or maybe he was in the mafia. That would explain the weird, obvious lies he'd been telling her. Or maybe it was a voodoo thing, what with that crazy symbol that had been carved into his chest… not that Katie believed in that stuff. Sure, she believed in the Loch Ness monster, but not witch things. That stuff was too icky.

Castiel looked to his right—he'd been doing that a lot, obviously expecting to see someone. But this time, his expression changed, became this remarkable mixture of surprise and anxiety and relief all at once—he sat up straight, then stood up without warning, a little clumsily—and promptly was barreled back over by a willowy dark-haired girl who wrapped herself around him tightly—she knocked him back so that he was sitting on the bed again, and the girl was crying through laughter, she was hugging his neck tightly, then pulling back to hold his face in her hands, looking at him like she couldn't believe he was real, then hugging him again with what looked like every ounce of strength she had, burying her face in his neck, sobbing happily. Castiel had wrapped his arms around her in the most tender, touching way; was cradling her, and his expression was strange, relieved—emotional in a restrained way, but emotional all the same—and Katie stood back, holding her breath almost. It was like those soldier reunions you saw on TV… like he'd been gone for years and they'd both been anticipating the reunion day and night, living for this exact moment.

Castiel's wife—Alex, he'd said her name was—pulled back a little, cupped his face in her hands tenderly, lovingly, gazed at him with great amounts of emotion. "I thought… I thought I lost you," she said in a choked-up whisper, and it seemed like Castiel could see nothing else except for her; like what she'd said wounded him on some level.

"No," he said simply, softly, and tucked some hair behind her ear, smoothed the skin of her cheek, moved his hand back behind her head even as in tandem, they seemed to get the same idea, and kissed each other gently, their arms tightening around the other, soft little sounds of relief escaping them both.

It was like nothing Nurse Cooper had ever seen before—like out of a movie, the way they touched each other, how obvious it was that they loved the other, had missed the other—worshiped the other, almost.

And when the two of them broke the kiss, Castiel had a bewildered, perplexed look on his face—Alex was looking at him in dawning disbelief—and he brought a hand up to his face slowly, touched his fingertips to just below his right eye and pulled his hand away, looking at his shining wet tears in utter shock.
The Eleventh Hour

"I don't have a choice. But I still choose you."
- The Civil Wars

Several Hours Earlier
Somewhere in East Utah

Backed into the dead end of a filthy alleyway, three men cornered a fourth.

"And you're sure this is where he'll be?" Crowley asked Brady—Pestilence's right-hand man. Well, right-hand demon. Crowley looked at him coolly, daring him to be lying about this.

Brady's face had blood streaks down the sides and splatters of the same on his expensive suit. Bright red was splotched underneath his nose and across his chin and there was some matted in his fair blond hair, too. He looked at Crowley with mild contempt, maybe because Crowley was the one who'd beaten the blood out of him. "Yeah. I'm sure Pestilence will be there," he muttered, then glanced over at the two brothers who stood back a few steps off—Dean, wary; Sam, cold and glaring.

Crowley turned away from the other demon, thoughtfully looking down at the piece of paper that Brady had just handed over. As Crowley swaggered over to Dean, Sam narrowed his eyes at Brady in unadulterated hatred.

"What do you think?" Dean asked Crowley, nodding at the slip of paper.

"It's good." Crowley seeming to be pleased. He handed Dean the paper with Pestilence's location, turning slightly to send Brady a smirk. "After all, you've got no reason to lie, have you? Like I said before, you're in my boat now."

Brady smiled facetiously. "You've screwed me—for eternity." He said, and Sam felt darkness choking him, white-hot anger bubbling in his veins. At his side, he held the demon blade.

"Nah," Crowley replied apathetically, glancing at Sam, who had murder on the mind. "Won't last that long. Trust me."

Earlier that day, Sam's world had been turned upside down. And he'd been waiting for this moment, the moment when he could slit Brady's throat.

Dean dragged in some guy, the demon who Crowley had said would lead them to Pestilence. And when they sat him down in a chair, tied him up, yanked the devil's hex bag off his head... Sam had gone still in shock, recognizing the demon.

"B-Brady?" Sam stared into the face of a guy he'd called a friend in his college years. And he hadn't understood, not at all.

"Heya, Sammy!" Brady smiled through bloody teeth even as Sam felt his reality crumbling anew. "Sorry but... Brady hasn't been Brady in years. Not since, oh... middle of our sophomore year?"

Shock filtered over Sam. Shock and horror when he'd realized that he'd been friends with a demon, good friends and for years. And suddenly it clicked into place, made perfect sense how Brady had suddenly just dropped out of pre-med in their sophomore year, how he'd gotten into drugs, started
taking home a different girl every night (usually a stripper or a hooker). And Sam remembered trying so hard to help the guy he thought was his friend get back onto the 'right track.' Why hadn't he realized back then that Brady hadn't just changed—that he'd been a different person? That he'd been possessed? It was so obvious now, like the demon had been taunting him almost, daring him to realize. But Sam hadn't.

Brady chuckled to see Sam's realization and stunned silence. "That's right. You had a devil on your shoulder even back then. All right, now, let it aaaaaalllll sink in..."

And that's when Sam realized something else and flew into a fit. "You son of a bitch. You son of a bitch!" Dean had to restrain Sam, who was almost blinded with rage. "You introduced me to Jess!"

"Yes sir!" Brady grinned proudly. "That was me!" He laughed in unrestrained, cruel delight at Sam's reaction. "Remember when I came back from break all messed up?" He taunted. "Remember how much time you spent trying to get me back on the right track? You really were a good friend, weren't you Sam. But ol' Yellow Eyes didn't send me back to be your friend. No, we could tell we were starting to lose you. You were becoming a mild-mannered, worthless sack of piss! Now, come on. We couldn't have that. You were our favorite, he had plans for you. So I hooked you up with a pure, sweet, innocent piece of tail, watched you fall in love with her... and then I toasted her on the ceiling. That's right—Azazel might have put the hit out on Jessica, but, man, I got to have all the fun!"

Sam almost murdered Brady right then and there even as the most painful memory he possessed had surged through his mind all over again: the girl he loved more than anyone, screaming and burning to death on the ceiling as he'd watched and done nothing. Just run away.

"Did it make you mad Sam? Did it get that blood of yours boiling?" Brady had asked, barely able to contain his spiteful mirth. "Must have, after all, got you back in the life, back where we needed you..."

Dean was still holding onto Sam at that point, who was shaking, furious, ready to claw Brady's eyes out.

"You know, she thought we were friends, too. She let me right in the day that I lit her up... you know what she was doing? She was baking cookies. Such a sweet little girl..." Brady had begun to laugh gleefully at that point as he continued to talk, taking huge amounts of pleasure in the memory of murdering the girl Sam had wanted to marry, have children with, grow old with. "She was so surprised..." Brady drawled, "so hurt when I started in on her... begged me please no Brady, what are you doing, Brady?"

And Brady had practically cackled, watching Sam writhe as he tried to get away from Dean's restraining grip.

It had taken everything Sam had inside not to kill Brady then—just rip himself out of Dean's grasp and fucking send that black-eyed asshole into the darkness that did not end. But Sam had gotten a grip on himself (well, with Dean's help) and told himself wait. Be patient. Get what we need out of this motherfucker, and then you can rip his heart out of his chest.

Now, the moment was here. Sam knew it, was feeling some sort of calm, dark anticipation as he looked at Brady. At his side, he held onto the demon blade. He could almost smile now. Behind him, he knew Dean had the can of salt from the back of the car.

Crowley seemed to get his cue, realized that it was time to leave. And as he began to retreat toward the open end of the alley, Brady's expression chilled a couple degrees. "Where are you going?" He
demanded, even as Dean began to pour a thick line of salt across the alley way. Brady looked at it
nervously, then Crowley, seeming to finally see that he was much more screwed than he'd
imagined.

"I'm going to do you a favor," Crowley said, stopping next to Sam. "End your misery once and for
all. By association, that is." He gave Brady a coy smile and a wink, then looked at Sam knowingly.
"I expect we'll be in touch."

Sam just stared Brady down, not looking away for a second.

Dean let Crowley pass and and then closed the salt line behind him, effectively sealing Brady into
the dead-end alley. Crowley disappeared into thin air, and Brady looked like he wished he could do
the same. Too bad Crowley had trapped him in his body with a sigil. Sam's mouth curved upward
just slightly.

Dean set the can of salt down. "What is this?" Brady asked, attempting nonchalance, his eyes
flickering between the two brothers. He was smiling strangely, nervously, and he had his hands in
his pockets.

"Guessing you wanna do the honors?" Dean asked Sam while looking at Brady calmly.

"You know I do," Sam replied, not taking his eyes off of the demon for even a second.

"What is this?" Brady asked again, growing angry. "I gave you what you wanted, what we agreed
on—let me go."  

Dean chuckled, looked down, and Brady looked at him sharply. "What's so funny?"

The oldest Winchester wet his lips, looked at Brady without wavering in the slightest. "All those
angels, all those demons, all those sons of bitches—they just don't get it, do they, Sammy?"

Sam's eyes narrowed just slightly. "No, they don't, Dean."

"You see, Brady… we're the ones you should be afraid of." Dean said. "And you don't get to call
the shots anymore." He glanced at his brother, silently giving him the go-ahead.

Sam tightened his grip on the knife, he began to approach Brady, who scoffed, laughed lightly,
rolled his eyes. That lifeless smile never left his face. "I bet this is a real moment for you, big boy.
Gonna make you feel all better?"

"It's a start," Sam said as he took another slow, deliberate step towards Brady, who, in unison, took
a step back. His smile faltered a little. Good. Sam wanted to draw this out—see Brady squirm and
beg for his life. But Brady suddenly smirked, glanced at Dean and then back at Sam, wiggled his
eyebrows up briefly.

"You know, the only thing I wish were different about all of this is I wish your sister were here to
see this," his smile widened when Sam's expression registered cold, warning fury. "Hell, maybe I
just wanna see her again, after all, it's been awhile, and damn if that little bitch isn't hot."

"Don't talk about my sister, Brady," Sam threatened lowly, trying to keep himself in check. His
voice trembled in undiluted rage but he held himself back, refusing to let Brady rattle him.

"Aw Sam, come on. Lighten up!" Brady grinned, giving the impression of relaxed, easy going
nonchalance. "You think you're the only one Daddy had plans for?" Sam's confidence flickered.
"Are you really that stupid?" Brady asked scornfully. "I don't think you are, so tell me: why the
hell have you been playing dumb all these years?" Brady took another step back as Sam advanced on him by another step. He gave an overly dramatic shrug, simpering almost. "I like Alex, so sue me. She was supposed to be special, too, did you know that?" His lips curved upward in a knowing, closed-mouth smile. He was in total control of the conversation, and they both knew it. "And she still will be special, after this," Brady continued, and Sam didn't like his soft, knowing tone. "The two of you... the most special out of all the children Azazel gathered..."

"What are you talking about?" Sam demanded, becoming afraid but trying to remain outwardly threatening. Behind him, Dean had gone still, was listening in rapt worry.

Brady ignored the question. "I've heard she's into angels these days, is that true?" he asked, seeming to be greatly amused by the thought.

Sam knew Brady was trying to get a rise out of him, use a wild, brainless attack to make a break for it. So Sam held himself back, trying to stay aloof and collected. Speaking through clenched teeth, he raised the knife a little, glaring at Brady relentlessly. "Cut the crap, Brady. You tell me what you're talking about right now or I swear to god—"

"What, you'll kill me? Great, so do it! Is that gonna make up for all the times that we yanked your chain? Yellow Eyes, Ruby, me? But it wasn't all our fault you turned out how you did, was it? No, no, no, no. You're the one who trusted us. You're the one who let us into your life, let us whisper in your ear over and over and over again. You're the one who's staring reality down the barrel and trying to act all high and mighty but really, you're just as low as the rest of us. We've got the same stuff in our veins, you and me and, deep down, you know you're just like us: angry, spiteful... full of desire for everything corrupt and abominable. Sam, you're part of something bigger than yourself, something darker than all those secrets you keep..."

Getting close to losing it, Sam's voice raised, and fast. "Shut up," Sam spat, trying to get control back. "What did Azazel plan to do with my sister? Tell me now."

Brady cracked another bloody grin. "Oh, you'll see, Sam, don't you worry about that."

The foreboding, threatening nature of the words, combined with the way Brady seemed so sure made Sam lose his edge for a second. And when he faltered, the demon took the opportunity. The grin disappeared unnervingly fast and Brady suddenly lunged at Sam, swinging a wild fist at him. Sam reacted fast, ducking the blow just barely, swiping the demon blade across Brady's side, grabbing Brady and whirling him then shoving him face-first into the wall. He held Brady there, the blade held tight against Brady's neck.

"Tell me now, you son of a bitch!" Sam thundered, pulling the knife tighter against the demon's neck. And even though he had the upper hand, he shook not with rage, but with fear. Trying to cover it, he lowered his voice, filled it with as much menacing as he could muster. "You aren't taking anyone else from me ever again, asshole."

Brady laughed, low and soft, slow, and Sam could see the demon's eyes slide in his direction. "No, you're right. I'm not," he said smugly. "See... this right here is what they call 'misdirected anger,' Sammy. The rage and bitterness you feel, the all-consuming need compelling you to bury that knife in me until I bleed and die underneath you... is what you should feel for yourself." His voice lowered to a whisper. "Because you're the one who's to blame for everything that's going to happen." He laughed again, harder, loud, a sudden bark of sound. "It's just too good!"

"Stop laughing," Sam growled, and shoved Brady hard, backed up a couple steps.

Brady turned around, sneering. "Do you think maybe you hate us so much because you hate what
you see every time you look in the mirror? Because you know, deep down, how dark you are, how twisted? You ever think of that, huh?" He was gloating, gleeful, and Sam could feel himself losing his temper completely. He was doing nothing to this waste of space, he was so furious, and every second that passed and Brady continued to breathe air was vile. "Did you ever wonder if maybe the only difference between you and a demon... is your hell is right here on earth, and no matter whether you're dead or alive you'll never escape from your worst enemy... yourself."

"Maybe that's true," Sam breathed, and his mouth curved upwards now in a smile. Brady's eyes narrowed, his smile faded—even as Sam lunged forward and stabbed the blade hard into the flesh of Brady's stomach, relishing the scream of pain and fear that ripped out of Brady's mouth. He grabbed Brady behind the neck with his free hand, forced him to meet his gaze as he died. "But you and all of your friends will never escape me, either." Sam ripped the blade out and Brady collapsed, his glazed eyes wide with shock, mouth slack as he fell down, dead.

Breathing heavily, Sam stared down at the dead demon, expecting to feel more triumph and more relief. What he felt was more like dread and emptiness. He turned around. Dean was looking at him oddly—warily. And Sam looked down at the blade in his hand. It was covered in demon's blood and Dean was looking at the knife, too. Warily. Then at Sam.

"You want me to—" Dean started.

"I got it," Sam muttered and wiped the knife, both sides, onto the leg of his jeans, defying Dean to continue the sentence. And Dean, chastised, nodded grimly, looked at Brady's body. Sam brushed past him, stalked down the alley toward the Impala. When he got to the car, he didn't get in, just suddenly leaned down onto the roof, feeling so much utter heaviness. He thought of Jess—sweet, innocent Jess, who had never hurt anyone, who had looked at him like he was a hero, a good man. She'd always told him how proud she was of him. How much she loved him. Sam had loved her more than anyone, would have given anything to have been there in her place, to have died instead of her. Nothing could ever bring her back: a thought that had echoed hollowly in his heart from the day she died until now.

Sam would never tell Dean or Alex—not now and not then—but for years in the back of his mind, he'd sometimes blamed them and Dad for her death. Because if they hadn't come to get him, if they hadn't pulled him back into the hunting life, she would have lived. That's what he'd always thought. But after today, Sam wasn't so sure.

What Brady had said... maybe it was his fault, and not because of something he did or didn't do, but because of who he was. That single thought was unbearable. He held a hand to his forehead, his mind whirling at a dizzying rate. The dreams of his sister were starting to pound through his head again without warning, and he was scared, cornered, wondering why Brady said she was supposed to have been special, and still would be...

"You okay?" Dean asked. Sam realized Dean was across from him at the driver's side door of the Impala.

Sam let out a heavy breath, pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to get himself together. He shook his head, disillusioned about what had just happened and wary of the future. "I thought... it'd feel better, you know?" he asked. His voice and face darkened. "And I didn't like that stuff he said about Alex."

Dean seemed to share his sentiment—glancing to the side darkly, his jaw tightening perceptibly. He opened his door. "Me either. Let's get back to Bobby's, regroup, get her. Go from there."

"Yeah," Sam said. He glanced back at the dead body in the alley way, opened the door to his side
of the car, paused. Revenge never brought back the ones you lost. He knew that. So why did it feel like he'd lost Jess all over again? And why was he so certain, deep down, that his sister was next? The things he didn't want to remember crossed his mind without his permission. He heard the screams again, felt the heat of flames…

"Hey!" Dean's voice came from inside the car and Sam realized he was just standing there. "Earth to planet Sam. Come on, it's like a solid twelve hour drive. We need to get going." Dean put his hands up, impatient, clearly wondering what Sam's deal was.

Sam looked over his shoulder for one last moment. "Yeah, no, sorry."

Dean looked at Sam oddly as he sat down and swung his legs into the car, pulled the door shut after him. "You sure you're okay?" he asked his little brother, concern tightening his features.

"No." Sam clenched his jaw, glancing his brother's way but not looking at him directly. "I'm not okay."

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**Chalmette, Louisiana**

3:08am

Nurse Katie Cooper remained frozen and silent as the just-reunited couple in front of her looked at each other wordlessly. Alex, who'd knocked Castiel over when she'd run to him full force, was sitting on her husband, her legs on either side of him. Her arms had slackened around his neck as they stared at each other in what looked like astonishment.

Castiel blinked a couple times as he stared at the tears that had come away on his fingers, then he looked at his wife in surprise, who seemed similarly stunned, a breathless, half-confused smile on her face, like the sight of the tears amazed her, touched her. Slowly, she brushed the backs of her fingers across one of his cheeks and then gently cupped her hand to the other side of his face comfortingly, using her thumb to brush away the wet streak below his eye.

Weird, you'd think he'd never cried before from the way they were both reacting to it. Maybe he wasn't a very emotional guy. Either way… God, it was a sweet moment. The nurse almost felt like she could get teary eyed, too. She cleared her throat apologetically, feeling like she was part of an extremely intimate moment, and was pretty sure that the wife hadn't even noticed her yet—which made it feel even more like an intrusion.

The wife—Alex, Castiel had said her name was—turned her head, noticed Katie for the first time, seeming mildly surprised to see the nurse standing there. "Oh. Hi." Alex cleared her throat, wiped her cheeks rapidly with the side of her hand. "Didn't see you there." Castiel hadn't looked Katie's direction even once—he currently seemed to have eyes only for Alex, who maybe felt his intensely soulful gaze and turned her attention back to him. She seemed unable to stop herself and touched the side of his face again, her face relaxing into the smallest little smile, like she couldn't believe he was really there. Like he was the most precious thing to her.

"Sorry," the nurse apologized, feeling more and more like she was intruding with every passing second. "I don't mean to interrupt…" she cleared her throat and excused herself fumblingly. "I'll uh, give you two a minute. I'll be right outside if you need anything." She stepped out of the room, feeling embarrassed of herself and a bit flustered. Neither Castiel or Alex seemed to hear her or care, they were too busy being wrapped up in each other—quite literally.

Katie remained close, watching in quick flickering glances from the side of her eye as she held her clipboard, pretending to read it. She couldn't help it—she was curious as crap about the mysterious
couple who were currently saying nothing, just embracing each other—his arms circling around her waist, one of her hands on his shoulder, the other curled into the hair at the back of his head, and it looked like their eyes were shut—he'd rested his head onto her shoulder, his face was buried in the side of her neck, she had her face bowed down toward his, her nose was in his hair, her eyes were shut. Katie wasn't sure if she'd ever seen two people who appeared to be more in love. And there was a pang of disillusionment or maybe jealousy in the pit of her stomach. Billy had never held her like that, ever.

Katie studied the wife carefully. Alex looked to be in her late twenties—she wore some old jeans, hunting type boots, a neutral-toned plaid button up, a cargo jacket. She had a military style messenger bag slung across her body. Actually, no… Katie realized on closer inspection that it was a *real* military grade ammo bag. Katie's brother was in the Marines and he used the same kind. Huh. This Alex girl had the look of someone who was smart and sharp, observant and wary—she was wiry and petite but looked relatively strong… though she currently looked a little underweight and not very well-rested, like she'd been running and looking back over her shoulder nights on end. It all added in to the theory that Katie was beginning to build that these two were involved in some bad business. She briefly pictured them as Bonnie and Clyde types, or maybe sexy international spies like in that Brad Pitt movie she'd seen a few summers back.

"Are you in a lot of pain, Cas?" Alex asked her husband in a soft, worried murmur, pulling back and looking at his cut up face then ghosting her fingers over the bruises that discolored his temple, his jaw. *Cas*—that must be his nickname.

"I have no real point of reference to access, but… yes, I believe so. It's not as bad as it was when I first woke up." He told her. He grimaced a little, and his wife grimaced too, clearly not happy about his pain, empathizing with him. He brushed aside his own discomfort. "The angels… did they hurt you?" he asked, his face etched over in apprehension.

*Angels?* Katie's unconscious frown deepened slightly. Castiel had said some stuff about angels earlier, too, when she'd been trying to get basic information from him—he'd sounded a little crazy. But Alex didn't look at him like he was nuts when he asked her if angels had hurt her.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Alex told her husband, who caught her right hand in his, looking at the large scab across her knuckles.

"This?" he asked, looking up at her, his expression tense with concern.

Katie suddenly wondered if maybe 'the angels' was a gang or a code word for whoever had hurt Castiel. "No, that was me," Alex told Castiel, looking down at her messed up hand. She sounded mildly ashamed. "I did that."

Her husband's expression grew confused in the midst of his vast worry. "You?" he asked.

"Long story," she said, smiling softly, dismissing it, refocusing on her husband, brushing his messy hair back from his face. He wasn't easily derailed, still gazed up at her with great amounts of unease. But she was smiling at him despite that, and her closed-mouth smile was so heartfelt and full of tenderness. "I'm so glad you're okay." She told him softly. It was easy to hear, from the wavering tone in her voice, how convinced she'd been that Castiel wasn't coming back.

Katie glanced at her watch. She really needed to do her rounds soon. Feeling really rude but knowing how she was always pissing off the head nurse and some of the doctors with her penchant for running behind schedule, forgetting paperwork, and getting too chatty with patients, Katie cleared her throat, turned around and went back into the room, an apologetic expression on her face. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Nellcor?" Katie asked, approaching the two of them.
Alex's brow furrowed, she looked at the nurse as if to ask 'me'? She glanced at her husband and then got a funny almost amused look on her face as she looked back at Katie. "Y...es," she replied slowly, glanced at Cas again as she got up, removed herself from her husband and stood beside him, not going far from him at all. "That's me. Mrs… Nellcor."

Castiel was now looking at Katie grumpily, clearly unhappy that they'd been interrupted.

"I'm so sorry..." Katie paused and tried a disarming, silly smile "I don't mean to get all up in ya biz-nizz," Katie apologized with joking drama, falling back on her goofy side to try and get a laugh or smile. She wilted a little when they both looked at her oddly. Dammit. No one ever thought that was funny, why did she always try it again? Professional. Be professional. "But uh, I need some information. Some paperwork. I'll, I'll leave the two of you once I get some basic information," she said, being totally serious again. "There's just not a lot of us nurses on the night shift and I need to make my rounds soon, so..."

"Of course," Alex said—she was more understanding than her sullen husband—and also appeared anxious for answers. She stayed at his side, kept a hand on his shoulder. "How is he doing? He said he was in a coma?"

"Yes, he was in a coma," Katie confirmed, all business. "But he's doing well—remarkably well. We were all pretty surprised that he woke up at all, actually. The doctor on-call should be in to see you both soon, by the way, and he can tell you more, but... for now, I can tell you that your husband was pretty much brain dead. Then he just... woke up a few hours ago out of nowhere." Alex and Castiel exchanged a brief glance at that. "He was a little disoriented, but very coherent overall." She was getting a little animated now. "It was kind of a miracle, really." Crap, there you go again, inserting personal opinion into medical diagnosis. Katie made herself get back to just facts. "We've got him on a morphine drip for the pain right now, we'll increase the dose if he continues to experience discomfort... his vitals are good, he seems to be recovering a lot better than some might, actually." Katie looked at Castiel, mildly impressed, giving him a little smile. "I can't believe he stood up a minute ago when you came in. Pretty dang cool."

Alex was nodding, listening closely. At the last part, she smiled, glanced down at her husband, gave him a knowing smile. "He's... a pretty dang cool guy," she said, grinning now, and it made her even prettier than she already was. There were clear notes of pride, love, and admiration in her voice. Castiel looked almost bashful at the playful compliment, the smallest smile tugging on his lips he looked at his wife, who suddenly seemed to think of something and looked back at the nurse. "Wait... what's the pain medication for, exactly? What are his injuries?"

Katie didn't have to look at his chart, she knew Castiel's condition by heart. "He had severe internal bruising and trauma to the brain and head, as well as the... freaky symbol that was cut into him. The cuts were deep and still haven't finished healing all the way." She studied their reactions at the mention of the symbol. The wife seemed to know, her expression fell, she grew pensive, looked at Castiel, whose wide, open eyes looked back up at her as if he were silently telling her not to be upset. Still, Alex was clearly troubled.

Katie's curiosity was killing her, but she guessed asking about the symbol and the circumstances was the police's job, not hers. "He's going to need physical therapy most likely," she told Alex. "Not much probably, but we'll want to verify that his motor skills are up to par. He'll need a lot of rest, shouldn't stay on his feet too long. We'll probably want to keep him a couple more days for observation before he goes home with you."

Alex's expression showed a clearly negative reaction. "A couple more days?"

Katie paused, looked between the two of them, uncertain why they'd be eager to leave when Castiel
wasn't fully recovered… what if they were on the run from the guys who'd cut Castiel up? She tried not to show how interested she was, just frowned slightly. "Is that going to be a problem?" she asked, fishing for answers and trying not to sound suspicious.

Alex's mouth turned downward briefly and she shrugged, shook her head, acted suddenly unfazed, like Katie had misread her. She gave a bright smile like everything were fine, shook her head. "No, no. Not at all."

Katie wasn't sure—she didn't know if that were the truth or not, seemed sort of over the top... but she went along with it, moved ahead—she really did need to start her rounds as soon as possible. "Good. Well, here's the part everyone loves: paperwork." She laughed awkwardly at her own joke. "I'll need you to fill out some forms, we're going to need some ID for him, insurance… he's been on life support for over a month now, I'm afraid the bill might be a little shocking…" Katie glanced down at her clipboard, realizing she had just gone and said something inappropriate again. She tried to recover. "No worries, I'm sure it'll be fine. We can talk to the billing department… someone will be in in about… four hours, around seven."

Alex nodded, looking down, frowning in thought. God, they were a young couple—well, no they weren't, he looked almost forty—but somehow they seemed young, and Katie felt bad, wondered if the cost of the medical care would set them back too bad, put a strain on their marriage. She hoped they had good insurance. She then remembered there was one more thing she needed to discuss with Alex. Katie cleared her throat, tried to be discreet. "Mrs. Nellcor, if I can just talk with you privately? For a minute?"

Alex's attention seemed to be piqued and she nodded consent, followed Katie into the hallway where they stood out of earshot from Castiel but could still see him. "Mrs. Nellcor—" Katie started.

"Call me Alex," she said, grinning again at the use of her last name, like she found it funny or awkward or both.

Katie shut her mouth, opened it again. "Alex." It shouldn't have felt so weird, addressing a patient's spouse by their first name, especially since Katie thought Alex looked just a little younger than herself. "Your husband is… displaying signs of… moderate delusion, possibly some kind of trauma induced selective amnesia."

Alex grew concerned, her eyes narrowed in thought, she immediately looked back toward where her husband sat on the bed, staring back at her. "How do you mean?" she asked Katie.

Katie lowered her voice a little. "Well, he's just said some strange things. Like, that he had no last name… that he was as old as the planet, but that his body was thirty-seven… some stuff about angels. I think he thinks he is one, or was one."

Alex made a thoughtful face, almost amused. "That does sound a little crazy."

Katie was confused. A lot of people, when getting even slightly bad news, got worried and paranoid, and it was like you could see them starting to prepare for the worst as they wondered 'will I have to live the rest of my life with this?' but this Alex woman was unaffected. She was looking back into the room, smiling at Castiel with soft eyes, eyes full of fondness and love. Like she wouldn't care what was wrong with him. Like she loved him no matter what. Katie realized she had never looked at Billy like that. And maybe she was nuts but seeing this weird, quirky, totally in love couple was suddenly making her question her own two-year relationship. Just… the way Castiel was looking at Alex even now, like he didn't want her to disappear from his eyesight, like he absolutely adored her.
If a guy looked at her like that, she wouldn't mind if he were a little crazy, either. Katie's curiosity got the better of her. "If you don't mind me asking... how did the two of you meet?" she asked Alex, who refocused on the nurse, looking mildly knocked off balance by the question.

"Um, we met…" there was a distinctly suspicious slide of Alex's eyes to the side, like she was trying to think of something. "At work. We met at work. He uh, was around for a whole year before I really noticed him. You would have thought I didn't even know he was there." Alex chuckled as if it were funny. "Then one day he walked through the door and... it was like sparks flew." She was laughing softly, to herself, like it was an inside joke. She shrugged, looked back at Castiel again. Her amusement softened into that same fond gentle gaze she seemed to constantly look at her husband with. "Now… here we are."

Katie was intrigued and now totally convinced that the two of them were spies or secret agents. Maybe they weren't even really married, actually, maybe that was some kind of cover story, but in love? Definitely. They were definitely in love. And you know what, she was going to choose to believe they were married, because even if they weren't, they should be. And Katie was worried for them, because she didn't even know who they were, but she could feel, instinctively, that they were up against something.

And it was the exact kind of thing she constantly got in trouble for, but Katie asked it anyway: "I'm sorry, it's none of my business but… the way he was found—with the… weirdo symbol carved into his chest. Is he… are the two of you in some kind of trouble?"

Alex looked at her and was mildly amused again, her expression seemed to say you might say that—and Katie felt a thrill race through her. Oh my god I knew it, secret agents! "Nothing we can't handle," Alex said, and there was a confidence and serenity there that Katie thought was so damn cool.

She felt slightly starstruck and couldn't help but grin stupidly as she pulled out the basic information form and handed it over. "Okay, well, uh, if you could just fill out this patient information form. For our records, if you can. I'll have someone from the billing department come up in the morning. And I'll be back to check in after my rounds."

Alex took the form and looked at Katie in mild concern at her behavior. "We'll... be here."

"Okay, great," Katie said, and hurried off.

Alex watched the nurse go, looked down at the paperwork in her hand, and crumpled it up as she went back to Castiel. They would not be there when the nurse got back. She tossed the crumpled form into the trash bin beside the door, shut the door behind her for privacy... stopped when her eyes locked with Cas.

"Hi." She said softly, briefly forgetting her hurry. Just took him in—hospital gown and bracelet, messy hair, bright blue eyes, boyish features. She still couldn't believe he was really here, and couldn't ever remember feeling this happy or relieved—ever.

"Hello," he replied, and there was that little ghost of a smile on his lips again. He was irresistible and she went to him again, hugged her arms around his neck, let out a shuddering breath... so, so, so relieved to feel him breathing, his heartbeat pounding against her, his arms around her. In fact, it struck her all over again that he really was back and tears filled her eyes. She squeezed her eyes shut, held him tighter for a second, felt his forehead brush against her neck as he turned his face toward her.

Alex had to force herself to think about what she was doing—getting them out of there before
anyone else showed up and realized that Castiel had no ID, no insurance, no way of paying whatever medical bill he'd accumulated... it would be simplest just to cut and run while they could. Reluctantly, she drew back and looked at her angel. "Can you walk?" she asked. She wasn't above stealing a wheelchair too, if she had to.

"Yes, I believe so."

"Good, cuz we have to go," she told him. "Get out of here while there's not a lot of staff around."

And looking down into his face, she didn't want to have to be away from him for even a second, but she forced herself, again, to get her head in the game. She looked around the room, spotted the bedside table, where the familiar trench coat was folded up on one of the lower shelves—she could see little peeks of his pants and shirt, jacket sticking out underneath it, too. His shoes were on the floor, she saw that the socks were in shoved into each shoe. Okay, good.

Alex crouched, picked the stuff all up except for the shoes, straightened back up looked at him expectantly, set his clothing down onto the bed beside him.

He understood and stiffly he pushed himself up to his feet, pulled off the hospital gown awkwardly. He was wearing black boxer briefs that the hospital must have put on him—she didn't recognize them. But what she noticed more than his underwear was the scabbed angel sigil on his chest. And momentarily stilled in faint horror, she stared. "Oh Cas." She touched her fingers to the scabbed sigil, and she saw him flinch just slightly underneath the touch of her fingers.

He'd done this to himself, for her. She sought his gaze, feeling horrible all over again. "That's not what hurts," he told her. "Mostly it's my head and... well... everywhere."

Alex handed him his white dress shirt, watched him shrug it on. He didn't button it up yet. "Where are Sam and Dean and Adam?" he asked, taking the pants from her now and bending with a grimace, putting each of his legs through a foot hole. The wrong ones.

"Backwards, Cas," she told him, having to press a smile away. "Backwards."

He paused, looked, frowned briefly. "Oh." He fixed the problem and pulled his pants all the way up, buttoned and zipped them.

"Sam and Dean are somewhere up northeast of here, trying to find Pestilence—Gabriel said the horsemen's rings make some kind of key to Lucifer's cage, so... that's what we're doing."

He frowned. "Interesting." He picked his suit jacket up, she buttoned his dress shirt without a second thought. He watched her work, quiet for a moment. "And Adam? Where is he?"

Alex paused, two buttons away from being done. Her eyes flickered up to his, her expression grew harder. "Gone," she buttoned the last two buttons. "He said yes to Michael, we're pretty sure."

"I don't understand..." Castiel said. He was in deep, apprehensive thought.

"Same here," Alex told him, then motioned at his suit jacket, which he'd been holding forgetfully. "Jacket." She glanced back at the closed hospital room door, nervous about someone coming in and finding her about to whisk away the coma patient who hadn't paid and wasn't on file and had no records.

Cas shrugged on the black suit jacket, sat down onto the bed, grunted slightly when he reached down for his socks and shoes. "I find getting dressed to be tiresome," he complained, pulling on one sock, then pausing. "Is this on the right foot?"
"I... don't think it matters with socks," she told him, a crooked little smile pulling on her mouth. She watched him for a minute as he put on his socks, then pulled on his shoes, tying those horrible uneven knots he always did. He did it all slowly, slightly clumsily, obviously sore and struggling to move well. She wondered how long he'd be like this for. "When do you think your batteries'll recharge?" she asked.

"Meaning my state of celestial grace?" he asked. He shook his head and looked down, his eyebrows knit together tightly. "I don't know. Maybe my... 'batteries'... may never be recharged. I feel incredibly..." he looked up, and his expression seemed lost, afraid, confused, his voice faltered, and it had never done anything quite like that before. "Human." It was like being punched in the stomach, that quiet confession. Neither of them said anything, but both of them were thinking of 2014. Castiel, in particular, looked worried. "How am I supposed to keep you safe now?" he asked her, and he seemed so much smaller and more fragile than he ever had. Alex didn't like to see him scared.

She tried to look hopeful and confident, squeezed his shoulder. "We'll keep each other safe," she told him. But she was scared, too. What was going on?

He stood up, still frowning slightly, and he took the trench coat up, shrugged it on. And seeing him in it suddenly made her feel a little better.

"You look..." she couldn't think of a word, just let out some sort of appreciative soft huff of air. "Just missing one thing," she said, and reached into the pocket of her jacket... drew out his tie.

He saw that she had the tie and there was that slight smile again.

"I kept it for you," Alex told him, stating the obvious—what she didn't say was that she'd kept a part of him with her at all times, day and night. But when his eyes flickered to the pocket she'd pulled it out of, then back up to hers, she thought maybe he understood it all the same.

She looped the tie around his neck, began to knot it for him. God, the last time she'd done this was after they'd slept together in Bobby's attic. Self-conscious, she looked up into his intent eyes... and from the way he was looking at her with them, she thought maybe he was thinking the same thing she was. Wordlessly Alex craned her neck up and kissed him, soft and sweet and slow. His hands touched either of her arms, his mouth returned her kiss, and she could have sobbed for happiness. He was here, alive, and they had another chance.

Despite the physical arousal that so predictably came at the softest kiss of his lips, Alex broke the kiss and let go of the tie, regretful—they had to get out of there, now. She turned, went to the box of personal effects that she'd spied sitting on the bedside table. She saw her silver whistle, a couple wrinkled pictures, his old cell phone, clearly ruined, some spare change... a box cutter. What he must have carved that sigil into himself with. She picked it up, looked at it almost broodingly. Behind her a few steps off, she heard Cas take a shuffling step toward her.

"What happened after I disappeared? Did Dean and Sam succeed in killing Zachariah?" he asked.

"No, I—" Alex started.

She heard the familiar sound of angel's wings and turned, confused. She quickly became terrified.

"Did someone say my name?" Zachariah asked, beaming practically, hands on his hips, standing between them. He grinned idiotically at each of them in turn, relishing the shocked, semi-horrified looks on their faces. "Hiya, lovebirds!" He chuckled. "Don't look so surprised!" He held up a finger like he was reciting from memory. "Say an angel's name loud enough, if they're listening,
they can find you." He indicated Cas with a sweep of his hand, pulling a face as he did. "'Cas' here should know this."

Cas, weakened as he was and weaponless, recovered from his shock and drew himself up to his full height, approaching Zachariah. "You'll not take her again, Zachariah," he growled, to which the other angel gave a short, derisive laugh, turned and faced Cas.

"Even if I was here for her, which I'm not, how were you planning on stopping me?" he asked.

Castiel's expression fell into puzzlement as he processed what Zachariah had said. "If you're not here for her..." Cas trailed off and Zachariah nodded, pleased. He turned a little, looked at Alex over his shoulder. She stood frozen beside the hospital bed.

"By the way, thanks for screwing up my plans, Alex—sweetie. Real good job. I'd kill you right now if Michael hadn't told me not to." His annoyed expression sprung back to that false cheer he always exuded. "Hey, maybe later!"

He turned back to Castiel, grabbed him abruptly by the front of his shirt, shoved him into the wall. Cas gave a great cry of pain the likes that Alex had never heard from him before—and seeing the man she loved in pain like that made her see red. "Raphael is tired of your constant meddling, Castiel... you messed him up one too many times," Zachariah said, matter of fact as he held Castiel against the wall, his feet dangling above the floor. Cringing and groaning lowly, Cas panted in pain as Zachariah continued. "And now... he's decided you have to die," Zachariah said, then gave a pleasant smile. "Any last words?"

"I've got a couple," Alex growled in his ear, right before she stabbed him through the side of the throat with Castiel's blade, which she'd had concealed inside of her jacket. "Fuck you." Zachariah's face was filled with shock as he choked, gagged—blue light blazing out of where the blade had sunk in—and his grip loosened on Cas and Alex twisted and drove the blade all the way in. Zachariah screamed as his grace burned blue beams out of his mouth, eyes... and when Alex yanked the blade out, he collapsed down to the ground, there was a sound like thunder... and below his dead body, the spidery black wings stretched across the hospital floor.

Alex stood over him, a little shocked—she looked over at Cas, who was standing slackly against the wall, looking at her in a mixture of surprise, awe, worry. His eyes flickered to his blade, and he looked at her silently, questioningly.

She shrugged, a little out of breath, her adrenaline still going, making her shake a little now. "I kept it," she said and bent over Zachariah, pulled his jacket open a little—found his blade tucked inside. She grabbed it up, straightened, looked at Cas kind of cheekily as she crossed back to the bedside table. "And I'm keeping this one, too."

Someone would have heard that scream, they needed to move, now. Alex grabbed the box of Cas's personal effects, dumped all of it unceremoniously into the ammo bag she had slung across her body. They could hear a muffled voice over the hospital intercom system and they both looked up at the same time, then at each other. "We really need to go now," Alex told him, looking at the dead body on the ground.

And without any further delay, Alex took Castiel by the hand, and they fled the hospital together.

Nurse Katie Cooper would come back to a very different scene than she'd left—all the nurses on shift and a couple doctors gasping and panicking over the strange, dead body of a guy in his fifties who no one had ever seen before... with strange, inky black wings etched beneath him.
Katie would take in the sights of the dead man, the crumbled wall, the signs of a struggle, the absence of Castiel and Alex and all of his things and think to herself, again, I knew it! The couple were some kind of spies on the run… and had evaded this guy who was in a gang called the angels, apparently. How did they have the time to paint the wings onto the floor, though? Some things would always be a mystery, she guessed.

When she got off of work a few hours later, she would call her boyfriend Billy of two years and tell him it was over. Because really, when she thought about it, she deserved a guy who would look at her like Castiel had looked at Alex. And she wasn't gonna settle any more.

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Jackson, Mississippi
Around 6am

Cas and Alex were no longer in Louisiana. After slipping out of the hospital, Alex had stolen a car—some kind of sedan—and they'd started driving North. Cas had been uncomfortable about stealing the car, Alex had told him sorry but at three in the morning before the bus stations were running full swing, it was their only option. After he had resigned himself to a life of thievery, Cas had listened as Alex told him in detail about what happened with Adam—how he'd disappeared in a flash of light in the middle of the night, mumbling about "Michael." She told him how they'd spent the month visiting spiritists and shamans and psychics and how no one had any answers or ideas on how to kill Satan. She told him how, last week, they'd been drawn into a trap by several demigods and gods who had been eager to stop the apocalypse, too. Cas was especially horrified when Alex told him how Lucifer had suddenly appeared and taken interest in her again. Cas noted how his body felt physically ill at the thought of the devil touching Alex in any way. She explained more in depth how Gabriel had left a recording, saying he was dead and how the horsemen's rings created a key to the devil's cage.

He was deeply troubled when Alex told him how Sam was contemplating saying "yes" to Lucifer to jump into the cage. Troubled and intrigued, almost.

Alex didn't tell him about her visit from Crowley.

About two and a half hours into the drive, Cas had noticed his stomach felt empty… and when it had made some strange noises, Alex had seemed to hear, had looked at him oddly, asked if he were hungry. He hadn't known one way or the other if he were hungry, but she'd decided he was and they were now some place called "Waffle House." It was neither a house nor was it made of waffles.

It was busy in the restaurant, even at the early hour—the kitchen was out in the open and short order cooks in strange paper hats were calling out things as food sizzled on the large, flat grill surface. It had a hustle and bustle to it that Cas was interested in. There were many different kinds of people here—old, young, black, white… Castiel looked at the occupants with fondness, remembering how endeared he was to people, the things they did, the odd traditions and sayings they came up with. But none of them were as endeared to him as the one who sat across from him. As if she knew he were thinking of her, Alex looked up from the plastic laminated menu she'd been scanning.

"Know what you want?" she asked him.

He felt himself narrow his eyes just slightly in confusion. "Yes," he replied. Of course he did—he wanted her. He wondered why she had asked him that so abruptly. He didn't have a chance to ask her.
She set her menu flat onto the table, leaning over it, looking at him intently, resting her elbow on the table, her chin in her hand. "Cas, did you know what carving the sigil onto yourself would do?"

"I assumed it would kill me, actually," he answered honestly. She straightened up, frowning, her hand coming away from her face. At her upset expression, he attempted to explain himself a bit better. "I'm your guardian angel. I would give my life for you, Alex. You know I would." She only looked more upset and Cas's head canted to the side slightly. "What is it?" he asked.

Her mouth moved oddly, kind of shrugging upwards in a chagrinned expression. "For the past month I thought you had."

A short, older woman with choppy salt-and-pepper hair and several missing teeth came to their table just then, smiling widely at them. "All right folks! You decided?" she asked, holding a pen and a little pad of paper to write their order on.

Taking the cue to order, Castiel tried to remember the right way to order food, the way he'd seen people do it in the past. "A waffle, please," he said.

The waitress peered over the little notepad she carried at him. "That it?"

The waitress seemed to be implying something, like he should order more, that a waffle wasn't enough, and Castiel squinted slightly. "Should I order something else?" he asked, then looked at Alex, wondering if he were doing this wrong.

"I mean, that's up to you, chief," the waitress said. Her name tag said Flo.

"Why do you think I'm a chief, Flo?" Castiel asked. Nothing about his outfit said native American, did it?

Flo looked at him oddly, then seemed to give up, turned to Alex, who was smiling at Cas—and it was one of those little twitchy smiles she smiled when she was trying to hide it. She had her chin in her hand again, her mouth was partially hidden behind her pinky and ring finger. But he could still see the smile. He liked it.

"And for you, miss?" Flo asked her. Distracted out of her smile, Alex looked up at the waitress. "Three scrambled eggs and bacon—extra bacon, please. And two coffees, two waters." She set her menu back where she'd gotten it, on the rack with all the condiments with her free hand, then set both hands in her lap.

"Sure thing, I'll be back in a jiff," Flo said, glancing at Castiel oddly one last time, who was taking a bottle labeled ketchup out of the little wire basket, looking at it curiously.

Alex leaned toward him, her hands in her lap now. "You know they have stuff other than waffles here," she told him.

"But it's called Waffle House," Castiel said, absently scratching the itchy mosquito bite that was on the inside of his wrist.

"A little confusing, I know," Alex said, one corner of her mouth lifted up higher than the other. She looked at him for a long moment as he put the ketchup bottle back, pulled out the bright yellow one labelled mustard. He opened it, sniffed it, cringed. It smelled pungent, horrible. He closed it and put it back, uncertain why anyone would eat this mustard substance. He looked at Alex again, and when he did, he was left feeling strangely content. Just sitting here in the noisy din, surrounded by people, with her.
He looked around again, watched a cook slap raw bacon slices down onto the griddle. "One hash brown scattered smothered diced!" A waitress yelled over the sound of metal spatulas banging against the griddle. A couple conversed a few tables over, a younger waitress swept the old checkered floor, the bristles a made a steady, dry sounding rhythm that Cas enjoyed. In the back corner of the restaurant, there was an old man reading a paper with a steaming cup of coffee beside him.

Cas felt himself smiling softly. "I find this atmosphere enjoyable," he said, looking back at his companion. She was watching him like he was watching the others.

"Two waters," Flo said, setting down two plastic cups of sloshing water in front of them. "Back with your coffee in a sec."

"Thanks," Alex said.

"Thanks," Cas echoed, mimicking her. Flo was sauntering off to another table to take another order.

Across from Cas, Alex seemed contemplative and was studying him closely. "So, you're hungry, you're sore, no angel poof powers… do you really think this will be permanent?" She paused, then began to theorize out loud. "Maybe you just need to rest and heal, like when we went back to seventy-nine."

Cas gripped his glass of water, looked at it frowning. "No. It's not like that time. This is different." He let out a short, heavy breath. "I'm not sure why but it's just… gone."

Cas looked up at her again, both horrified and somewhat drawn to the idea of becoming what she was… mortal. But when he thought deeper on it, he felt any enthusiasm fade. He'd been a poor excuse for an angel, what kind of man could he possibly be? He became troubled. "Perhaps this is when I… become human," he said, looking down now, trying not to think of the flawed, violent, unhinged man he'd seen himself become in 2014.

"You don't sound too happy about it," Alex observed, and it was hard to tell what she was thinking. Castiel was conflicted. "What I was before… was better. I could protect you. Now I'm…" he looked down at his hands, laid them on the table palm facing up, his frown deepening. "Mere flesh and bone."

She reached across the table, surprising him when she laid her hand in his. "Like me," Alex said. Their eyes met and she smiled faintly, curled her fingers around the side of his hand. "It's not the worst thing, is it? You're alive and we're… here. Together."

Here, together. On earth. He looked at her hand in his and Cas felt some of his anxiety fade in favor of the familiar rush of feelings at her touch: warmth, safety, comfort. His eyes came back to meet hers, his mouth curved up a little. "Yes. There is that."

Appearing mildly uncertain after a brief moment of happiness, Alex pulled her hand away, took in a breath, looked around, giving the impression of slight embarrassment when she tilted her head to the side, rubbed the side of her neck with her hand. "So. Do you think the plan to put the devil back into the cage will work?"

He'd been too shocked by all of the information she'd relayed earlier to respond properly. Cas still found himself uncertain of what to think. "It will be difficult to trick him inside. In fact, I can't think of how. But Sam's idea seems risky, too."
Alex seemed to share the sentiment, pulling a face and seeming disconcerted by the idea. "Yeah but... we're running out of options... every time we turn around something else goes wrong..." she trailed off and her expression darkened. "Oh. I forgot to tell you about the dreams I've been having," she said.

Interested immediately, especially because of the dream he had somehow reached her in earlier that night, Castiel felt himself lean a little closer to her. "Dreams?"

"Visions, maybe," she said. "I don't know. I keep seeing Sam and Dean. Dead. And Lu—" she stopped short of saying his name after the whole Zachariah debacle. "Satan is always there. And he's always Sam. And the whole world burns."

Cas thought a minute, considered, calculated. "You've never had psychic dreams before, have you?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "No." She paused, frowning now. "But there was the dream tonight where you and I talked to each other. How did that happen? What was that?"

Castiel paused, because he wasn't sure. "I'm not entirely sure how it happened, to be honest with you. The only explanation I can think of is..." he trailed off, deep in thought, then looked up into her eyes. "We share a profound bond, you and I."

Her face relaxed into a helpless little smile, she looked down and chuckled lightly. "I guess we do, don't we." She looked at him again and he wondered what she was thinking of. Her eyes seemed so bright. No one else looked at him like she did, and he couldn't look away. Her smile faded in a moment, as she fell into deep thought. "What I don't understand is why aren't you in the dreams? You never are and... I dunno, Sam and Dean are two of the most important people in the world to me so... why aren't you in the dreams, too?"

He was one of the most important people in the world to her? Cas felt a deep flicker inside of him, somewhere past physical. How mere words could do that to him was a mystery he couldn't fathom. Not for the first time, he privately marveled at how he responded to her so automatically, instinctively. "I don't know," he answered her question slowly. She seemed genuinely worried and apprehensive about the dreams, and he wished he knew how to alleviate her fears. All he could do was make a logical guess at why she was dreaming these things. "The dreams of the end are probably the result of your subconscious fears."

"Hope so," Alex said. She didn't seem to feel any better and Castiel sat back slightly. He rubbed the bug bite on his wrist again, irked with it.

Flo reappeared with two ceramic mugs of steaming dark liquid. "Here's your coffee, ya'll, food'll be up in just a couple minutes, kay?" she plunked the mugs down onto the table and bustled off the the kitchen again.

"Have you told your brothers about the dreams?" Castiel asked, watching Alex turn the mug of coffee where the handle was on the other side. She slipped her fingers through the loop, pulled the mug to her lips, blew softly.

"Nah," she answered, seeming to imply with her body language and expression that wouldn't be a good idea. "They'd just think I was nuts. They don't need to know. The dreams are probably nothing, like you said."

Cas looked at Alex, who had clearly lost weight this past month, slept very little—and now he had a strange suspicion that she hadn't spoken much either. He thought back to how she had told him
about the past month but hadn't put any personal details in—it had all been factual and removed. He felt a sudden, strange sensation taking over him, his mouth suddenly opened, his eyes squinted closed, his lungs pulled in a long, slow breath and he couldn't stop it—he felt so tired. What just happened?

Alex was looking at him in a mixture of surprise and growing mirth. "Did you just yawn?"

He blinked a few times, surprised. "I think I did."

Alex tilted her mug of coffee toward him as if toasting him, and she nodded toward his untouched mug of coffee, indicating he drink some. His nose wrinkled just slightly and he lifted the mug, wary. He remembered how this stuff had tasted, and he hadn't liked it before. Still, he lifted the rim of the mug to his lips, sipped—and his nose wrinkled even more. "I still find the taste wholly unappealing." Alex smiled sympathetically at him. He set the mug down, scratched at the mosquito bite on his wrist again, irritated. "Will this bug bite always itch?" he asked her, looking at the soft swell of reddened skin that stood out on the inside of his wrist.

"Until the end of time," Alex told him with deadly seriousness. Castiel looked at her in shock—that long? Her deadpan face cracked into a grin—and she looked so beautiful like that. "No," she told him. "It won't."

"You're always teasing me," Cas commented, but he wasn't unhappy about it. In fact, he somehow liked it when she did that, because she always laughed afterward.

Flo reappeared with two plates and a dark bottle of something. She set down their meals. "Order up, sweethearts. Enjoy!"

Castiel picked up his fork, realizing this was a new experience altogether for him. "I've never used a fork before..." he said, and looked at the round, dimpled food item on his plate—a waffle—in the center of it, a little pat of pale yellow stuff was dissolving. He wondered if he should stab the fork down into the center and try to eat the waffle like that, or—

Alex had picked up her fork, held it out demonstratively. "Watch." She leaned closer to him, demonstrated by using her fork to slice into the side of the waffle. She looked at him expectantly, indicating that he do the same. He took his fork and used the side of it like she had, mimicking her. She made another cut, making a crooked little triangle—and she stuck the fork down into the triangle, pulled away a bite-sized piece of waffle, smiled at him and stuck it in her mouth, chewed.

Cas now had a little wedge of waffle, too, and looked at it with dawning fond interest. "It's very ingenious," he said—both the fork and the waffle. He put the bite of food into his mouth, chewing slowly, frowning, wondering how this food would taste and if he would like it. His frown softened as the blunt taste of coffee was covered over with the starchy, slightly sweet, fluffy taste and texture of the waffle. He smiled a little. "Now this... I like."

"I bet you like this, too," Alex said, and put a piece of bacon from her plate onto his. "Everyone likes bacon."

"I don't want to take your food," he told her.

"I got extra for you," she explained setting one more strip onto his plate. "Now try it." He lifted his fork... "with your fingers," she said, amusement playing on her voice again.

Oh. Cas picked up the strip of bacon and looked at it a moment, then took a bite. Crunchy, savory, salty, smoky. He liked this! He cracked a half-grin. "This is very enjoyable," he said and Alex
laughed at him.

"Thought so," she said, and repeated herself in joking triumph. "Like I said. *Everyone* likes bacon."

She grabbed the little dark brown bottle the waitress had brought. "Try this. It's syrup and it's *good.*" She drizzled a little bit over his waffle for him, then put some on her eggs and bacon… strange.

She mashed everything on her plate up together—rather unappealing looking, the final product was brown and odd—but Alex ate it all, ravenously, and Castiel felt good watching her eat. He began to work on eating his waffle, taking his time, cutting wedges out, pouring more syrup when he realized how sweet and sticky and tasty it was. It was a very good invention, this syrup substance. He got better at using the fork, too.

And as he stuck another piece of waffle into his mouth and chewed, caught Alex's eyes across the table, Castiel wondered if this would be his existence from now on… breakfasts with Alex, stealing cars. Being together. He felt a ripple of doubt. He barely knew how to use a fork, he didn't exactly fit into her world seamlessly. He had been better suited to be with Alex when he'd been an angel, or at least *better* for her—able to protect her and watch over her. He'd been less powerful than before, but he'd still been powerful, at least in comparison to this, now. What did he have now? He looked at one of his hands, clenched it, let it fall open, then turned it over a moment. He had nothing but this, his flesh and bones. But now, he was like her. Mortal. He imagined, briefly, growing old, aging like she would. Together. What would that be like?

Alex's phone rang just then, a garbled sound. She pulled her phone out of her bag—it was now held together with tape. She squinted at the screen and then answered, glancing up at Cas. "Hi Dean."

Cas could hear Dean from where he sat. "Hey, sorry to call so early, you up?" came Dean's voice.

Alex appeared mildly hesitant. "Well, uh, *yeah*..."

"Okay good. We're like four hours out," Dean said.

"From Bobby's." Alex surmised.

"Yeah."

She cleared her throat, appearing apprehensive about what she said next. "Okay, well I'm like… I dunno, *fifteen* hours out from Bobby's."

Dean's voice raised in surprise. "What? Where are you? What are you doing? When did you leave?"

Cas looked at Alex earnestly, the piece of waffle on his fork forgotten briefly. "Should I explain?" he asked.

"Was that *Cas*?!" Dean exclaimed.

"Uh, yeah, so Cas is alive," Alex said. "Called me last night—or early this morning I guess."

"Why didn't he just zap over to Bobby's?" Dean asked. He sounded suspicious.

Alex glanced at Cas briefly. "Uh… no can do."

"What do you mean?"
"Well, he's been in a hospital in a coma for the past month... and now that he's back in the land of the living he's just..." she trailed off hesitantly, seeming reluctant to keep going. "Kind of powerless, I guess."

"Wait, you mean he's outta angel mojo?" Dean asked incredulously.

"That's one way to put it."

"That's... just great," Dean paused. "So, what, he calls and you just, drop everything and go to wherever he is—without telling me?" Dean sounded unhappy and Cas frowned slightly. He didn't like to hear them argue, especially not after the last time. But he knew that Dean had been good to Alex the past month—it was one of the first things he'd asked her about after they'd stolen the car.

"Hey, I tried calling you all day yesterday and you never answered, thank you very much," Alex retorted, then sat back in her seat, fell into deep thought. "Wait, if you're on the way back to Bobby's, do you have Pestilence's ring?"

"No—but we know where he is. Davenport, Iowa, some nursing home. Where are you two, anyway?"

Alex glanced out of the restaurant window. "Few hours north of New Orleans, Mississippi."

Dean sighed gustily. "Tell you what, meet us there in Davenport. We're probably ten hours out. If you guys get a car or ride a bus you can meet us there. Do you have money?"

"Yeah, I've got a little cash and a couple cards."

"Okay, good," Dean said, then chuckled derisively. "Yeah and Sam here tells me he told you his genius idea to say yes to the devil."

"Yeah, he did." Alex confirmed neutrally. She looked like she were prepared for Dean to become unreasonable.

"Un-freakin-believable," Dean said, and Cas wasn't sure if that were a commentary on Sam's idea or Alex's failure to relay the information... but Alex just kind of smirked.

"Weren't you jumping up and down a month ago to say yes?" she asked.

"You didn't have to bring that up," her brother said sullenly.

Cas looked at Alex, trying not to be rude, but not sure when else to ask. "Can I speak to Dean?" he asked.

"Hey, Cas wants to talk to you, hold on." She handed the phone over.

"Hello Dean."

"Cas." Dean's deep, gruff voice was much clearer now, and he sounded less sullen than he had a minute ago. "We all thought you were dead, man. I'm... I'm glad you're okay."

"Thank you. Dean, your sister's told me about everything that happened. Thank you for keeping your word."

He heard Dean chuckle airily. "Yeah well, I'm the one who should be saying thanks. You saved their lives and I... I really underestimated you, Cas buddy." Dean sounded as though the compliments were hard for him to say, so Castiel appreciated them even more. After a long silence,
Dean spoke up again. "So... can I talk to my sister again, or...?"

"Yes. Of course." Cas handed the phone back.

"Hey," Alex said. "We'll get on our way to you really soon, okay? Also, my phone's about to die and I don't have the charger, so..." she trailed off.

"Dammit, Alex, what have I told you about always making sure I can get in touch with you?" Dean asked. He sounded less angry than he had a minute ago, more genuinely frustrated and worried.

Alex looked up at the ceiling. "I know, I know..."

"Okay, look. Just burn rubber and meet us at Serenity Valley Convalescent Home. Davenport, Iowa, got it?"

"Yup."

"And hey... no funny business, you hear me?"

Alex rolled her eyes, appearing to be unsure whether she should be annoyed or amused by her brother's command. "Bye Dean." She ended the call, stuck her phone back into her bag. "Looks like we have to get moving..." she told Cas, and scraped the last bit of egg off her plate with her fork, put it in her mouth. "I'm pretty sure Iowa is about twelve or so hours from here."

The waitress came back as if on cue, holding a yellow slip. She set it down onto the table. "Here's your bill, ya'll, need anything else?"

"Can you tell me where the nearest bus station is?" Alex asked.

"There's a Greyhound station downtown, just east of here." Flo pointed for emphasis. "Cross over highway fifty-one and go a couple streets down, the depot's there."

"Thanks."

"Uh huh! Ya'll have a good day." She took their plates and left.

"A bus?" Cas asked, confused.

"I'm too tired to drive—I really need sleep." Alex paused. "And I'd rather not take a stolen car much further anyway."

"Because it's wrong to steal?" Cas asked.

She cracked a lopsided grin. "Because the longer I keep driving it the greater the chance of getting caught by the cops. But sure, let's say because it's wrong." She took a gulp of her coffee, grimaced, wiped the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand, dug in her bag. "I have to live on pretty gray morality, Cas. And now you do too. For example... I need to stop and steal you some major prescription pain medicine... that morphine in your system'll wear off soon and you'll be in a world of pain." She seemed to be almost talking to herself at this point as she raking through her bag, frowning. "I guess I could forge a prescription but I don't have any stuff to make a believable one with me..."

She fished out some money from her bag, set down a twenty and a ten dollar bill onto the table. Gave him a slight, helpless shrug. "At least I'm paying for breakfast, right?"
About thirty minutes after leaving the Waffle House, Alex found a twenty-four hour drug store, left Cas in the stolen car, went inside, tripped the fire alarm and used the distraction to steal Cas some medicine called "Lortabs" from the pharmacy. They then crossed town and found the bus depot, bought tickets to Davenport, boarded the bus and were settled in the further row of seating in the back, in a corner. Outside, the sun was rising slowly, rendering the sky into a dim gray. The passing landscape was hard to make out, and Alex had turned on one of the little overhead lights so that she could see.

"So, take one of these. It'll probably make you sleepy for a little while," Alex said, handing Cas a little white pill speckled in blue. He took it into the palm of his hand and she pulled out a water bottle out of her bag. She must have gotten that from the drug store, too. She seemed to realize that he hadn't ever had to take a pill before. "Uh—put it on your tongue then just take a drink of water, really relaxed… and swallow it."

Cas did as she said. It was a strange sensation when he felt the pill go down and knock up against the back of his throat. He swallowed again, felt it stick in the base of his throat. Drank a little more water, felt the pill go all the way down. Not the most pleasant thing he'd ever experienced. Water did, however, drip down out of his mouth and onto his pants.

"Thank you," Castiel told her, and Alex took the bottle back, screwed the cap on, stuck it back into her bag, paused.

"Hey, that reminds me." She pulled out a book from her bag. "I got this for you. When I stole the drugs. I, uh, stole this too."

She held out a paperback that said **Sirens of Titan**, by Kurt Vonnegut. It had a light purple cover with three strange hand-drawn yellow eyes on it. "I… thought you might like this. I read it when I was ten. Heady stuff for a ten year old but… I dunno. I saw it there on the shelf and… I think it might be your kinda novel."

Cas was surprised and felt an odd sense of humility wash over him. She had **gotten** something for him. "Thank you," he said, looking at her a moment longer, almost too surprised to know how to accept the gesture. She held the book out further to him, and he took it, turned it over in his hands. He could smell the pages—a thick, pleasing, papery smell. He'd never read a book before—he had the word of the Lord etched onto his mind of course, but that was different. He'd never done what the humans did and read for pleasure or interest. He looked at the back of the book, curious as to what made Alex think he would like this particular tome.

"*Beyond the limits of space, where the beauty of woman is without compare but man is without a memory of sexual delights… where nothing is forbidden but free thinking is an unforgivable sin…. where life is perfect, but resistance to perfection means death.*"

Alex shrugged kind of bashfully. "I dunno. I thought, long bus ride, maybe a book…" she did that thing she did where she dipped her head toward her shoulder a little self consciously. She cleared her throat, started pulling things out of her bag. The things that had been in his pocket: she set them down one by one into the small space between them. She pulled out his ruined cell phone, some quarters, the box cutter, her silver whistle, and then the wrinkled, water-stained pictures. She looked at the one of herself, made a face. "Whoa. This is the worst picture of me ever. You really need a better one."

Castiel frowned. He loved that picture and didn't understand. "What would make it better? ...It's of you."

She seemed surprised, flattered, a little embarrassed by what he'd said. She handed the photo over...
to him. He put it back into the pocket of his coat, where it belonged, then picked up the rest of his things, put them there too.

She pulled his angel blade out—she had it stashed inside her jacket, along with Zachariah's, which she was now clearly claiming as her own. "I guess you'll want this back," she said, and turned the blade, offering it to him handle-first He accepted the blade, met her gaze. He remembered when he'd given her the blade back in 1979.

He took his blade back. "Thank you."

She nodded. Rubbed one of her eyes with the heel of her hand, blinking rapidly after, seeming to be tired. He thought maybe he felt the same… his body felt sluggish and weary. "I think the medicine is working," he commented, and blinked. His eyelids seemed heavier than they had before. "I feel very drowsy." It was similar to when he'd been drunk, but less unpleasant. His body urged him to just shut his eyes, but he resisted.

Beside him, Alex suddenly yawned—made a soft little sleepy sound, and leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. "Me too," she said. Feeling her there against him, so trusting and close… his chest seemed to grow a little bit somewhere inside, welling up with vast emotion he wasn't sure what to call. Looking down, he could see that her eyes had drifted shut.

Cas opened up the book—his book—and read the first line of the first chapter: *Everyone now knows how to find the meaning of life within himself. But mankind wasn't always so lucky.*

He liked that. The statement of a whole consciousness, the implied shift in perception, the indication that things had not always been so glorious but had become thus at the present time the sentence had been written. All of that in eighteen little words. He heard the softest little snore and looked down—realizing that Alex had fallen fast asleep. That big, swelling feeling in his chest grew even bigger. He would never leave her side again. He swore it to himself, and in that moment, he believed he could actually accomplish that goal. After about five minutes of watching her, the book forgotten, Castiel nodded off to sleep, too.

In the back of a greyhound bus, they were easy to miss—a man in a trench coat and a girl with dark brown hair slept, their heads leaned together. She had both of her arms looped around one of his. How could anyone know that the man was a fallen angel? That the girl leaned against him was the reason he fell?

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**Davenport, Iowa**

**Serenity Valley Convalescent Home**

"This way," Castiel said, leading them down a dim hallway. Nothing—no one. Not a peep. Kind of eerie. After an thirteen-hour-and-some-change bus ride, Cas and Alex had finally arrived in Davenport. Alex had used a phone book and a town map from a gas station to find the nursing home where Sam and Dean said they'd be… neither of the Winchesters had picked up their phones when she tried to call from a pay phone.

Cas seemed to know where he was going, maybe sensing Pestilence's presence somehow. Alex wondered if his angelic powers really *were* all gone like he thought. But the way he'd gotten hungry, thirsty, slept that day (for nearly nine hours, longer than she had)… wasn't exactly angelic. However he'd never had to use the bathroom and he hadn't gotten hungry again. It was hard to tell what exactly was going on with him.

They rounded another corner and Cas led on. Alex had her newly acquired angel blade out—
Zachariah's. Figured it had more of a chance of fucking up Pestilence and any demons with him
than her little hunting knife did. Where the hell were her brothers, anyway? She knew they were
here—the Impala was parked out front.

A wave of nausea hit Alex and she grimaced. Bad time to get a stomachache, body. Please not
now.

She and Cas turned another corner and promptly stopped. A few bodies littered the area. "He's
close," Cas told her—that explained her suddenly nausea—he turned to look at her apprehensively.
"I don't think you should go any further," he looked down then the hallway ahead, frowning
deply. "He'll make you very sick."

"And he won't make you sick, too?" Alex challenged. He met her gaze and she told him in no
uncertain terms, "I'm not letting you out of my sight. Where you go… I go."

Surprising her, Cas didn't argue. He accepted it with a mixture of chagrin and fondness, like he'd
known she would say as much. "Stay close," he told her, holding her gaze a moment longer.

She gave him a little smirk. Always.

They advanced down the hallway and Alex felt sicker and sicker—Cas wiped his forehead with the
back of his hand, suddenly sweating profusely, maybe feverish. And Alex stumbled about seven
steps down the hallway, her stomach cramping up miserably, and she threw an arm up against the
wall to support herself. The world was spinning strangely, she felt like vomiting. Her entire body
was on fire with a violent fever.

She felt Cas at her side, supporting her. "Are you all right?" he asked as she struggled against the
queasy feeling, the need to puke everywhere.

"Nope," she managed in a strained voice. "He's definitely close."

"Let me take you back," Cas said, indicating she come with him, back away from where
Pestilence.

Alex looked up at him. "No. I'm not leaving you." She suddenly coughed violently and doubled
over, gasped for air. Shit, Pestilence didn't play around. Were her brothers okay? They needed to
hurry, she could feel it.

Cas looked miserable, and she wasn't sure if it was because he was feeling ill, too, or didn't like to
see her unwell. Either way, they moved forward again, jerkily this time. Alex's vision began to
double, her grip on her angel blade was shaky and sweaty and loose, she wanted to fall over and
die… where was she, anyway? What was happening? Why did she hear the tune of Back in Black
in her mind? She felt distinctly nuts, like she was close to hallucinating, and she wondered how
high her temperature was. Cas was holding her up at this point, his hand gripping her upper arm.
He stopped at the next door they came to. "He's here," he said, pulling his blade out from inside his
coat. Alex grabbed onto the doorframe, holding herself up, not sure if she could go any further
without collapsing. The world spun strangely.

Cas kicked the door open, startling the occupants inside—a wiry, elderly man in glasses—
Pestilence—and a young, curly haired, black-eyed nurse. On the floor, Sam and Dean were curled
up, groaning and injured, sick, oblivious to the world.

Not thinking straight, Alex stumbled toward them lurchingly, making it about three steps into the
room before she promptly fell, dropping her blade, unable to grasp it any longer. Holding herself
up on all fours weakly, hacking up a huge glob of blood, she groaned pitifully, clutching at her stomach with one hand, her entire body wracking violently with deep coughs. She fell onto her side, pretty sure she was dying. Somewhere above her, she saw Castiel's blurry outline. He came into focus for a second—she saw that he was horrified. She moaned miserably and bared her teeth, shutting her eyes against a violent spasm of pain.

"Al...ex..." Sam managed in a gasp, through a mouthful of blood.

Pestilence and the nurse looked at the angel with what was clearly fear—they didn't know, yet, that the angel in front of them was almost as human as the Winchesters were. "How'd you get here?" She heard Pestilence ask Cas darkly—he sounded nervous.

"Cas?" Dean asked, groaning on the floor.

Cas lurched toward Pestilence, hefting his blade, appearing more and more unwell every second. "I —" he started, then gave a great choking sound and cough, fell onto his hands and knees, hacking up blood, his blade clattering uselessly to the floor at his side. Pestilence bent and took the blade easily, turning it over in his hand with great interest, then looking at Cas with great amusement.

"Well, look at that!" Pestilence exclaimed. "An occupied vessel, but powerless. Oh, that's fascinating..." Cas was heaving, blood dripping down and off of his lower lip, his eye caught something on the floor near to him, he glanced at Alex, grimacing... and she was oblivious to the world, groaning horribly, writhing almost—Sam and Dean were similarly incapacitated, coughing weakly and looking close to death. And Cas looked back at Pestilence, his expression murderous. Pestilence, greatly pleased, was grinning down at him, had a hand on the table beside himself as he leaned down, observing Cas closely, seeming intrigued. "There's not a speck of angel in you, is there?"

In a flash of movement, Cas grabbed Sam's knife, the demon blade, from where it had been discarded on the floor, and summoning strength he didn't know he had, he sprang to his feet, grabbed Pestilence by the wrist, cut off his ring finger and pinky finger all at once with a brutal slice of the blade.

"Ahh!" Pestilence cried out in surprise and pain, even as Castiel released him, told him through gritted teeth: "Maybe just a speck."

The demon nurse bellowed in rage, rushing Castiel brainlessly, knocking him over—and found herself with the demon blade in her stomach. She convulsed and collapsed, dead. Cas threw her off of himself, stood up, panting from exertion and anxiety.

Sam and Dean were getting up—when Cas cut the ring off Pestilence's finger, the powerful spell had been broken and they weren't ill anymore. Maybe just a little stunned. Sam pulled his dazed sister to her feet even as Dean rushed over to the table and picked up the bloody ring and finger Castiel had just cut off of the horseman.

Pestilence, who held his bleeding hand as he stood back at the far end of the room, was disturbingly calm. "It doesn't matter," he told them softly. "It's too late." And then he vanished into thin air.

Alex and Cas looked at each other breathlessly, frowning. "You okay?" Sam asked his sister, and she nodded, straightened up, pulling her arm out of her brother's grasp.

"Yeah, you?" she asked.
Sam, a little disconcerted, rubbed his palm down and over his mouth and chin, shrugged. "Guess so."

"What took you so long?" Dean asked, looking at Cas and then Alex.

Disliking his tone, Alex looked at him with a rigid expression. "You could have waited for us to get here," she pointed out. "Nice to see you too." She gave him an irritated side glance as she picked up her discarded angel's blade, then Cas's too. Dean said nothing, pulled a face.

"It's good to see you Cas," Sam said, gingerly clapping the angel on the shoulder with one of his massive hands. "Glad you're still here with us."

"Thank you, Sam," Cas said. "It's good to see you too."

Alex handed Cas one of the angel blades and Sam saw the significant glance the two of them shared, glanced at Dean—who saw it too but thankfully said nothing. His cold scowl was enough commentary though.

Sam looked at the spot Pestilence had disappeared from, filled with foreboding. "What did he mean it's too late?"

Dean looked, too. He appeared deeply unsettled. "I'm not sticking around to find out." With a couple of dark glances at Cas and Alex, Dean nodded toward the door and pocketed Pestilence's ring. "Let's blow this popsicle stand, huh?"

They headed back without delay to Bobby's. And in a show of his immature control freak nature, Dean would suggest that Cas sit up front with him in the Impala, separating his sister and the angel by way of passive aggression. It was a long seven hour drive back to Bobby's.

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**Sioux Falls, South Dakota**

"And then Cas cut his ring finger off and none of us were sick anymore," Sam finished explaining. Dean pulled the ring in question out of his pocket, held it between his thumb and pointer finger.

In the study, Sam and Dean sat across the desk from Bobby—Cas leaned against the desk at the wall a few feet away, Alex was beside him. The four of them looked tired out and tense, and for the Winchesters, that was normal. But for Cas to look physically weary was a little on the odd side.

"Well, it's nice to actually score a home run for once, ain't it?" Bobby asked. Dean plunked the ring down onto Bobby's desk, stared at it blankly. Bobby took in everyone's grim expressions and grew confused. "What?"

Sam heaved a soft, thoughtful sigh. "Last thing Pestilence said: 'it's too late.'"

Bobby sat back, frowning dubiously. "He get specific?"

Sam shook his head. "No."

"We're just a little freaked out that he might have left a bomb somewhere," Dean said. That had been the topic of most of the glancing discussions they'd had on the car ride back from Davenport—what Pestilence had meant and what way, if any, they had of stopping whatever plan he'd set into motion. "So please tell us you have actual good news." Dean looked at Bobby, clearly not expecting to actually hear any.
"Well, Chicago's about to be wiped off the map" Bobby said. "Storm of the millennium. Sets off a daisy chain of natural disasters. Three million people are gonna die." Sam and Dean looked at each other darkly.

"I don't understand your definition of good news," Castiel said, frowning.

"Well… Death, the horseman—he's gonna be there," Bobby explained. "And if we can stop him before he kick starts this storm, get his ring back…"

"Yeah, you make it sound so easy," Dean commented snidely, his tone bordering on rude.

"Shut up Dean," Alex told her oldest brother, clearly annoyed with him. Bobby looked at the two of them closely. There it was again, the clear, growing rift between the oldest and youngest Winchester. He hated to see that. He glanced at Cas, who was looking down, seeming to be conflicted. "How do you know all that stuff, anyway, Bobby?" Alex asked. She sounded distinctly suspicious and Bobby felt distinctly guilty.

"I had, you know… help."

The sound of someone clinking around in the kitchen made them all turn. "Don't be so modest," Crowley said, announcing his presence as he always did—without warning, and at the strangest of times. He was pouring himself some of Bobby's whiskey. "I barely helped at all." He took his glass of whiskey, sauntered into the room, leaned against the doorway. "Hello, boys, madame. Pleasure, et cetera."

Alex had stood up the second she saw him, Cas right after her—and Crowley looked at the two of them saucily. "Please, no need for that," he said, and they slowly sat back down. He sniffed the whiskey he'd poured himself, made a face, set the glass down, then leveled Bobby with a little arrogant smile. "Go ahead. Tell them. There's no shame in it."

Everyone in the room looked back at Bobby in unison. "Bobby? Tell us what?" Sam asked. He seemed to be bracing himself for the worst, which, hell, this pretty much was. Bobby felt himself shrinking down slightly into his wheelchair.

"World's gonna end," Bobby mumbled. "Seems stupid to get all precious over one little… soul."

Bobby saw Sam and Alex both go slack-jawed, Cas hang his head in dismay, even as Dean's face went cold all over. "You sold your soul?" he asked in disbelief.

"Oh, more like pawned it," Crowley commented mildly. "I fully intend to give it back."

"Well, then give it back!" Dean demanded, temper flaring.

"I will," Crowley replied evenly.

"Now!" Dean thundered.

Sam was looking at Bobby with a morbidly curious expression. "Did you kiss him?" he asked.

"Sam!" Dean exclaimed.

"Just wondering," Sam defended himself.

"It's a good question." Alex put in, siding with her twin, her hands shrugged up to her shoulders. Dean made a face, but was clearly curious too—all three of the Winchesters looked at Bobby
expectantly, Cas frowned oddly, Crowley smirked.

Embarrassed as hell at how all the eyes in the room were on him, Bobby made an indignant face. "No!"

Crowley cleared his throat meaningfully, drawing all the gazes in the room to himself. He held out his phone, and on the screen, a picture of Bobby and Crowley kissing—Bobby's eyes were closed, Crowley was looking into the camera. The Winchesters gaped, Alex put a hand over her mouth—it wasn't clear if she were covering up a gasp or a laugh.

Bobby looked at Crowley, mildly humiliated. "Why'd you take a picture?"

"Why'd you have to use tongue?" Crowley shot back, further deepening the embarrassed flush on Bobby's cheeks.

"Can you text that to me?" Alex asked Crowley, drawing four incredulous stares from Sam, Dean, Bobby, and Cas. She shrugged defensively, looking at them innocently. "What?"

"Sure, lemme have your digits and I'll sext it right over," Crowley purred.

"All right. You know what? Enough of the comedy hour," Dean said, standing up out of his chair and crossing the room, confronting Crowley. "Give him his soul back now."

"I'm sorry," Crowley said without much conviction. "I can't."

"Can't or won't?" Dean thundered, close to flipping his lid completely.

"I won't, all right?" Crowley retorted, a little more loudly, a little more defensive now. "It's insurance."

"What are you talking about?" Dean asked.

"You kill demons," Crowley said in a velvet growl, then glanced at Sam sharply. "Gigantor over there has a temper issue about it, can't say that your little angelfood cupcake sister over here feels any sweeter on me than he does." He glanced at Alex, who was regarding him guardedly now. "But none of you will kill me..." Crowley said, smiling again casually, "as long as I have that soul in the deposit box."

"You son of a bitch," Bobby muttered.

Crowley looked like he resented that comment. "I'll return it," he reiterated. "After all this is over, and I can walk safely away." His voice suddenly raised into an unexpected shout. "Do we all understand each other?!"

Dean looked at Bobby angrily, then Crowley, his expression foul. "Yeah. We understand each other." He brushed past Crowley and stalked out of the study.

"What's got under his skin then?" Crowley asked, as if he hadn't the slightest idea why Dean was perturbed. He gestured back at the kitchen. "Anyone fancy a cuppa tea?"

"How's about you get lost?" Bobby retorted sharply.

Crowley looked around the room. "Fine. I can tell when I'm not wanted." He disappeared into thin air.

Bobby looked at the twins, who were eyeing him strangely. "Why'd you do it, Bobby?" Sam asked.
He sounded upset, which made Bobby feel a couple shades worse.

"I only wanted to help," he said. "And hey, I found Death, didn't I? It was part of the deal." He paused. Alex and Cas were looking at him with similarly anxious frowns on their faces. Bobby shrugged, adjusted the brim of his hat. "This hare-brained plan to shove the devil back into his little box is our last option, so… I was just tryin' to do my part to make it happen."

Sam nodded tensely, deep in thought. "Once we have all four rings though, then what?" he asked, looked back at his sister, then scrubbed his hands across his forehead, stood up with a heavy expulsion of breath. He looked at his sister, who seemed to know what he was thinking.

She looked reluctant, like she was silently begging her brother no.

Outside and behind Bobby's house, Dean had the Impala's hood raised. He pulled out the filthy air filter. He needed to replace that, stat. It was cold for late April, and the sky was cloudy, overcast, dim. He heard two sets of footsteps on the gravel nearby and he glanced up. His siblings. Further back, twenty or thirty feet off, Cas hung back, his hands in his coat pockets. Dean looked at him warily before turning his attention back to his brother and sister. Sam gave him a look and leaned his back against the car. Alex stood there with her arms crossed beside Sam. She didn't look too happy. Hell, neither of them did. "Let me guess," Dean said, coming to stand a couple feet off from Sam. "We're about to have a talk."

Sam looked down. "Look, Dean, um…" he drew in a deep breath as if he were steeling himself and he stood all the way up, looked at Dean intently, assertively. "For the record… I agree with you, with both of you." He glanced at their sister, who was silent and brooding. "About me," he clarified. "You both think I'm too weak to take on Lucifer... well... so do I." Alex looked mildly surprised at his admission. "Believe me, I know exactly how screwed up I am," Sam continued. "You, Alex, Bobby, Cas… I'm the least of any of you."

"That's not true," Alex butted in, frowning in confusion and almost personal offense, "Why—"

"No, it is true," Sam interrupted, and his voice was full of conviction. "It is. I've always run away, I've always given up, I've never hung in like you guys have and I'm sorry. I'm not the right man for the job. But… it looks like I'm the only man for the job. If there was another way we could…" he trailed off. Dean folded his arms now, listening with a stony expression on his face, leaning against the Impala as Sam continued. "But I don't think there is another way. There's just me."

Dean glanced up at Sam, deep in thought, and Alex looked at her oldest brother, took in his expression and became irate. "Are you actually listening to him?"

Dean threw his hands up dispassionately, his shit attitude written all over his moody expression.

More understanding and kind than Dean was at the moment, Sam looked at his twin emphatically. "Alex, I know you don't like it, and I'm definitely all ears if you have any other suggestions," he told her, pausing, letting a silent beat hang, waiting for her to come up with another idea or solution, which clearly, she didn't have. She said nothing, only clenched her jaw tightly, glanced at Dean darkly, then back to Sam. "I don't know what else to do," Sam told them both. "Except just try t-to do what's got to be done."

"Aaaand… scene," came a familiar voice behind them, and Crowley smiled at them, sauntered around the car and over to them. "There's something you need to see," he said, and handed a newspaper over to Sam, who took it uncertainly.
"Niveus Pharmaceuticals is rushing delivery of its new swine-flu vaccine quote 'to stem the tide of the unprecedented outbreak,'" Sam read slowly. "Uh... shipments leave Thursday—tomorrow."

Sam looked at Crowley, puzzled. "What's this have to do with anything?"

"Niveus?" Alex asked, her head canted to the side in thought. "Isn't that where you snatched that Brady guy up from?" she asked, thinking back to everything her brothers had said in the car trip back to Bobby's about their past week tracking down Pestilence.

"Yeah, but..." Sam trailed off, realization dawned onto his face. "Oh."

"Ding ding ding. That's right, Brady, V.P. of distribution, Niveus Pharmaceuticals," Crowley confirmed then smiled silkily. "We all caught up, then?"

"So, Pestilence..." Dean started slowly.

"...was spreading swine flu..." Sam continued.

"So that he could distribute a quote unquote vaccine," Alex finished.

"Smart one, right here," Crowley patted Alex on the shoulder fondly, she gave him a dirty look even as both of her brothers seemed to become slightly taller. Crowley's face fell indignantly. "Oh the lot of you! Knock it off, will you? I'm here to help. Now, I'll stake my reputation on it—mark my words, boys and girl, that vaccine is chock-full of grade-A, farm-fresh croatoan virus."

The Winchesters exchanged a quick look. The brothers were especially chagrined. "Simultaneous, countrywide distribution," Sam commented tensely. "It's quite a plan."

"You lot better stock up on... well, everything," Crowley said. He wasn't being a total wiseass—there was a certain note of warning to his voice. "This time next week, we'll all be living in zombieland."

Dean pinched the bridge of his nose. "Great. One more thing to do, like we didn't already have enough on our plate," he muttered in frustration.

"Oh come off it. You make it sound so impossible." Crowley gestured to the three of them. "Look, there's a whole lot of us now. Dean, you and I head over to Chicago, get Death's ring while Sammy and Al here, they go knock Niveus over onto its ass. Win, win."

"Divide and conquer," Sam said, eyes downcast as he thought about it.

Dean looked at Crowley grimly. The demon had a point, but not one Dean was very enthusiastic about. "For the record, I don't like this," he said.

Crowley just smiled mildly. "I didn't think you would. Now, there's something we'll need, Dean. I'll be back round in just a tick." He disappeared again.

Dean turned and faced Sam straight on, pointed an authoritative finger at him. "Okay, Sam, look, I'm gonna get this last ring but we are not jumping head first into some crazy plan where you say yes to the devil. We are gonna make this decision together, okay, the three of us." He paused. "Cuz call me crazy but if you say yes to the devil and can't fight him off... the world's all kinds of screwed. You'd dominate that poor bastard half brother of ours like no one's business."

They were all silent for a minute, guilty, thinking of Adam. "It's not a good idea, period," Dean finally said.
Sam just looked at Dean. "I never said it was good, I said it was our last chance."

Alex was looking someplace over Dean's shoulder, where Cas stood. Decisively, she went around to the back of the car, opened the trunk, grabbed a shotgun out of the trunk, hefted it up, started off toward Cas. "Where are you going?" Dean asked gruffly.

She glanced back at him. "To teach the angel how to shoot a shotgun."

The brothers watched her go. "That's not something you hear every day," Sam commented, attempting a chuckle. Dean didn't look so amused.

"What if it backfires, Sam?" He asked in a low, quiet voice. "What if you say yes and you can't even raise a pinky against satan?"

Sam looked at his older brother grimly. "That's not an option. If I do this… we have to know it's gonna work."

On the outer edge of the salvage yard, Alex had just finished showing Cas how to take the safety off the shotgun, load ammunition into it, and fire it. She'd loaded a single shell into the gun chamber, cocked it, aimed, fired and left a large gaping hole in one of the junked cars beside them—all in about one second. The sound of the shotgun blast was startlingly loud. "Now you do it," Alex told him. She handed the gun to him and he took it uncertainly, then the shotgun shell she handed him.

He put one of the shining golden shells into the chamber, slid it in until it clicked, just like she had. He wasn't sure how to hold the gun, really—and Alex seemed to be able to tell, putting one of her hands onto the barrel as she stood beside him, pushing the butt of the gun more firmly into his shoulder. "Always pull it tight into your shoulder," she explained. "If you don't, the kick will bruise you bad."

He looked at her as she continued to explain. "Shotguns like this one, sawed off, work best at a close range, about how far we are from the target right now. Just aim in the general vicinity of where you wanna hit, cuz the buckshot will spray everywhere. You can't miss, pretty much." She pointed at the old car headlight she'd set on top of an upside down barrel, patted him on the shoulder, gave him an encouraging little smile. "Go for it, Cas."

He felt utterly foolish, but aimed as best he could, pulled the trigger, watched the car headlight spin as buckshot hit it. The gun kicked hard against him, he was surprised at the brute force of it…and also reminded sickeningly of the time he'd seen himself shoot a gun in visions of the future. He was disheartened and miserable, lowered the shotgun, feeling entirely useless and trapped in himself, doomed to the fate he'd foreseen...

"Hey, hey," Alex said, taking the shotgun from him, noticing his sudden upset. "It's okay. You can do this," she said. "I know it's kinda overwhelming." She was assuming he was upset because he was having difficulty with so many new experiences… when the truth was that he was only thinking about how powerless he was to protect her now. And how he'd used one of these man-made weapons, a gun, to end her life in the future.

"I don't like guns," he told her, meeting her concerned gaze slowly. His mind ghosted over the memories of her dying in twenty-fourteen. She didn't seem to understand completely.

Sam lumbered up, a couple beers in his hands. "Hey guys. How's the shotgun lesson going?"

Alex smiled at Cas, who was morose and unhappy, not appearing too confident in himself. "I think
he'll do just fine," she said, trying to cheer him up.

"Cas, Dean told me to tell you that he wants to talk to you, whenever you get a minute," Sam said.

Cas's face twisted into a half-quizzical, half-apprehensive frown. He glanced at Alex. "I'll go now," he decided.

Alex set the shotgun down on the hood of an old busted Bronco. "I'll come with you," she said, but Cas shook his head, his frown deepening.

"No…" he trailed off. "I think I should speak with him alone."

Alex looked at him carefully, concerned. "You sure?" she asked.

He didn't look sure, but he seemed resigned. "I'll be fine."

They were doing it again, Sam noticed—looking at each other silently, seeming to study each other and speak to each other at the same time. After a couple seconds, Cas headed back toward the house, and Sam smiled at his sister crookedly when she finally looked over at him. "It's good to see you two together again," he told her.

She reminded Sam of himself when she smiled somewhat cynically, looked down, gave a soft little air laugh as her eyebrows shot up briefly. "I wish Dean felt the same."

Sam wasn't sure if it were true or not, but he decided to be optimistic. "He'll come around."

His sister gave him a funny look, mildly suspicious and mostly sarcastic. "Are we talking about the same Dean right now?"

Sam chuckled softly, offered her one of the drinks he'd brought. "Beer?"

She took it right away. "Please."

Dean was leaned over the engine of his car, fiddling with it, off in his own little world. He had his jacket off, wore a t-shirt that had some dark black oil streaks on it. "Hello Dean," Castiel greeted.

Dean glanced up somewhat warily and straightened, wiped his hands on a black-streaked rag. "Cas." He tossed the rag down onto the edge of the engine, spread his hands apart and leaned over the engine again, not looking at Cas. "So, all outta angel batteries, huh?" He glanced up briefly. "What, you human now?"

Castiel frowned slightly, pensive, unsure. "I might as well be."

Dean stood up again, looked at Cas in that same wary, watchful way. "I'm sorry man. Glad you made it though." He sounded a little forced, and tried to chuckle—a clipped, strained sound. "We thought you were dead. Like, never coming back dead."

"Yes, that's what everyone has been saying," Cas confirmed slowly. He wasn't sure where Dean was going with this conversation.

Dean wet his lips, put a hand out in a pay attention sort of gesture. "Look man, we gotta clear the air about something." Castiel felt the small amount of dread in the vicinity of his stomach growing bigger as Dean looked at him with a cloudy expression. "I don't know how I feel about you and my sister, okay? I don't get it, for one. Of all the human girls in the world, why'd you have to pick my little sister?" Dean sounded almost pleading, which was worse than when he was angry.
Castiel couldn't put it into words, the way he'd been drawn to Alex from the start. He shook his head. "I don't know. I just did."

Dean's expression darkened. "Look, I'm all for her having a guardian angel, for getting protection from Heaven, blah blah whatever, but… we've talked about this. And now you're human or at least mojo-less. Just like the Cas I met in twenty-fourteen. See, I'm watching the future unfold right in front of my eyes where Alex is dead and Sam is satan and you're… a wingless, drugged out mess. I saw her give you Lortab on the friggin' car ride over here… do you know how freaky this is? What if this is where you get hooked on pills?"

Cas was silent, stunned by the thought. He hadn't even considered that.

"Tell me again how I'm supposed to just go along with this," Dean continued. "Cause I'm not down to watch her ruin her life over you. I'm not trying to be a dick, it's just the way it is."

Cas was growing frustrated. "Dean, if the idea of what happens in that future didn't loom over us, would you still feel this way?"

"Yes!" Dean replied immediately, emphatically. "You're too old for her, you're not normal, you're not human."

Castiel felt himself darkening. "Strange that you didn't seem to find these things to be issues where Anna was concerned." Dean was startled. "I know about you and her, Dean," Cas said bluntly. "All of it." Castiel stared at him tensely. "And I believe the term that most accurately describes you right now is… hypocrite."

"That was different," Dean said forcefully. "When she and I were together, she was human."

Cas shook his head. "She was what I am now. In fact, she had more angel remaining in her than I do."

Not what Dean had wanted to hear, clearly. He threw his hands up, his face screwed up into an overbearing expression. "I mean, how would you ever take care of her, man? It's a delusion. She needs someone who can provide for her, protect her from the world out there—someone who she doesn't have to raise, train like a pet or a kid. A boyfriend or a husband, not some angel from planet clueless! You don't know how to do anything, Cas. The whole time I've known you, everything normal and every day to me, to us, you look at like it's Greek. You're not from our world, you don't understand our life, and what's more, I don't think you ever can."

Stung, Cas was silent. He wasn't sure why, but now, like this, his emotions were so much more close to the surface. And what Dean had just said hurt.

There was a box of silver tools balanced on the side of the Impala, just above the car's headlight. "Hey, hand me the socket wrench would you?" Dean asked, and Cas recognized that it was a challenge. Cas looked down at the tools and didn't know what any of them were—recognized only a screwdriver and a small hammer. Dean gave Cas a somewhat superior look, and Cas wondered if Dean were trying to make him feel stupid. Dean picked up a long silver tool when Cas did nothing—the end of the tool reminded Cas of a faucet. "It's this one," Dean said, and the way he said it hurt again.

Cas watched Dean pull something out of the car engine. His heart was beating faster than normal and he looked at the tools, discouraged, feeling worthless. But he thought of Alex, who looked at him like he was something valuable and worthwhile. He looked back at Dean, raised his chin. "I may not know the names of all these tools," he said, "or how to do the most basic human tasks
but... Dean... I love her."

Dean's head whipped to the side as he looked at Cas in abject shock which quickly darkened into indignant anger. "No you don't," he said, standing up. "Don't you say that to me and don't you dare say that to her," he thundered. Cas thought he saw fear flickering across Dean's eyes. "You don't know what that word means."

Cas looked at Dean, not understanding why his friend would treat him this way. "How can you claim to know what I feel?"

Dean pointed a livid finger at Cas. "You listen to me. All you will ever do is hurt her, leave her, and damage her. Mark my words Cas!" He gestured vaguely at nothing. "You don't know how broken she was this past month with you gone, how messed up—almost suicidal she was!" Castiel was shocked, unsure whether Dean were overreacting or speaking truthfully. "I may be in your debt for what you did to save her and I am grateful to you, I am," Dean said, controlling his anger but still giving away how enraged he was. "And I am trying my damnedest to be reasonable but you don't seem to get what you're doing and I need you to understand."

Dean's outrage was building up at a rapid pace. "Ever since I was a damn kid those two have been my responsibility and I have watched them live the shittiest life in all existence and all I've ever tried to do was make it better. And now it's at an all time low—my brother is talking about going to hell and dying like I did and my sister is with the last guy she should be with and there is nothing I can do about any of it!" He threw the wrench he'd been holding across garage and it knocked into a shelf of stuff that clattered down to the ground. Dean pinched the bridge of his nose and gathered himself. Softened slightly, seemed to, for a moment, come to his senses.

"Look man I know you care about her, I do. But you're bad for her and you know it. And if you did love her you'd walk away and let her be with someone her own age, her own species, someone who isn't gonna screw her over in the end." Dean looked at Cas pleadingly, begging him to listen. But Cas shook his head slowly. "I won't walk away from her, Dean."

Dean's expression hardened and fell; he nodded, his mouth in a hard line. He shook his head, wouldn't look at Cas for a few seconds. "I wish to hell we could be friends Cas. But I am not okay with this. I'm not."

"Dean..." Cas felt like he had nothing left in himself. "Shouldn't it be her decision?"

Dean's next words were heartbreaking. "Not if she chooses you." Dean looked at Cas with a mournful expression on his face. "You're not a human and you never will be."


"You two do whatever the hell you gotta do," Dean muttered. "Just don't expect me to like it or accept it, ever."

"So did killing Brady make it better?" Alex asked Sam. She was sitting cross legged on the hood of an old car, up near the windshield. Sam was reclined next to her, his long legs hanging over the edge of the hood. He was propped up on an elbow, his beer in his hand.

"No. I feel worse," he said. He was staring off into middle distance, thoughtful and somewhat grim. "Cuz, turns out my whole life, demons have been right there behind me, manipulating every single step I took... I feel like a puppet." He looked at the beer in his hand. "It scares the shit out of
me. Makes me wanna take matters into my own hands, stop being played, you know?" Alex looked at him carefully, knowing he meant saying yes to Lucifer. He shrugged, raised the beer bottle to his lips again. "But what if I'm just falling for it again, you know?"

The twins were silent and pensive for a minute. It was getting pretty dark now. Looked like rain for sure sometime soon. "I used to dream that you died," Sam suddenly said and Alex looked at him as if she'd misheard.

"What?" she asked.

"I dreamed it over and over," he said, his eyes somewhere far away, and he looked deeply disturbed. Alex felt disturbed by association. Sam shook himself. "And the details, maybe I blocked them out or m-maybe I didn't dream clearly, I'm not sure. But there was fire, I remember that. And... I was too scared to tell anyone." He looked down, obviously deeply ashamed of himself. Alex touched his shoulder gently for a couple seconds, he glanced at her briefly. "When Azazel died, I thought we were home free, you know? I thought I didn't have to worry anymore." He looked at her, and she could see how torn up he was about it. "Now I'm not so sure. Brady was saying all this stuff and... and now I'm just worried about you all over again."

Sam looked away again, grinding his teeth, she could tell from how the edge of his jaw worked. "Hey, I'll be fine," she said with an air of exaggerated confidence. "See, I have these awesome big brothers... who always have my back. Maybe you know them, Sam and Dean Winchester?"

Sam chuckled lowly. "They sound like losers."

"Yeah pretty much," she confirmed, deadpan, "and they're both super ugly." Sam made a half-amused, half-offended face.

"Hey!"

She shrugged, made an overly innocent face, and then they both laughed softly. This, the two of them hanging out like this reminded her of when they'd been kids and had just been friends. It had been different then, but somehow, she thought this was better. Not just because she had the ability to speak, but because they'd worked through their issues and were more solid than ever. So it was even more important to her that he didn't go and get himself killed by the devil.

Dying in a fire. Sam had dreamed she died in a fire. She thought of her dreams of Lucifer burning the world. In some of the dreams, she'd been on fire. She thought that telling him about her dreams would only freak him out more, so she said nothing. Only looked at him after a moment. "You can't say yes Sam," she told him, remembering the dreams so clearly that for a moment she couldn't look at his face—because that was Lucifer's face. "We have to figure out another way."

"I don't think there is another way," he protested. And he sounded hopeless.

Alex let out a breath, ran the palm of her hand down across her chin and mouth. "You know, you and Dean have always sacrificed yourselves... and it's just your default MO now." She thought a minute about what Crowley had told her. "We have to figure out another way."

"Maybe," Sam said. "Maybe not."

She was quiet another moment, trying to figure out a way to test Sam's reaction to the things she was thinking about. "I wonder if I had been born a boy, if you and Dean would have been so protective over me."

Sam looked at Alex oddly. "That's... a kind of random thing to wonder." He gave her a fond,
slightly lecturing look. "It's not a bad thing to have brothers who want you to stay safe and alive, Alex."

"I know," she said. So far so good. "But it seems like a double standard," she paused. She had to be careful about how she phrased this. "Like, for example... if I suggested that I could kill the devil by saying yes to him... you and Dean wouldn't even let me think about it. Just because I'm a girl."

"No that's... I mean yeah, no, we'd never let you do that, period, no matter what. Maybe you being a girl is part of it but..." Sam got slightly frustrated, his confusion and suspicion piquing. "Do we really even need to hypothesize about this?"

"Yeah, no, sorry." Alex sipped at her beer again, looked over the junk yard somberly. Just like she thought. Sam was the less overprotective of her brothers, more reasonable than Dean by a long shot—and he'd shot down the glancing possibility of her being able to kill the devil without a second thought. There was probably nothing to it, anyway, she thought. But, Crowley did seem to be pretty well informed. Alex craned her neck a little, trying to see over the piled-high cars and toward the house, wondering if she'd see a flash of tan trench coat. She was mildly worried about whatever Dean wanted to talk to Cas about.

"So did you really get me a pony for our birthday?" Sam asked, giving her a cheeky little smile and cutting into her thoughts.

She looked down at him and raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah. Pink. Sparkly."

He chuckled. "Cuz I uh, actually have your present here." He wasn't joking.

He was reaching into his jacket pocket and Alex felt herself sit up straighter in surprise. "Aw, Sam," she protested, feeling bad. "But I haven't gotten you anything yet."

"It's okay. I just... saw this in a gas station and thought of you, thought I'd give it to you early. No time like the present, right?" He held out a really cheap, flat metal keychain shaped like a cupcake and painted with cheesy glittery paint. Sam almost laughed at himself at this point, shrugging. "It's... kinda stupid."

Alex looked at her brother, took it and grinned down at it. "I love it."

His mouth lifted up crookedly in a stupid grin—his dimples cut into his cheeks. "Yeah and I know how you don't even have keys to anything, but I thought you could put it on your duffel or something," Sam continued.

"You genius," Alex said fondly. He shrugged in playful humility and Alex looked at her keychain, then reached over and hugged an arm around his neck, pressing their cheeks together for a second. "Thank you Sammy." she told him as she pulled away. "You're a good big brother." She looked at him for a minute, thinking about the past few years and how rocky things had been for them. "I'm really glad we're friends again," she said honestly, softly.

And she saw that he felt the same. He smiled at her softly, nodding. "Me too."

Alex laughed at them, pointed at him, cringing slightly. "So, chick flick moment over, or...?"

"Yup," Sam agreed readily, and sat up all the way, swung his legs over the side of the car, sitting beside her still but with his feet on the ground now. "I'll go see if Bobby needs a hand with anything. Gotta figure out how exactly we're gonna stop this whole Croatoan outbreak thing." He paused, gave her a little smile. "Betcha ten bucks explosives will be involved."
Alex nodded her approval. "Hm. Those are always fun."

The twins headed to the house together—Sam walking a little slower than normal to keep from outpacing his twin with his long legs—and when Alex glimpsed Dean working on his car alone, she frowned, told Sam she'd see him inside.

She approached Dean slowly. He was banging around on the engine aimlessly—she recognized that he was trying to act like he was doing something important but really was just trying to kill time. "Hey, you seen Cas?" she asked.

He glanced up at her fleetingly. "Went off somewhere, I dunno. Seemed kinda pissy."

Alex got quiet a second. Dean wouldn't look at her still. "What did you say to him?" she asked, her tone mildly accusing.

"Nothing," Dean muttered. "Don't worry about it."

"Dean… the world's probably about to end. Do you really want to spend our last days pissed off at each other?"

He stopped clanging around under the hood and straightened up, gave her an unreadable, terse look, wiping his dirty hands on a grungy rag. "You know, I've been thinking about what you said," he told her, looking straight at her now. "How I'm just like Dad in all the bad ways." Oh great, here we go. Alex looked at her big brother reluctantly. "And I think maybe you're right," Dean said, surprising her. "But I'm also like him in the best ways, I do what I have to, to keep this family safe. Even if it pisses you off, even if it's not what you want."

Alex was pissed off now. Still, she tried to reason with Dean, even though it never seemed to work. "Dean. I'm going to be twenty-eight in a week. I'm an adult and I have been for awhile now." She huffed somewhat indignantly. "You know... you're not my father. So stop acting like it." She stopped a minute, then appealed to him desperately. "Just be my brother. Be happy that I found someone."

Dean looked insulted and wounded. "Him?" The word was said with disbelief and total lack of understanding.

"Yes," Alex said. "Him." And she said the same word Dean had with great amounts of affection, emotion.

Dean looked almost repulsed. Or maybe that was hopelessness. He swung his rag onto his shoulder, shook his head, didn't look at her. "I don't get you at all anymore." He began to mess around underneath the hood of the car, closing the conversation.

But she had a final remark to leave him with. "Maybe you never did."

She stalked off, in search of Cas, leaving Dean to stew. And honestly, he wasn't even angry anymore, he was lost and confused and felt like giving up on everything. His brother was slipping out of his grasp, his sister too... the two people he depended on most in the world. And one of them, Alex, hated him. All Dean was trying to do was protect her. He was so, so unsure of himself these days, which made him try even harder to do the right thing. The thing was, it was getting hard to tell what was wrong, what was right.

She did deserve to be happy, but... not with Cas. How could he be the right guy for her? How?

Alex would look for Cas for several minutes, finally find him at the end of Bobby's road, staring
off into the distance somberly, deeply upset about something. He wouldn't tell her what, would claim it wasn't important. She would talk him into going back to the house for peanut butter sandwiches and milk, telling him that they could use his help formulating the plan to stop the croatoan outbreak. He'd go with her but would remain withdrawn and brooding for the rest of the day.

**Just After Sunset**

Castiel stood outside beside Bobby's old black van. Bobby was loading up some of the C4 that Sam had brought up from the basement into an army green duffel bag, a few feet away. Cas watched glumly, uselessly.

Sam, Alex, and Bobby had tried to include him throughout the day as they'd planned out the attack on the Niveus distribution center, which was a couple states away. However, he hadn't been able to add anything to their efforts, had felt out of place and had nothing to contribute.

The plan was that they would leave from Bobby's shortly, drive most of the night, arrive in the morning, stop the trucks from leaving, blow up the plant.

Dean's words had been running through Cas's mind all day. About what Alex really needed—a man, a human man. Cas was deeply distressed, because he'd tried to think of what he could offer her, and he could think of nothing except himself. What did he have? Nothing. And losing all the powers that had made him relatively useful at all, in a dire time such as this… to say the least, fate had a cruel sense of humor. Cas felt himself heaving a disconsolate breath, and Bobby stopped what he was doing a few feet away.

"What's your problem?" Bobby asked.

Cas faltered slightly underneath the hunter's pointed stare. "This is what they mean by 'the eleventh hour,' right?"

"Pretty much," Bobby confirmed.

"Well, it's the eleventh hour, and I am... useless. All I have is this." Cas waved the shotgun he held briefly, hating the feel of it, the weight of it, the smell of it. He looked down at it, full of loathing. "What am I even supposed to do with it?"

"Point it and shoot." Bobby replied snidely.

"No, I know that—" Castiel mumbled. He felt low and small, pathetic. "What I used to be—"

"Are you really gonna bitch—to me?" Bobby demanded, gesturing to himself, his wheelchair. And Cas was chastised by the man's hard tone. Bobby wheeled himself forward, grabbed the duffel bag out of his lap, threw it at Cas, who barely managed to react and catch it in time. "Quit pinin' for the varsity years..." Bobby told him gruffly, "and load the damn truck."

Cas watched him wheel away, back inside the garage. He threw the bag Bobby had tossed at him into the old black van, resentful. He glanced back at Bobby, who was now about fifteen feet away... behind him, Alex appeared from the inside of the house, and she had a couple of ammo bags and a box in her arms. She was heading toward him, and Castiel went to help her, feeling even worse than he had a moment ago after Bobby's harsh words, but wanting to be helpful however he could. Alex took in his morose expression as he took the box from her and she attempted a smile. "I know what you're thinking... how come Bobby had all this C4 just laying around, right?" He
tossed the box into the van, feeling too miserable to know how to react. "What's wrong?" Alex asked, looking at him intently, sliding the ammo bags off her shoulder and slinging them into the van.

He turned and faced her, not attempting to hide his misery. He knew she would listen to him, if no one else would. "Everything."

"Everything?" she asked, and she seemed slightly hurt by his words. She looked both ways—Dean was off a little bit, loading up the Impala, straightening the contents of the trunk, not paying attention to them—Sam and Bobby were fussing over some stuff in the garage. Surprising Cas, she grabbed his hand, pulled him around to the other side of the van, out of eyesight of the three other present people.

Cas was confused but intrigued by the unexplained action, and when she pushed him up against the other side of the van, stepped closer, leaving no space between their bodies, he understood. He became breathless, wondering what she was about to do. She touched the side of his face gently, soothingly.

"A lot's wrong right now." She said, and her eyes held his gaze steadily. He felt her hand move down just a little across the skin of his face. "But not everything." She traced her thumb down across his lower lip, looked at him with eyes that had grown full of a playful but predatory quality that made his pulse raise by several beats per minute. She got a little smile on her face and went onto her tiptoes just slightly, pressing her lips up to his softly, just barely, then she deepening the kiss, softening her mouth on his, pressing into him more, and he responded in kind, forgetting everything but her as he circled his arms around her, pulling her close, needing her, needing. She sighed so softly, he felt one of her hands in his hair, the other snuck inside his coat and jacket, curved around his waist, pulled herself to him. He forgot all of the things that had been plaguing him all day as the way she kissed him grew more and more intense.

He felt the rigid way his face had been etched all day softening and he realized dimly that ever since the hospital he'd been thinking of kissing her like this and had never found the right time… and that she must have been doing the same—because she there was a tone to kisses, he'd discovered, and the tone to this one was desperate, filled with pent-up things. Alex kissed him with growing levels of passion, like she'd been holding it back and saving it up and was finally letting it all pour out.

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He kissed her in the same way, surprised at how much he felt, how much he suddenly needed. He wondered how it was that she could make him feel so powerful and powerless at the exact same time. On instinct, Cas turned them a hundred and eighty degrees, so that she was the one with her back against the van—she breathed out the faintest gasp into his mouth as he kissed her deeply. He pressed himself closely to her, she whimpered ever so softly and Castiel did too, helpless. He was becoming very warm, his clothes felt too tight, all he could think about was having her again and how much he wanted her.

Caught up in the moment, impassioned, Cas pulled her against him as hard as he could with one arm and a soft little groan sounded in the base of his throat—he put his other hand on the side of her neck. He could feel her pulse fluttering underneath his thumb, the most gorgeous rhythm in the universe… and he would never be tired of how it felt to kiss her and be kissed by her, it felt like worship and adoration, like comfort and reassurance.

He felt one of her hands pressing against his chest then clenching at his shirt, and he could feel, literally feel, how much she wanted him when she did that. He pulled away a little, looking down at her, in awe of her and the overwhelming surge of emotions in his veins and chest—the love he
felt for her was even more than ever before and he didn't understand how he could hold all of it in. He wanted to tell her, he wanted to speak it out loud for her to hear. She looked up at him and wasn't playful anymore—she looked slightly tortured, deeply emotional. "I missed you so much," she told him in a whisper, and he saw how sad she'd been when he was gone. He held his hand at the side of her head, fingers threading through her hair, and he was so quickly distressed to see her in anguish. Her breathing was slightly labored, she looked at him with eyes that shone like there were tears in them. "I—" she started.

"Where'd you two idjits disappear to?" Bobby's voice, on the other side of the van, thundered. "This truck ain't gonna load itself." There was some grumpy mumbling, they could hear Sam talking somewhere nearby too.

Cas looked at Alex, reluctant to part but knowing they should. She seemed reluctant, too. It was warm here, safe, and he didn't feel useless when it was the two of them together. He stroked the side of her hair, searched her gaze. All he wanted was to be with her again, to be wrapped up in her, to show her what he couldn't ever seem to put into words. Maybe reassure her, reassure himself, too. She didn't look as sad anymore, there was a soft little smile on her face and the way she looked at him prompted him to pose one soft, single word question to her. "When?" he asked faintly. She understood, and her dark eyes looked up into his.

"Soon," she promised in a whisper. They drifted together again, lips seeking the others, but another loud shout interrupted.

"Alex, where'd you put my ammo sling?" Sam hollered.

Even more reluctant than before, they parted, the promise of soon on both of their minds. "Wait here a minute," Alex told Cas quietly. She was looking at him slightly coyly again, she glanced down, then back up at him. "Then follow." He looked down at himself. Oh. He saw why she said that. Yes, it seemed like a good idea to wait here a minute.

A few minutes later, with the van loaded up, the Impala full of supplies, everyone gathered near the garage to say goodbye. Thunder sounded in the distance.

"All right, well..." Dean looked at Sam in mild cynicism. He seemed so tired. "Good luck stopping the whole zombie apocalypse."

Sam pulled a face. "Yeah. Good luck... killing Death."

"Yeah," Dean replied, nodding hollowly. He glanced at his sister, then Cas, tense, clearly worried about going separate ways. "You guys be safe, all right?"

"We will be," Sam said. He got a funny look on his face, chuckled briefly. "Remember when we used to just... hunt wendigos? How simple things were?" he asked.

Dean pulled a face. "Not really."

Sam was mildly disappointed by Dean's blasé reaction, but reached around behind his back. "Well, um..." he pulled out his demon blade. "You might need this."

Dean reached out to take it, but then a new voice startled them and interrupted the moment.

"Keep it." Crowley handed Dean a small scythe. "Dean's covered. Death's own, that. Kills, golly, demons and angels and reapers and, rumor has it, the very thing itself."

"How did you get that?" Castiel asked, dubious.
Crowley shot Cas a cheeky expression. "Hello?—King of the crossroads." He turned back to Dean. "So, shall we?" He glanced at Bobby now, too. "Bobby, you just gonna sit there?"

"No, I'm gonna riverdance," Bobby retorted, giving Crowley a look that clearly said bite me.

"I suppose if you want to impress the ladies," Crowley commented, mystifying everyone, but especially Bobby. Crowley sighed as if in impatience. "Bobby, Bobby, Bobby... really wasted that crossroads deal. Fact—you get more if you phrase it properly. So, I took the liberty of adding a teeny little sub-a-clause on your behalf."

Sam and Dean looked at each other, raising their eyebrows slowly, even as Cas and Alex exchanged a glance, frowning in dawning disbelief.

"What can I say?" Crowley asked. "I'm an altruist." He looked at Bobby again, a soft little smile on his face. He made a get up motion with his hand. "Just gonna sit there?"

Face full of disbelief that didn't dare to believe, Bobby gripped the arms of his chair… pushed himself up really slowly at first… then shot to his feet when he realized his legs worked again, and perfectly. "Son of a bitch," Bobby breathed in surprise as everyone looked at him in wide-eyed surprise, smiles dawning across their features.

"Yes, I know," Crowley said at Bobby's slack-jawed state. "Completely worth your soul. I'm a hell of a guy."

Bobby looked at him in the oddest mixture of gratefulness and confusion. "Thanks."

"I know, I know, I'm the tops," Crowley muttered. "This is getting maudlin. Can we go?" The demon walked off toward the Impala even as Alex practically bounded up and hugged her uncle around his neck, grinning widely. Sam stood back grinning too, barely able to believe it.

"I'll be damned," Bobby said, looking down at his feet, still in shock.

"You will if he doesn't give your soul back," Dean muttered. When he got two looks of disapproval from the twins, he attempted to backpedal. "I'm just saying!" he said defensively.

"Well, shall we?" Bobby asked. Nothing could dampen his sudden good mood. "I'll drive." He grinned—for probably the first time in months, and circled the van, got in, started the engines.

"All right Dean," Sam said, turning and putting a hand on the passenger side door handle. He paused tensely. "Seeya."

"Yeah," Dean said, looking at his two siblings. He looked like he felt excluded or sad. "Seeya."

And he didn't say anything to Alex, just looked at her, appearing mildly ashamed. His hands were in his pockets, he glanced at Cas, turned, walked away, and strode to his car, not looking back at them.

Alex watched her big brother go, not sure what she'd been hoping for. The divide between herself and Dean was only getting bigger. It hurt that he wouldn't accept the one she loved. He was making her choose. And she'd made her choice. The one she was getting into the van with.

She turned and gave Cas a small, strained smile, got into the van, and he followed.

And the under a dark night sky full of storms, two vehicles went their separate ways.
Here to Fall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Rescue me from me, and all that I believe… carve out your heart for keeps in an old oak tree and hold me for goodbyes-and whispered lullabies. Should I fall from grace here with you? Will you leave me, too?"
- Smashing Pumpkins

Last Year

Castiel was confused, reeling, in so much pain; laying on the ground and unsure of where he was. The last thing he remembered was being with Alex and her brothers—late at night, out in the woods, and Alex had been very, very drunk. Castiel had taken the flask of absinthe from her on impulse because her behavior had been so strange: she’d rambled angrily and grievously to him about her father, she’d been upset and sarcastic and out of control. He’d only wanted to help her and understand her and the alcohol only seemed to be making her more of a danger to herself.

But what had happened after that? Briefly, he couldn't recall—the searing, aching pain crippled him and his ability to think. And then he remembered: that several angel brethren had summoned him away from the Winchesters forcefully, demanded he come with them, told him that he was wanted for an audience with the archangels—that he was to leave his vessel behind. And Castiel had known what that meant. He had resisted at first—an instinct he never would have possessed before. Another instance of disobedience he could add to the growing list.

Castiel groaned and raised up slightly, seeing his older brothers Michael and Raphael in front of him—and he knew he was weakened, because he didn't perceive their true forms, instead he saw their vessels—and Castiel looked down, realizing that he still saw himself as Jimmy Novak. They were in a heaven that was an ornate, french style palace hall, and Castiel was sprawled onto the shining marble floor. Raphael bent forward just slightly, looking at Castiel with a stony, unreadable expression. "It hurts, doesn't it. Being ripped out of a vessel without warning."

Yes. It did. Very much. Castiel looked up at his older brother full of agonized pleading. "Why have you done this?" he asked, not understanding.

Michael looked at him cooly. "We've brought you here so that you can explain yourself. Your actions."

"My actions?" Castiel repeated.

Michael made a 'get up' motion with his hand. "Stand up, Castiel."

Castiel did as he was told and looked between his archangel brothers. They seemed displeased. "Your interferences and interactions with the human girl are becoming increasingly extraneous and unnecessary," Raphael said plainly in the slow, insolent tone he so often took. "You've been warned before. You've been disciplined before... or have you forgotten?"

No, he had not, and he never would. Castiel looked down.

"Explain yourself, Castiel. Why you continue to foolishly walk this dangerous line." Michael paused. "You are a servant of Heaven."
"Yes, I know that I am," Castiel replied. He was thinking deeply, earnest. "But she's... she's my friend. The Winchester family. They're my friends." The archangels looked at him strangely and then at each other, and he could see that they did not understand him. Castiel attempted to explain himself. "I don't believe my actions have been—"

Michael cut him off harshly. "Your opinion is unimportant, Castiel." He stepped closer. "Your obedience is what we require. You are to accept what we tell you without question and cease to act on your own accord." He looked at Castiel for a long moment, cool and aloof. "You have no need of friendship. Not Alex Winchester's, not Dean Winchester's, not Sam Winchester's."

Castiel had wanted to protest, but Michael continued. "Be grateful we allow you this exception, Castiel. After what you did before..." he trailed off meaningfully and Castiel knew he was expected to express guilt and regret. But he would not, or perhaps he could not. He had given Alex Winchester her voice back and he would not apologize for it—because it was the right thing and he knew it, even though all of Heaven had disagreed. "After what you did before," Michael repeated, dissatisfied with Castiel's silence, "you should not be allowed even a second chance."

Castiel frowned. Puzzled. "Then why am I being given it?"

There was a short silence, and the archangels exchanged a glance. Castiel felt, intuitively, there was something they were not communicating to him. "The Winchesters trust you," Michael told him artlessly. "We can use this to our advantage."

"But make no mistake," Raphael told him. "This will be your last warning. If you fall to disobedience again... I will lay you to waste myself."

Castiel and Raphael locked gazes and there was a long, tense silence.

"The relationship you had with her is over," Michael told him. "You are not her friend. You are her guardian, and that is all. You will not interfere in safeguarding her from anything less than imminent death, as you've been commanded. Do you understand?"

Yes. Castiel understood the command, but he also felt the greatest sense of despair that he ever had. His loyalties were torn, and it was a new, terrifying sensation. He knew who he was: a soldier, a bearer of the word of the Lord, a member of the Heavenly host. His role was to obey without question, to carry out the will of God and Heaven until the end of time, to remain unquestioningly loyal.

But there were questions. And there were doubts. And there was her.

He thought of the little family he called his friends. He thought of Alex, who he had watched in the quiet, lonely moments, who he had seen cry when she thought no one was there with her. Who he had felt an inexplicable sense of kinship to from first sight. She inspired gentleness and fierceness in him all at once and he wanted to be loyal to her. He wanted to protect her from everything that would cause her harm, not just from imminent death. It didn't seem right that Heaven would forbid him from guarding her as closely as he knew she needed to be.

She never left his mind, not even for a moment.

"Do you understand?" Michael repeated, more intensely now.

Quiet defiance glittered in Castiel's eyes, even as he spoke a false truth, purposefully. "Yes."

Michael looked at Castiel, detached yet malevolent. Clearly, he did not believe Castiel's answer. He reached out a hand and searing, blinding light consumed Castiel—but right before the
punishment began, Castiel heard his older brother say to him, "you will."

How times had changed.

Castiel was in the back of a dark van that sped down the road at breakneck speeds—powerless, cut off from Heaven, reduced to human nature. And yet, not unhappy about it. He couldn't be, not entirely.

Across from him, sitting on a plastic crate and deftly loading another shotgun with nimble fingers, the reason he had defied Heaven glanced up at him, feeling his gaze. Her dark eyes flickered over his features in appraisal, she gave him a tight little smile, then she returned focus to her task. He felt himself smiling too, just slightly, despite everything.

He'd spent much of the day feeling inadequate and ridden by emotional torment concerning his newfound condition as an all-but-human fallen angel. What Dean had said—that Castiel was not human and never would be—haunted him still. Dean's vehement disapproval of the two of them together in any sort of romantic context weighed heavily on Castiel, bothered him. Made him question himself. Dean was wise and insightful, despite his shortcomings of a short temper and stubbornness… and Castiel wondered if the man had a point.

His emotions were so much rawer and more overpowering now, and he wasn't able to rise above them in the least like he'd been able to in the past. When he'd first acquired his vessel, he'd been compartmentalized: emotion, logic, duty had all been separated. But slowly, as he had fought for the Winchester family and become more involved with them, his thoughts, feelings, and convictions had all become a tangled mess. It was difficult to process, so overwhelming.

Even though Dean spoke with certainty, Castiel clung to the idea that his own feelings were worth something, meant something, and shouldn't be cast aside so readily just because Dean disagreed. With Alex, Cas didn't feel out of place, in fact he felt that he belonged… but he wondered if he should feel this way at all. More than anything, Castiel desired to be worthy of Alex, because his conviction was that she deserved only the best. Herein lay the dilemma: he did not view himself as the best anything. He was a wayward angel, a guardian who had failed her several times over, an angel who had been stripped of everything that made him an angel. So what did that make him now? At best, he was a placeholder. A shadow of a human—clueless and incapable. Just what Dean had said.

He disliked that she had to show him how to do everything—he wished to be able to care for her without assistance. Perhaps that was his sense of pride rearing its head. Pride, or shame. He didn't want to be useless or a bother. He desired to give to her the things he wasn't sure how to provide: stability, support, protection. He wondered if this is what the humans called 'wishful thinking.'

Dean was right. Castiel was not a human. Not really, not completely. But whatever he was, despite his misgivings about what the future held, he reminded himself that he was here. With her. Finally. Not separated by the laws of differing dimensions. Able to speak to her, be seen by her, interact with her. Touch her. Be touched. And perhaps, deep down, he had been waiting for this, almost daring to hope that it would happen, but afraid of it all the same—the time when the divide between them would crumble down and leave nothing between them but the air that they breathed. Perhaps, Castiel thought, perhaps he had been put here to fall. Perhaps he had been meant for this all along. Nearly three years ago, when he'd first seen her, he'd known she was important. He'd felt it with certainty. And now he realized it was because he'd sensed that she would be important to him. And she was. The most important thing.

That's why he supposed he should have foreseen this happening, this long fall to earth. After all…
Alex had brought him downfall after downfall from the very beginning. Every time he had sacrificed for her and defied Heaven, he'd been stripped of power and position, each time more and more. The first time, when he had restored her voice. The second, when he had rebelled outright and given Dean and Alex a chance to stop Lucifer from rising. The third, when he had gone up into a blaze of light, nearly killing himself to save Alex from Zachariah's clutches.

He didn't regret his decisions or actions, not even for a fraction of a millisecond. He only regretted that he was no longer strong and powerful, capable of protecting Alex the way he knew how, with celestial power at his right hand. But he would learn how to safeguard her as he was now, this mortal mass of flesh and blood. And if they somehow survived this apocalypse, if they somehow stopped Lucifer from destroying the world, Castiel would find a way to save her life in the year 2013—he vowed to himself all over again, looking across from himself at the one he would guard and protect for the rest of his days, to his dying breath. She was taking apart a pistol and cleaning the parts with a rag and he thought he had never seen a more beautiful, frightening sight. He knew she was capable and strong, but just the thought of where they were going right now and what could happen to her in the crossfire was utterly terrifying.

They were heading to the Niveus Pharmaceuticals distribution plant where croatoan virus was being shipped out, disguised as a vaccine. Pestilence was clever to have manipulated the situation like this, and if the four of them were not successful, the virus would sweep the country overnight, exterminating millions and millions of people and plunging the entire world into the apocalypse without hope of escape. That fact was vexing enough, but any mention of the word croatoan triggered immense, helpless fear in Castiel. He could still remember Alex as she lay dying in his arms, and he wished he had never seen those visions, that Anna had never shown him those things. Taking Alex anywhere near anything to do with the croatoan virus made alarm bells scream in his mind. All he could do was promise himself that he wouldn't let her out of his sight, not even for a moment as they completed this job.

She looked up at him again. There were only about three feet between them or so, but it felt like a far distance. She was so lovely, errant dim light from passing street lamps and cars flickering over her features. Again, she gave him a little, soft smile. There was a hesitant, apprehensive quality to the expression—she was worried and anxious, too, like him. Maybe that's why she'd been busying herself for the past few hours, quietly working on things he didn't know how to help with. She returned her focus to the pistol she was reassembling, and there was a loud, metallic click as she pulled the slide back and double-checked her work, then pushed the slide forward, satisfied with her handiwork momentarily. She seemed to be finished with the pistol but looked back into the van, like she was searching for more to do. She seemed to find nothing and slight dissatisfaction filtered over her features. Castiel saw the restlessness, but even as he saw it, she was forcing her expression into a less revealing state. She nodded as she looked over her work, then glanced up toward the front of the van.

"All right guys, shotguns all loaded, your rifle too, Bobby… ammo bags packed… charges secure." She pulled her crate forward a little toward the front seat, craning her head around Sam's seat and handing him his gun, handle-first. "Sam, your pistol had so much damn carbon buildup in the chamber that I'm surprised it even shot straight anymore," she said teasingly.

Her twin was a little sheepish and he chuckled as he took the pistol. "Thanks, Alex." Sam had been pensive and quiet for the duration of the van ride, not saying much, and even now he seemed distracted, tucking the pistol into his jeans and looking back out in front of himself through the windshield and in to far distance with thoughtful, narrow eyes.

"Are we there yet?" Alex asked Bobby, and there was a distinctly joking tone to her question that he responded to with a brief, affectionate side glance.
"Not yet, kiddo. Few more hours." He chuckled. "I hope you brought a coloring book."

Castiel didn't understand why that comment entertained the twins, but Alex and Sam were both momentarily lightened, looking at the man who they referred to as their uncle with appreciative, amused smiles.

Cas imitated Alex's motion and scraped the crate he sat on forward a little, nearer to her, sensing that a conversation was about to begin. Bobby glanced at him in the rearview. "So I'm guessin' these yahoos told you all about Sam's crazy idea to stop Satan?" he asked.

Bobby was in better spirits than he'd been in earlier, but there was an underlying quality of apprehensiveness to the question. And Castiel understood why. He nodded tensely, narrowing his eyes in thought. He'd been mulling this over today, too. Though maybe not as in depth as everything else. "They did," he confirmed and expelled a weighty breath. "'Yes' to Lucifer. Then jump into the cage. It's an interesting plan."

"That's a word for it," Bobby muttered.

"So when are you gonna tell me it's the worst plan you ever heard, Cas?" Sam asked. "Everyone else has."

"I am happy to tell you that if it's what you want to hear," Castiel replied. "But... it's not what I think."

"What?" Alex asked, and she was looking at him in flat-out shock.

He knew she would be unhappy with what he was about to say. "Your family has a habit of exceeding my expectations," he told her, and there was an almost fond note in his voice. "You are all very stubborn and strong willed." He looked at Sam now. "Dean resisted Michael to a point that Michael gave up on him... an impressive feat in itself." He frowned deeply. "Maybe you could resist Lucifer, Sam, but... Adam being chosen as Michael's vessel presents a very dangerous dilemma."

"As if it weren't dangerous already?" Alex asked, mildly derisive. Cas glanced at her and saw that her nervous fear was doubled.

"Dangerous how?" Sam questioned, and Cas tore his gaze away from Alex, torn. He knew none of this would be what she wanted to hear. Because all of it meant losing her brother.

"If you say yes to Lucifer and then fail... this fight will happen. And the collateral..." he shook his head gravely, looking down. "It'll be immense. Adam isn't Michael's true vessel, therefore, he's weakened already, disadvantaged. And you're Lucifer's chosen vessel—so if you weren't prepared, if you failed to resist Satan, Michael would be defeated. I'm sure of it." There was a heavy silence in the van. "You'd need to be ready. As strong as possible to be able to grapple with Lucifer and cast him back down into his cage."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked, intrigued and anxious, paying close attention. "How?"

Castiel met the man's uneasy, questioning gaze. "Demon blood." Sam's expression registered shocked.

"Demon blood?" Alex echoed, as if she'd misheard.

"Yes. Demon blood." Castiel looked at her somberly. "To take in Lucifer... it would be more than he's ever drunk."
"But… why?" Sam asked.

"It strengthens the vessel," Cas explained. "Keeps it from exploding."

"But if the vessel exploded, wouldn't that kill Lucifer?" Alex asked.

Castiel shook his head slowly. "The vessel would die, not Lucifer."

Alex was grim and sat back slightly. "Ah."

Sam seemed to be struggling to understand. "Wait, so, the guy he's in now—is he drinking demon blood?"

Cas's eyes flicked to Sam's. "Gallons."

"And how is any of that not the worst plan you ever heard?" Bobby commented sarcastically.

Castiel turned his head toward Bobby. "The alternative is to continue running."

Bobby pulled a chagrinned face, reluctant, glancing at Cas sidelong. "Touché."

There was a short, thoughtful silence. "Come on, you guys can't really be thinking about this," Alex protested, sitting forward again and looking at her brother, her uncle, her angel all in turn. "I mean, why not summon Lucifer and then like throw the rings down, shove him in?" She asked, tripping over her words, flustered and desperate. "Or, one of us kills him with an angel blade? There has to be another way, right?"

Cas knew why she was so keen to find another way, and as much as he wanted to be able to tell her there was another way… he couldn't think of one and he couldn't lie to her to give her or any of them false hope. "A human fighting an angel. That would never work. He's too fast. And I can't, I'm…" he gestured at himself briefly. "This." He shook his head, deep in thought. "It might work to open the cage and summon him but… pushing him in, I don't know how we could manage that. And if we couldn't, he might also take the rings and with then, our only chance. I truly don't think there's another way, Alex."

Castiel looked at her sadly. She was silent. Sam's eyebrows shot up, his forehead was wrinkled in apprehensive thought, and he glanced over at his sister. "Like Dad always said, taking the offensive's always better," he said.

"Yeah, and look where that got him," Alex replied sullenly.

She sat back, removing herself from the conversation and subsequently ending it, too. This was crazy. Had she been a moron to keep believing there was a way for Sam to walk away from this? After all, Dean had dodged a bullet when Adam stepped in, filled the shoes her oldest brother was supposed to fill… and the secret things Crowley had told her about Lucifer and how she was supposed to have been the one who could have killed him bothered her again, deeply. Upset and in denial, Alex put an elbow on her knee and her face in a hand. She felt a warm, heavy hand come to rest on her other knee, and she looked up at Castiel, who was looking at her in vast worry and sadness. She couldn't believe he thought Sam's idea was good. She also couldn't believe he wasn't protesting more about her being along for this ride to Niveus. He'd objected yesterday when he first learned of Pestilence's plan to distribute the croatoan virus disguised as a swine flu vaccine—and the Winchester's subsequent plan to go head off that distribution by blowing up the factory distribution center. But he seemed resigned to it now.

Maybe she should resign herself to certain things, too. That no other plan or option came to them,
she would be saying goodbye to Sam forever. And that if Sam didn't succeed in defeating Lucifer and dragging him into his cage… that the entire world would burn… just like in her dreams. Alex looked at Cas's hand on her knee and covered it with one of her own hands, curling her fingers around the outer edge of his palm. His skin was warm and comforting, but she was afraid.

In the back of her mind, there were whispers, terrified whispers commanding her to do something, to save them all, to stop Sam from making the biggest mistake in history.

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**Springfield, Missouri**

Thunder rumbled distantly and the occupants of the van looked up at the sound briefly, except for Bobby, who was peering through some binoculars at the Niveus warehouse where workers were busy loading huge boxes of 'vaccine' into huge yellow trucks. It was early morning—an overcast, dreary day that fit the tense mood in the vehicle. They were parked across from the large warehouse complex and putting the final touches on their plan of action. The four of them knew that if they didn't manage to wipe out this threat here and now, the entire continent of North America would be infected by the croatoan virus. It was important to get this right. Alex was double checking her shotgun again, Sam was looked at a blueprint of the warehouse that Bobby had somehow gotten his hands onto yesterday—probably Crowley, now that Cas thought about it.

"Yup, they're loading up hotshots of Croatoan in the trucks," Bobby confirmed, and set his binoculars down, looked at Sam, glanced at Alex. "Okay. First truck don't leave for an hour. We get in, we plant the C4 every twenty-five feet, then we pull the fire alarm so everyone scrams."

"Uh, that truck is leaving," Cas pointed out, and everyone looked up in unison at the truck that was pulling out of the loading dock at a crawling pace.

"Balls!" Bobby exclaimed. "Okay, new plan," he said, a new note of urgency in his voice. Sam was already getting out of the van and yanking open the side door as Bobby was doling out the new plan and reaching back—Alex shoved his rifle into his waiting hand. "Sam with me, we'll skirt the west side of the building and see if we can get in before they go into lockdown, Alex, you—"

Alex was three steps ahead of him—already slinging one of the ammo bags she'd prepared across her body, grabbing two shotguns and jumping out of the van, brushing past Sam, who was grabbing at the other bags that were on the van floor. "On it," she told Bobby, and Cas was right behind her, startled by how quickly they were having to take action. "Heads up," she told him as he jogged slightly to catch up with her, and he barely caught the shotgun she tossed to him. She strode across the parking lot at a brisk pace and Castiel wasn't sure what they were going to do—the warehouse was enclosed by a high chain-link fence but that was exactly where she was heading to. Were they going to climb over it? On the other side, cars and trucks lined the parking lot, partially obscuring Alex and Cas from being seen.

The yellow Niveus truck was slowly chugging toward the closed wrought-iron gate at the end of the parking lot that they were moving toward. Alex held her shotgun tight against herself lengthwise, and her stride turned into an all-out run as she saw how little time they had. Castiel chanced a quick glance behind them, saw that Bobby and Sam were cutting through the parking lot, heading to the far corner of the warehouse.

Alex stopped short at the fence, shocking Cas when she drew her foot back and kicked hard, three times, at the place where the chain link fence seam was secured to a flimsy pole. The metal clasps that held the fence to the pole snapped under the brutal force and she was stooping slightly, squeezing in through the gap she'd forced. "What are we supposed to do?" Cas asked, following her, the metal points of the fence scraping against his shoulder uncomfortably. She was bent over a
little, shoulder pressed into a large SUV that was parked there. They were close to the gate that the truck was heading for, and she watched it hawkishly as it approaching them slowly, its engine growling lowly. She gestured briefly at the gate, breathless.

"That gate up there is automatic, you smash the keypad thing when I give you the signal, I'll take care of the driver."

"But—" Castiel made to protest. She suddenly grabbed him by the back of the neck and kissed him, once—hard and fast—shocking him and catching him off guard. And even as he tried to return the kiss, she was pulling back and grinning at him almost playfully.

"For luck," she said. The truck rolled to a stop and Alex told Cas, "now."

She was already moving, bent over and almost militaristic in her movements as she moved up between the parked cars and then pressed close to the side of the Niveus truck, skirting alongside it and toward the driver's open window. The driver's arm reached out to swipe a card into the keypad—and Alex leapt up, her feet finding a hold on the little step underneath the driver's door, and she walloped him on top of the head with her shotgun, stunning him and yanking him by the arm hard, she used all of her weight to pull him out of the truck completely even as he yelped in protest—and the second he crashed on the ground, face-first, she jumped down off of the truck and rammed the butt of her shotgun into the back of his head, rendering him unconscious and silent.

Simultaneously, Cas smashed the keypad with the end of his shotgun and the gate shuddered and stopped rolling open. The two of them looked at each other, a little breathless. "You should have let me take care of the driver," Cas said and she gave him a faintly amused challenging look.

"Maybe next time," she said, smiling despite herself at his somewhat grumpy expression.

The sounds of commotion—shouts and some heavy stuff tumbling over caught their attention and Alex hurried down to the end of the truck and peeked around the end—then quickly jerked back. A bunch of guys were looking at the stopped truck and jammed gate and maybe she'd imagined it, but one of them looked black-eyed. She wasn't sure if they'd seen her or not, but she could tell: "They know something's up," she hissed to Cas, who was beside her, holding his shotgun awkwardly, looking grim. Why couldn't things just go according to plan? Just once! "Shit," she muttered, glancing to the far side of the warehouse where Sam and Bobby were hugging to the side of the building, their guns raised. "Hurry guys," she muttered under her breath, hoping they could make it in before one of the warehouse guys sounded the alarm.

She crouched down, peering across the parking lot from underneath the truck, and saw a pair of booted feet striding toward them—but instead of rounding the truck around the back, it looked like he was heading up to the front passenger-side of the truck—and Cas was closer. Alex looked up at Cas, pointing urgently, and he seemed to understand, moving back up toward the front of the truck and the unconscious driver.

"Yo Anderson, what's up with the gate!" the newcomer called out as he rounded the front of the truck. He stopped short when he saw Cas, right there in his face, waiting.

"Out of order," Castiel replied gruffly, and smacked his shotgun across the man's face, knocking him out cold—and Cas looked down at the man, then looked at the shotgun, then looked at Alex.

He seemed mildly grudging. "Perhaps these things aren't so bad."

Alex gave him a look, almost a smirk. "Told you."
They could hear the warehouse doors closing and Alex quickly got confused, peered back around the end of the truck. "Oh no, no!"

"What's happening?" Cas asked, beside her again and turned toward her protectively, standing so close that her arm was pressed into his torso. "They're going into lockdown; they know we're here," Alex said tersely, and then they heard a gunshot, and screams. Without a second thought, Alex took off at a run toward the warehouse, recognizing the sound of Sam's voice commanding people, "go, go, go!"

A huge Suburban SUV came out of nowhere and squealed to a stop in front of Alex, cutting her off unexpectedly, and a male, black-eyed demon bolted out of the driver's seat, snarling, a pistol in his hand, raising up to aim at her—and Alex was raising her shotgun—but abruptly the demon was stumbling backwards, something silver and bright in the middle of his chest—and he screamed, convulsing, his skeleton flickering wildly. What the—Alex realized that Cas had done that and looked back at him—then almost fell over in terror, because there was another demon behind him, and before she could say anything, Cas was knocked forward, flat onto his face with a cry of surprise, and the demon who had tackled him to the ground had a knife raised high, the sharp tip glinting wickedly, right above Castiel's head…

Alex had never experienced so much righteous anger and terror all at once. She dropped her shotgun without a single thought and darted forward, grabbed the demon's wrist tightly with both of her hands, keeping him from stabbing it downward… and the jagged blade cut through the sleeve of her jacket and into the soft flesh of her forearm, but she didn't care, she yanked the demon up further by the arm and smashed her knee into the demon's face, twisting the demon's wrist so hard it snapped altogether—the demon's knife clattered to the ground even Alex reached into her jacket for her angel's blade, she whipped it out in a fit of absolute rage and fear, grabbed it with both hands and took the demon's head off completely when she slashed the blade blindly through its neck. She stood there, breathless and shocked, heart beating audibly in her ears almost sickeningly. Whoa. Castiel, pushing himself up onto his hands, looked at the demon's head that had rolled to a stop beside him head and then up her with wide eyes.

"A-are you all right?" she asked him, dropping to her knees and grabbing him by the upper arms, her angel blade clattering, forgotten, to the ground beside her. He could have just died, he was now as mortal as she was, and she'd really realized it just now and was terrified.

"Yes, I'm fine, I—"

The sound of another truck engine somewhere nearby rumbling to life caught their attention, then an unfamiliar voice shouting "Go, go, go!"

Another huge, yellow truck was pulling out of the loading dock area, heading the opposite direction than the other truck had gone in—and even as Alex and Cas were standing up—it wasn't clear who was helping who stand—they saw the truck barreling toward a far gate they hadn't seen, then careening through it without stopping.

"Oh my god, oh shit, shit!" Alex exclaimed, and grabbed up her angel blade, left her shotgun behind, her mind not fully functioning at this point. "Get in, get in!" She told Cas, even as she was jumping into the still-open door of the running Suburban the demon had been driving. Cas stopped to quickly yank his blade out of the other demon and pick his shotgun back up, and as soon as Cas was in, she hit the gas so hard that the tires burned rubber against pavement—and she spun the vehicle around, giving chase.

They shot out of the Niveus parking lot, and she floored the gas, right behind the truck that was
careening down the side road wildly, then turning so fast it almost capsized onto an unmarked, old road that ran alongside the Niveus complex—Alex glanced at Cas, who still had his shotgun, and she tightened her grip on the steering wheel. "Cas, I need you to get ready and shoot this truck's front tire out, okay?"

"Of course," he replied, and she could have laughed at his grim calmness if she wasn't in such distress. They could not let this truck get away. She heard Cas cock his shotgun cocking and a small twinge of pride did well up in her, because she'd taught him how to do that. She pressed the button to roll down his window and then floored the gas all the way and jerked the car to the left-hand side of the road, bringing the Suburban up next to the delivery truck, giving Cas a good shot at the tire—this road wasn't paved well and it would be hard to get a steady shot. Cas fired once—the truck swerved beside them, and it didn't look like the tire had been hit—Cas cocked the shotgun again, fired again—and the tire blew with a loud pop. Alex hit the brakes as soon as she heard the sound—the Niveus truck fishtailed across the road, losing control, and then swerved sharply off the road, crashing hard into a tree.

Throwing the Suburban into park, Alex scrambled out of the car immediately as Cas did the same, and he moved faster actually, closer to the truck than she was. The driver of the Niveus truck stumbled out, his black eyes giving him away—and Castiel, blade in one hand, bore down onto the demon with hesitation, ruthlessly backhanding the dazed demon across the face, shoving it into the side of the truck and then stabbing it through the heart, ending the demon right then and there. The demon slid down the side of the truck and crumpled to the ground and Castiel, blade in hand, looked down at the dead demon malevolently.

God, he's badass. Alex stood there in the middle of the deserted old road, breathing hard and looking at him appreciatively, struck by how attractive she found him in this moment. How much she loved him. And he looked up, saw the way she looked at him and he tilted his head just slightly, seeming to be curious and intrigued. A wind gusted up over them abruptly, sending Alex's hair wildly blustering around herself, Cas's trench coat fluttering around his calves. Closer now, thunder rumbled. It was going to rain, and soon. Alex looked around—they were in a heavily wooded area and she couldn't see anyone or anything on either end of the road. This was as good a place as any to set a truck on fire. It didn't look like anyone had been down this road in a long time.

"Okay, we need to torch the whole truck," Alex said, refocusing on what needed to be done, and pulled her ammo bag, still slung across her body, to the front of herself, pawing through the contents, looking for the book of matches she'd stuck in there, even as she walked around to the back of the truck, unlatched the lock that kept the sliding metal door down.

There was a funny clanking sound inside of the truck, like something was rolling around or moving, had fallen over. What was that? Huh. She yanked the back door up, and it creaked and groaned, sliding up, and she heard what sounded like a growl from inside. Cas got a horrified look on his face and he said "no, don't!" and he was rushing toward her, as if he'd realized what she hadn't yet.

Perplexed, Alex looked up, not sure what—the door shot up as if it'd been yanked upwards from inside and she stumbled back in surprise as a rabid croatoan leapt onto her, snarling madly, knocking her down onto her back. Alex was suddenly struggling against brute force strength for her very life, she could see that there were three other croats that had all rushed Cas, she heard shotgun blasts and heard him practically screaming her name. Fighting with everything she had to hold the croat above herself back, Alex had both of her hands on his neck as his bloody teeth clacked together in hungry bites—blood dripped down onto her and repulsed beyond compare, Alex turned her head away as far as she could, even as the croatoan's bloodshot eyes, wide and inhuman, stared at her wildly. Suddenly there was a flash of beige above Alex, and the croatoan
was ripped off of her completely.

Castiel threw the last surviving croatoan against the side of the Niveus truck and without hesitation, shot it in the head. Blood sprayed everywhere, splattering the sunny yellow of the truck. Cas turned to look in breathless horror at Alex, who was on her back, propped onto an elbow, her expression strange as she looked up at him. The shoulder of her jacket had blood all over it and a soft, shocked sound escaped Cas, he dropped the shotgun and staggered over to her, fell to his knees beside her, staring at her shoulder in utter horror.

"No," he protested softly, his shaking hands coming to hold either of her arms. She looked at him with surprisingly clear eyes and her eyebrows pressed together in confusion, she followed his gaze to her shoulder... then understanding washed over her face and she shook her head rapidly, sitting up, holding his arms, too.

"No, Cas, no, I'm fine," she told him, "Some of the blood from his mouth must have dripped onto me. I'm not bitten. I'm okay."

As if he didn't believe her, he yanked the shoulder of her jacket down, anxiously examining the flannel shirt beneath, which was clean, undamaged. Relieved beyond compare, almost to the point of tears, Castiel pulled her to him, cradling her against him tightly as his hand behind her head crushed her into his chest. He was shaking, and his fear frightened her. "Cas," she beseeched him, her voice muffled, her face buried in his chest. "It's okay," she repeated. His upset state was getting her upset, too.

Another gust of wind blew over them and with it came the first drops of errant, thin rain. Thunder grumbled ominously. Cas suddenly stood up and let go of her, walked away, a hand on his head. Alex had never seen him so visibly shaken up, and the way he distanced himself from her was strange, new, unsettling. Alex stood up, about to follow him, when her phone began to ring loudly. Keeping a worried eye on her angel, Alex dug for her phone in her ammo bag. It was Sam. She shrugged the bag off of her shoulder as she answered, dropped it at her feet. "Hey."

"Hey," he said, a little breathless. "You guys stop that truck?"

"Yeah, we did." She pulled her bloody jacket off, one arm at a time, looking into the back of the truck which was empty. "It was a trap, no virus to speak of."

"You guys okay?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, fine," Alex said, glancing at Cas again.

She balled her jacket up and threw it down at her ammo bag as Sam continued. "Okay, well we just cleared out all the mooks over this way and we're gonna set the charges."

Distracted, watching how Cas leaned against the SUV a few feet off from her, Alex chewed her lip anxiously. "Sounds good. So, uh, you guys good over that way?"

"Yeah, why?" Her twin was picking up on her distress. "You okay?"

"Just, if you don't need us, we'll... catch up," Alex said. She needed to calm Cas down, reassure him.

"Ah..." Sam sounded mildly awkward, clearly assuming she wanted time alone with Cas for another reason. "Gotcha. No, no, we're fine. You guys, uh, go ahead. How long we talking?"

Alex looked at Cas, who was leaning against the Suburban heavily, clearly distraught. This was
only going to add to the awkwardness and to Sam's assumptions, but she didn't care. "Don't wait for us. Head back when you're done. I'm the owner of a nice, new demon's SUV, so... we'll head back in a bit, okay?"

Sam paused, cleared his throat. "Yeah, okay. Uh, you two be careful out there. Call me if you need anything."

"Yeah, I will." Alex hung up, stuck her phone into her pocket. It was beginning to rain now and she shivered slightly, crossed her arms over herself.

Cas was leaning against the Suburban by pressing a palm to one of the closed windows. He stared down at his feet, his expression was absolutely horrified. He heard her approach but he stared at the ground. "How did they get in there? Why were they in there?" he asked, blank and shaking his head hollowly.

"I don't know, some kind of diversion, but it's okay, just, just calm down—" she said gently as she approached him, blinking against the rain drops, but he suddenly snapped his head up and looked at her almost wildly, panicked, grabbing her by either arm abruptly.

"I can't calm down!" he almost shouted, startling her. It was clear to her in that moment how human he'd become. He heaved several rapid breaths. "How am I supposed to calm down?"

They were both getting wet as the rain continued. Alex looked at him, shocked at his outburst and frightened because he wasn't supposed to be afraid. "Cas, I'm fine," she told him emphatically. "I'm fine."

She felt herself crumbling as she remembered how close he'd come to death just a few minutes ago. "You're the one who almost died." She shuddered helplessly, squeezed her eyes shut for two seconds. "If I lose you again I..." her voice broke. "I don't know what I'll do."

He looked at her but it was pained, it was agonized, the way his eyes locked on hers, and as rain trickled down his face, it looked like tears. He shut his eyes tightly, tormented, and bowed his head, clearly conflicted and so upset. "Hey, hey," Alex attempted to soothe, and she raised a hand up, brushed her thumb across his jaw. He opened his eyes, looked at her, clearly suffering. And not knowing what else to do, Alex leaned in, gave him a soft, simple kiss of reassurance. Trying to reassure herself, too.

When she pulled back to look at him, his strained expression remained—he breathed in and out a few times, each time more rapidly as his gaze flickered back and forth between her eyes—his expression darkened measurably as his eyes burned into hers, his jaw tightening visibly. He'd never looked at her quite like that before, so despairing and wretched and furiously covetous, and even as she realized what that look meant, he was taking hold of her roughly, pulling her against him, crushing his lips to hers, frenzied and afraid, seeking more of her, his mouth demanding, his nose smashed into her cheek, his hands grabbing the back of her head as he made a soft sound that was both relieved and agonized.

Surprised but only briefly, Alex responded to him with all the pent-up fears and longing she'd held inside for the past month, deepening the kiss as much as she could—she had missed him so much she could weep at just the thought of it—and he blindly pushed her against the side of the car, her back hit up against the smooth metal of the SUV—he grabbed her face then her arms, her waist, trying to hold onto every part of her frantically, pushing himself against her and pulling on her madly even as she did the same—the rain streamed over them, running into their mouths as they kissed deeply, whimpering at the other's every touch—and Cas lifted her up abruptly, pinning her there against the car and she hugged her legs around him as his hands threaded through her wet hair. Her arms circled tightly around his neck, her hands dug into him, one at the back of his head, the other into his shoulder—his hips tightened against hers, and he
heard her gasp or sob over the sound of the loud rain around them. She rocked her hips into his with a muffled moan as she held him as close to her as she could. Their teeth knocked together but neither one of them cared.

One of Alex's hands felt blindly beside herself for the door handle, he heard it click open and followed her lead—with sliding wet hands they both pulled and pushed the car door open and fumbled into the back seat of the car, unable or maybe refusing to cease kissing the other as they tumbled awkwardly into the tight space there—Cas managed to pull the door shut behind them, just barely missing slamming one of his feet in the door, such was his distraction.

He was sitting crookedly in the corner made by the door and the car seat, she was sitting on top of him, knees on either side of his thighs, the two of them were pressed up against one another tightly, wet and dripping, arms enveloping the each other. Out of the rain and in the quieter, still space of the car, their noisy breaths were loud and the kiss was becoming more frenzied, their movements against each other more and more feverish. Overcome with passion that he could barely contain, Castiel broke the kiss, grasping her head and pulling it to the side, exposing the skin of her neck to his mouth. He began to kiss her there—not close-mouthed and soft, but with deeply possessive sucking kisses, and he didn't even know why he did it, was only was driven to madness at the thought of not doing it—Alex gasped softly, surprised, her eyes fell closed, she was temporarily rendered putty in his hands, and he pulled her down further onto him as he continued to adore her neck with his mouth, and he could feel her lower lip dragging against his ear as she panted softly, every little soft cry she made maddening him completely; he had to have her, now. Even as he felt her shakily unbuttoning his shirt, he pulled one arm of her flannel shirt down and off, then grabbed the back of it shirt, yanking it off forcefully, leaving her in the wet, white tank top she was wearing underneath, and their mouths clashed with one another's again, he pulled the strap of her top down, exposing her shoulder to him completely and he splayed his hand behind her shoulder blade, pulling her shoulder to him completely and he splayed his hand behind her shoulder blade, pulling her shoulder to him, pressing kisses against the warm skin, nipping and dragging his lips, uncoordinated, not following any logical pattern he could think of, just knowing that he wanted to kiss her everywhere.

Frantically now, her fingers fumbled to loosen his wet tie even as his free hand slid up her shirt, making her top ride up to her ribcage, and he was kissing her collarbone now. He felt his wet tie whip away when she yanked it to the side, her warm hands braced against his bare lower torso, and the skin-to-skin contact made him moan softly, made him need more—his shirt wasn't even off, it was just unbuttoned and open, his coat and jacket were still on, her shirt was twisted and wet on her, but it seemed as if there wasn't time, and Alex seemed to share the sentiment—she moved her knees between his and began to yank on his pants even as he was pulling on hers, and the two of them almost fell sideways from the awkward fiasco of undressing the other from the waist down. Cas's pants only made it to the middle of his thighs, hers only somewhere below her calves, but neither of them could wait and his hands took her by the waist, lifting her up over him. He brought her down to settle over him even as their mouths had found each other's again. Her weight began to press down over him and they both clutched each other tighter, guttural gasps escaping their mouths as they became one.

Dazed, overcome Castiel looked up at her in awe—her entrancing hazel eyes were wide open and looking right back at him. They were both panting softly, relieved but only momentarily—there was a brief, still moment where, in unison, they brought their hands to the other's face, and Alex leaned close, her expression twisted in anxiety and earnestness—she pressed a slow, aching kiss to the place where he was cut just over his eyebrow and he could feel how much she had missed him.

Her hand tightened on his face, and her other hand braced flat-palmed against his bare chest—and she began to slowly rock her hips over him. They were both gone completely in all mental capacities when she did that—he heard himself moaning in both protest and pleasing frustration at
what she did. Her head fell onto the top of his shoulder and she made the softest, most beautiful moan he'd ever heard, her arms now circling around his shoulders, holding onto him as if he were her anchor, her rock. His arms enveloped her tightly, refusing to let go of her. She was so warm, she had wrapped him in staggering pressure of the most beautiful kind, and he belonged here with her, in the place that only existed between them, like this.

His hands were up her shirt on her shoulder blades, her skin was warm and damp and he pulled her down, guiding her movements with increasing frantic quality and he groaned lowly, his face buried in her chest as he pulled her closer, hands on her middle back now—he groaned again but loudly when she moved up, almost removing herself from him completely but then pressing back down onto him fully but in agonizing slowness, once, twice, three times…

Alex drew back to press her forehead against his and Castiel watched her, entranced and tortured and desperate for more as she continued to make love to him slowly, achingly, and he was unable to take his gaze off her—her eyes were heavy-lidded and her mouth was open softly, she seemed dazed and lost and transfixed and he felt the same—he heard himself making the agonized, frustrated, desperate sounds she always drew out of him and he felt like his mind was drifting away completely—his forehead bowed down and pressed against the front of her shoulder as he pulled her near with strong hands, needing her closer still. She moved herself down onto him again, harder that time, faster, and something in him snapped.

Feelings of urgency and something almost like alarm flooding him, Cas held her tightly and in a single, swift motion he moved them both, all but slamming her down onto the car seat in his haste, so that he was over her—he held a hand behind her head, supporting her, and she cried out, her hands gripping his upper arms tightly as he began to make love to her roughly, passionately, despairingly. His movements were wild and not gentle, high-pitched whispering gasps were escaping his mouth over and over as he held onto the front of one of her shoulders tightly, half out of his mind with primal need. She felt like sunshine and certainty and forever to him, and it overloaded his senses completely. Immense, staggering pleasure was filling every single atom he possessed, building up tensely, tightening around him, and he didn't think he could go much longer, not at this pace, but he didn't stop or slow down, he just gritted his teeth and let loose a sound of beautiful frustration and looked down at her—the flushed pink skin, swollen lips, pleasure-hooded eyes—she was out of breath, in impassioned torment beneath him, restless and anxious, and seeing his like that only urged him to move harder, deeper, give her what she needed, so he did. But doing so only increased his anguish and his breaths were now coming in short, shallow bursts. He tightened his hand into the front of her shoulder, trying to last, trying not to fall off the end of the earth, hearing himself making loud, guttural sounds he didn't even know he could make.

Her hand came up to lay on top of his, her fingers laced through his tightly, he closed his fingers around hers without hesitation… and her face began to contort, he could feel her entire body tensing up underneath him and around him, she was growing even more breathless and beginning to whimper higher and higher and he was doing the same as everything began to crumble—and her fingers tightened around his, she let out a soft little helpless cry as her eyes locked onto his, she looked close to tears, almost in pain. "Cas, I love you," she whispered urgently, and he saw a tear run out of the corner of her eye, down into her hair, and her fingers tightened in his again, she suddenly lurched forward to him and began to gasp uncontrollably and he loved her too—he held her hand tighter as she began to shudder around him, a sensation like being swept up by waves in a stormy ocean, and Cas's eyes squeezed closed as the world fell away... his mouth fell open and his head fell forward as everything he had burst out of him in white-hot heat, over and over again. A solitary, stunned moan of utter satisfaction escaped his lips against the pattern of her high-pitched sounds of bliss and rapture, he felt her free hand clenching the front of his open shirt, he quaked over her as she convulsed, arcing up into him, her forehead pressed to his as they came together.
intensely, and he breathed the air she expelled, his body ringing with pleasure and completion and wholeness. And exhausted, spent, they collapsed back down. It was over.

His rapid heartbeat was drumming so strong and hard that he could feel it in his throat, in his hands, everywhere, slowing now as they laid there, breathless. Resting on her shoulder, their hands were still pressed together, fingers interlaced. And on instinct, Cas dropped a single, lingering, whisper-soft kiss to the back of her hand, then bowed his head over her as their hands came apart. She was out of breath underneath him and her eyes shone with tears from the intensity of the what had just happened. He stroked her damp hair back, treasuring her in his arms, marveling at how she fit there with him, how close he felt to her, how beautiful she was. How much she trusted him. How her heart beat strongly, pressed up against his chest... how alive she was. Her vivid green eyes looked up at him and he couldn't believe that she loved him, that she wanted this from him. He loved her, too. So much.

He remembered the first time he'd seen her and how far away she'd been from him, how unreachable, and then how she used to look at him with mistrust and how he'd loved her even then, but hadn't understood it, hadn't known the name of what it was that pulsed through his veins for her.

He had walked eternity and had been created to be a soldier of the Lord. But this was the only place he'd known as home—with her. Anywhere with her. He was fallen from grace, an outcast of Heaven—but it didn't matter. For the second time that day, he thought that maybe he was here to fall. If the place he would fall was to her… that was what he wanted.

And he couldn't hold it inside any longer. As the rain beat down onto the metal roof above them in a car pulled off to the side of an abandoned old road, Castiel told Alex out loud that he loved her.

April 29th, 2010. The day Castiel and Alex would always remember as theirs. Where they were aware that the end was near but defied it—finally telling the other what they felt and promising the other the rest of their lives, in so many words. And instead of rushing back to Sioux Falls, the lovers would travel north slowly. Stopping to eat a lunch of gas station sandwiches in a roadside park, watching birds, talking about things of little consequence as well as things of major consequence. Castiel would pick a flower for Alex, a single white daisy that he found that reminded him of her. Just being together was enough for them. Neither of them wanted to think about what lay ahead, not really. And they did return to Sioux Falls that night, but instead of going to Bobby's, they checked into a hotel room—spent the night together where they could be together without questioning, prying brothers around. The two of them shared a queen-sized bed, but it could have been a twin, that's how close and how wrapped up in each other they remained all night long. Each in turn would think about how they never wanted to sleep apart from the other ever again. They thought they would never have to.

Chuck leaned back from what he'd just written and there was a fond smile on his face. This had to be his favorite love story. So unexpected, so strange and striking. Such a long time coming, when he thought about it, the more that came to him in visions. A sudden, last thought occurred to him and he frowned a little now, adding another sentence into the draft.

*The next day would be the beginning of the end... for all of them.*

Chuck tapped a thoughtful, troubled finger against his chin.
Dean gripped Death's scythe tightly as he crept into the back of the pizzeria. This is nuts. Of all the places for Death to be, a pizzeria? But Crowley had been sure. And as Dean edged out of the kitchen and into the dining room, he knew he had the right place. The little diner was full of dead people—lying on the ground, slumped over on the red-and-white checkered tables. A single person still remained living—a slight, stooped figure with thin dark hair. The man's back was turned to Dean and he sat at a table facing the window. His heartbeat quickening slightly in freaked out adrenaline, Dean stole further into the restaurant, closer to Death, his footsteps silent, every muscle in his body taut with focus…and then, in his hand, the handle of the scythe began to feel warm, hot—burning. Dean fought to hold onto it, but couldn't, the heat was too much—and loudly, the weapon slipped out of his grip and clattered loudly onto the floor.

Oh shit.

Dean looked at Death's back, knowing he was already a dead man but simultaneously, stupidly hoping maybe the guy hadn't heard it.

Without turning around, Death spoke in a pleasant, mellow voice. "Thanks for returning that." Huh? Dean looked down to see that the scythe had disappeared from the floor next to his feet…and when he looked at Death's back again, he saw that the scythe had reappeared beside Death's on the table he sat at. "Join me, Dean," Death suggested amicably, still not turning around. "The pizza's delicious."

Outside, the rain and thunder were growing louder—the wind was picking up—Chicago was as good as gone, three million people were about to die—and Dean thought maybe, if he played his cards right, he still had a shot at killing Death or maybe he could talk him out of wiping this city off the map. Dean moved forward slowly against his better judgement. Real, genuine fear filled him. And the heavy weight of responsibility as he thought of all those millions of sorry sons of bitches who were going to die in a few minutes if he didn't succeed here.

"Sit down," Death said, focused on eating a slice of deep dish pizza with a fork and knife, not looking at Dean. Slowly, Dean complied, even though his true instinct was to run for the hills. Death seemed disinterested in his presence overall. He had a long face and a prominent, wrinkled forehead, long, chin-length dark hair that was slicked back from his head and behind his ears. He was very plain and unassuming, but sitting across from him was terrifying. "Took you long enough to find me," he commented mildly, cutting his pizza primly. "I've been wanting to talk to you."

Dean swallowed, trying to save face, trying to remain unreadable. Lightning flashed brightly. "I got to say—I have mixed feelings about that. So is this the part where…" he cleared his throat when his voice wavered, "where you kill me?"

Death finally looked at him in the eye, chewing a bite of pizza slowly, and his eyes were unnervingly perceptive. He swallowed the food. "And why would I do that?" he asked. He was casual and in no rush, languid in the way he spoke. "You have an inflated sense of your importance. To a thing like me, a thing like you, well…" he picked up his cup, sipping his soda with a loud slurp sound. "Think how you'd feel if a bacterium sat at your table and started to get snarky."

Dean stared—snarky? Dean had barely said two words. This guy hadn't even seen snarky. But he remained silent, listening to his gut which urged him to handle this situation very, very delicately.

"This is one little planet in one tiny solar system in a galaxy that's barely out of its diapers," Death lectured indifferently. "I'm old, Dean. Very old. So, I invite you to contemplate how insignificant I find you."
The diatribe was lost on Dean, who was confused as to what Death wanted from him. Death took hold on the pizza server, shoveled up a slice, and put it onto a plate that happened to be in front of Dean—as if he'd been waiting for him. "Eat," Death commanded.

Dean looked at the wedge of pizza in distaste, not able to summon an appetite. Death watched him expectantly, almost challengingly—there was a hint of warning to the horsemen's gaze. Aware of how precarious the situation was, Dean obeyed slowly. Sawed off a bite like Death had, put it into his mouth, chewing automatically, barely tasting it.

"Good, isn't it?" Death asked.

"Y-yeah," Dean agreed automatically, and tried to gather his courage. He glanced at the ring on the horsemen's finger, then looked away quickly, trying to formulate a plan. Any plan. "I-I got to ask," he said, chewing the tasteless food in his mouth, trying to strike up a conversation that he could at least get some information out of. "How old are you?"

"As old as God," Death said, focused on his pizza again. "Maybe older. Neither of us can remember anymore. Life, death, chicken, egg. Regardless—at the end, I'll reap him, too."

Had he heard right? Dean leaned forward slightly. "God?" Dean asked, incredulous. "You'll reap God?"

"Oh, yes," the horsemen replied softly. "God will die, too, Dean. Everyone, every thing dies. It's only a matter of time. You know this."

Dean was flabbergasted and out of sorts. He had to get out of here somehow. He put on a charming smile, or tried to. "Well, this is way above my pay grade."

Death looked up at him, chewing methodically. "Just a bit."

"So, then why am I still breathing, sitting here with you?" Dean asked uncertainly. He wasn't sure if he should tempt fate, but Death seemed to want something from him, if he were reading the signs right. But that terrified Dean. "W-what do you want?"

"The leash around my neck—off. Lucifer has me bound to him. Some unseemly little spell. He has me where he wants, when he wants. That's why I couldn't go to you. I had to wait for you to catch up. He made me his weapon. Hurricanes, floods, raising the dead. I'm more powerful than you can process, and I'm enslaved to a bratty child having a tantrum."

Dean tried to follow. "And you think… I can unbind you?"

"There's your ridiculous bravado again," Death commented disdainfully. "Of course you can't. But you can help me take the bullets out of Lucifer's gun. I understand you want this." Death held up his hand and showed his ring to Dean clearly. "I'm inclined to give it to you."

"To give it to me?" Dean repeated dubiously.

"That's what I said."

Dean looked around as lightning flashed. "But what about…"

"Chicago?" Death sighed. "I suppose it can stay. I like the pizza." His chin lowered a little and he slid the ring off his finger, held it between his fingers. "There are conditions."

Of course there were conditions. But at this point, Dean would probably agree to anything. "Okay.
"Like?"

"You have to do whatever it takes to put Lucifer in his cell," Death said.

Well, that was a no-brainer. "Of course."

"Whatever it takes," Death reiterated.

"That's the plan."

"No," Death replied immediately. "You have no plan. Not yet. Your brother. He's the one that will stop Lucifer."

Dean was stunned, and remembering yesterday when Sam had approached him about saying yes to Lucifer and jumping into the cage. "What, you think—"

"I know," Death interrupted softly. "So, I need a promise. You're going to let your brother jump right into that fiery pit." Thunder crashed outside loudly, shaking the building. "You won't allow your sister to stop it, you won't allow yourself to stand in the way, either." Death held out his ring to Dean. "Well, do I have your word?"

Dean didn't like this idea, but staring at the ring, he knew he only had to say a couple simple words to get that ring in his hand. "Okay, yeah," he said. "Yes."

Dean held his hand out. His gaze was quietly foreboding. "That had better be 'yes,' Dean. You know you can't cheat death." Death dropped the ring into Dean's hand. "And if you try, I'll find you. I'll find your family. I've heard about your sister. The one with no Heaven. What a shame it would be if she died before you had a chance to figure out what was happening to her soul."

Stomach flipping over in distress, Dean felt himself go cold. "What do you know about that?" he asked.

Death looked at him coolly. "Do not assume to demand things from me, Dean. I have nothing more to say on the subject." He gestured to his ring. "Now, would you like the instruction manual?"

Outside, the storm had ended abruptly.

The Next Day

April 30th, 2010

Dean pulled into the familiar driveway of Bobby's house. It was early morning and he was exhausted after eight hours of driving, five hours of trying to find Death, and the eight hours of driving he'd done before that. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept right now. There was a lot on his mind, to put it succinctly. He'd asked Crowley, on the road trip from hell, if he knew anything about what Brady was getting at when he'd said Alex was supposed to be special, too, that Azazel still had plans for her. Crowley had given Dean one of those wiseass, smug little smiles and said that he hadn't the foggiest. There were too many unknowns for Dean to process right now, and Death's not-so-indirect threat toward his sister weighed heavily on him. Every way he turned, some asshole was threatening his sister or his brother. And damn if it didn't work every time. His family was his weak spot.

Dean pulled back around the house and into the salvage yard, parking the Impala and getting out, sauntering into the garage. Struck by a sudden thought, Dean took two rings out of his pocket—War and Famine's—laid them onto the table Bobby kept there. Took the other two rings—
Pestilence and Death's—and laid them out, too, slowly pushed them together and watched as, like magnets, they zipped in together. Wow. Nice. So this was the handy little key that would lock Satan away for good.

Dean looked up, hearing footsteps. It was Bobby—standing tall and proud of his two legs. "Hey," Dean greeted. "So how'd the Rockettes audition go?" he asked, and Bobby cracked a grin.

"High kick's not bad but boobs need work. You get the ring?"

Dean chuckled. "Yeah. So where is everyone?" he asked.

"Sam's still sleepin'. Kid's plumb wore out."

"And Alex? Cas?" Dean asked.

"Not back yet," Bobby said, and Dean immediately felt his face cloud over.

"Not back yet?" Dean asked slowly, looking at Bobby through narrowed eyes. "When did you get back?"

Bobby looked at Dean almost challengingly. "Yesterday afternoon."

Dean's eyes widened in shock. "What the hell, Bobby!" He couldn't believe this. "We're in the middle of the friggin' apocalypse and you just... let her run off with Cas?" Dean demanded incredulously, angry.

"Watch your tone, kid," Bobby said, not bothered. In fact, he looked at Dean like he were the one in the wrong. "She's not some teenager anymore, Dean. She's a full grown woman. Maybe you oughta stop tryin' to run her life. You'll run her off, if you haven't already." Not what Dean had wanted to hear. Bobby looked at him closely. "What's goin' on with you and her, anyway?"

Guilty just like Bobby had intended, Dean looked down, his mouth drawn into a thin line. He took a really long moment to reply, his anger dissolving into disillusion and shame. "I dunno Bobby. She... she used to need me. They both did and now... not so much." Dean tried to cover over his deeply wounded feelings with a little smile. "I guess they've grown up, huh." The smile faded and Dean's voice grew soft, pained. "I just look at her sometimes Bobby and she's still that fifteen year old punkass kid I was always having to look out for and take care of and keep safe." He shrugged, chuckled airily. "You know, not to be creepy but I thought she and I were gonna, I dunno, either get old together or die together. Before she got her voice back, I just... I was ready for that, you know?" Dean hung his head, realizing how stupid and selfish he really was, how pathetic. "I always thought she'd be there," he said hollowly. "I guess I'm just a selfish bastard, huh?" Dean sat down at the table now, uncomfortable and miserable.

Bobby looked at Dean sadly. "Look... the world might be about to end. I'd suggest the two of you set things straight while you still can."

Dean huffed, a sound almost like a dark laugh. "Yeah, I don't know, Bobby." His jaw tightened and he looked off into the salvage yard blankly. "Most of the stuff I've said is stuff you can't just take back." He refocused, trying to pull him together. "Anyway. I got bigger problems now."

"Like what?" Bobby asked.

"I told Death I was cool with Sam driving the bus on the whole Lucifer plan. And I'm not sure if I am."
Bobby's eyebrows raised slightly and he sat down across from Dean. "So Death thinks Sam ought to say yes, too, huh?"

Dean shrugged. "I dunno. Yeah." He frowned suddenly. "Wait, what do you mean, too? Who else thinks Sam should say yes?"

Bobby shrugged, not quite meeting Bobby's gaze. "Cas. Me. Sam."

"You? Whoa, whoa, what happened to you being against this?"

Bobby sighed. "Look, I'm not saying Sam ain't an ass-full of character defects. But…" he trailed off. "Back at Niveus? I watched that kid pull one civilian out after another. Must have saved ten people. Never stopped. Never slowed down. We're hard on him, Dean. We've always been. But in the meantime… he's been runnin' into burning buildings since he was, what, twelve?"

"Pretty much," Dean replied softly… proud of his brother but also guilty over where that life had landed him.

"Look, Sam's got a… a darkness in him," Bobby conceded softly. "I'm not saying he don't. But he's got a hell of a lot of good in him, too. He's a hero at the end of the day and you can't tell me he ain't got a heart of gold. That everything he's ever done is cuz he wants to do the right thing."

Dean looked down. "I know."

"Then you know Sam will beat the devil… or die trying," Bobby said. "That's the best we could ask for. So I gotta ask, Dean. What exactly are you afraid of? Losing? Or losing your brother?"

Dean was silent a minute. "Both, I guess," he said heavily, then sniffed, sat back, sighed. "Death made some pretty big threats if I didn't let Sam say yes. So looks like my hand is forced, huh?" He smiled facetiously.

Dean wandered through the salvage yard, found Sam reclined on the hood of the Impala. He put his phone back in his pocket, agitated. Three hours since he'd gotten back, and nothing. It was getting close to noon. "Hey," Sam greeted.

Dean took a beer out of the cooler that was beside the Impala silently, cracking it open, brooding, leaned his back against the car, turning the beer bottle cap over in his fingers in annoyance. The overcast gray sky overhead and chilly air was making Dean unhappy. Scratch that… everything was making him unhappy.

Sam craned his head around to try and see his brother's face. "You get a hold of Alex?"

Dean raised the beer to his lips apathetically. "Nope. Phone's off or dead." He took a sip of the pale brew.

"She'll be back Dean, don't worry."

"Yeah." Dean threw down the cap of his beer bottle, distracted. "Okay, so… I'm in," he suddenly declared.

Sam looked at his brother oddly. "In with…?"

"The whole 'up with Satan' thing," Dean reiterated gruffly. "I'm on board."

Sam sat up slowly. "You're... gonna let me say yes?"
"No," Dean said, forcing himself to go through with this, even though it went against every instinct
he had. "That's the thing. It's not on me to let you do anything. You're a grown—well, overgrown
—man. If this is what you want, I'll back your play."

Sam was obviously not expecting that. "...that's the last thing I thought you'd ever say."

"Might be," Dean said cynically. "I'm not gonna lie to you, though. It goes against every fiber I
got." He swallowed painful emotions. "I mean, truth is... you know, watching out for you... it's, it's
 kinda been my job, you know?" Dean finally looked over at Sam directly. "But more than that,
it's... it's kinda who I am. You're not a kid anymore, Sam, and I can't keep treating you like one."
He looked down. "Either of you. Maybe I gotta grow up a little, too." He was silent for a minute. "I
don't know if we got a snowball's chance. But... but I do know that if anybody can do it... it's you."

Sam sounded deeply affected. "Thank you."

"If this is what you want..." Dean started, then looked at Sam intensely, almost wishing his
brother would change his mind. "Is this really what you want?"

Sam took a minute to reply. He was grim and resolute when he replied. "I let him out. I gotta put
him back in." Not exactly Sam saying this was what he wanted outright, but Dean heard that Sam
was saying, basically, yes.

His heart sank but he kept his face from showing that. "Okay. That's it, then." Dean took a drink of
his beer.

Sam nervously cleared his throat. "I'll uh, I'll need some demon blood," Sam said. "Well, lots of it,
actually. The more I can drink, the stronger it'll make me."

Dean didn't even care to know how Sam knew that. He was so hollow inside that he didn't know
what to do with himself. "Bobby'll know where we can find some black-eyed mooks," he said. "If
we can just get that damn twin of yours to—" he paused, hearing the crunch of gravel to the side of
himself.

The brothers both turned at the sound of an approaching vehicle. A large black Suburban SUV was
pulling in, and behind the wheel, Alex. Cas was beside her in the passenger seat. Relieved and
mildly incensed all at once, Dean's grip tightened on his beer bottle. "Well if it isn't the dynamic
duo," he commented sarcastically as the car approached.

Sam gave his brother a look. "Dean, don't."

"I'm not, I'm not," Dean said, aggravated, giving Sam a look that said get off my case.

Dean got an irritated look in return. "I mean, you see how happy she is with him, right?" Sam asked
in that overly sensitive, caring tone that Dean was immediately annoyed by.

"Yeah, I do, and you know how 'happy' usually goes for this family, right?" Dean retorted darkly,
looking at his brother almost angrily. "It never lasts."

Sam shrugged, looked at the approaching vehicle. "Maybe this time it will."

The car rolled to a stop near them and Alex got out of the driver's side, glancing at her brothers
briefly. It was so gross... Dean could see how happy they were and it was the worst—made him
feel guilty and stupid and unsure of himself. Cas looked at Alex like she was the most wonderful
thing he'd ever seen—you could literally see him watching every little movement she made and see
how enamored he was, how fascinated, how pleasing he found every small nuance of her
expression. The guy had been in love with her for a long time, hadn't he? The two of them approached and Dean looked at his sister coolly. "Where you two been?"

"Disneyland," she wisecracked. So she wasn't going to tell him. She looked worn out, like she hadn't slept much. Dean's stomach turned again and he shot a sharp look at Cas. In the past he would have demanded to know what the hell they were doing and where the hell they had been, but today... he didn't. What Bobby said was true. She wasn't a teenager. He deflated slowly. What Alex said was true: he wasn't her dad. And Dean felt a deep sense of loss. His brother, his sister... they were everything to him and he had a really great way of showing it, huh?

Dean glanced at Cas, who stood at Alex's side—too closely—and looked back at Dean almost balefully. "Sounds like fun," Dean retorted and stood up all the way, set his beer down on the hood of the Impala and crossed his arms, looking at his sister brusquely. "Well—Sam's gonna do it."

Alex frowned slightly. "Do... what?" she asked.

"Say yes," Dean replied bluntly, and her expression fell, her mouth dropped open, she looked at Sam in total shock.

"Wait—wait," she said, holding a hand up for effect, rapidly growing indignant and flustered. "Sam. You promised we would make this decision the three of us!"

He was apologetic and slightly guilty. "I know, but—"

"But what?!" she demanded.

"I have to do this," Sam said firmly. "I let him out. I need to put him back."

"You were tricked into letting him out," Alex insisted forcefully. "What if this is another trick, huh? Either of you friggin' jackasses think of that?" She looked between her brothers, panicked, angry. Afraid.

"Look—we have the rings, he doesn't know about that," Sam tried, but his twin cut him off.

She began to ramble, almost crazily. "You know what, I should have told you this before but, but the whole past month, I've seen all these crazy dreams, visions where you're Lucifer and the world is burning and all I know is that you can't do this Sam, you can't."

The brothers exchanged a dubious, caught off guard look. "You what?" Sam asked, then shook his head. "You've never mentioned this before."

"Hey, you weren't exactly doing so good this past month," Dean said pointedly, and got a sharp glare from his sister.

"I know what I dreamed."

"Yeah, dreams," Dean said gruffly, discrediting her without a second thought. She'd always had bad dreams her whole life. He glanced at her folded arms, noticed something was missing from her hand. He balked. "Hey, where's Dad's ring?"

She looked at him sullenly, glanced to her left. "Lost it."

"Oh well good job," Dean said, feeling a rush of anger—how the hell could she have misplaced that! It meant a lot to him, which is why he'd given it to her in the first place. Getting three bitchy expressions from Sam, Alex, and Cas, Dean let it go. "Okay, look, we're gonna do this, like it or
not, Al. I got all four horsemen rings and Death was pretty clear about what to do with it. So... we gotta go get some demon blood and hit the road." He looked at his sister rudely, because it was easier for him to be horrible to her than to be nice right now. After all, he was about to lose Sam and he had a horrible feeling he'd already lost her, too. "Stay here if you want, I don't care."

He turned without giving her a chance to respond and headed toward the house but glanced back just in time to see how visibly distressed his sister was—she had a hand against her forehead. Cas touched her arm gently, knowingly, and Dean stopped, his mouth dropped open. He saw his sister visibly receiving Cas's gesture as comfort, saw how she looked up into his eyes and softened, warmed to his touch. Dean felt his stomach twist sickeningly—he didn't want to wonder about where they'd been the past day or what they'd been doing together. Just standing there looking at each other seemed intimate somehow and Dean ground his teeth together, because if that son of a bitch had touched her...

Sam gave Dean a warning look from where he still stood near to them and Dean turned his back completely, stalked into Bobby's house.

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**That Night**

The devil's in Detroit. That sounded kind of like a bad country music song, didn't it? The Impala streaked down a dark highway, Bobby's van close behind. Dean glanced into the rear view mirror where he could see his sullen, silent sister sitting beside Cas, who was asleep, snoring softly. "Aw. Ain't he a little angel?" Dean commented in faint sarcasm. Alex's eyes flickered up to his for a minute then darted away. She'd been like this all day. Either giving him death glares or inexplicable sad, soulful looks.

"Angels don't sleep," Sam replied softly, deep in thought.

Dean set his jaw, gripped the steering wheel tighter. Since that afternoon, they'd tracked down a couple pissant demons and killed them, drained their blood and bottled it for Sam to drink when they got to Detroit—which is where all signs pointed to Lucifer being. There was a block of old abandoned apartments where, apparently, there had been an unexplainable temperature drop. And just like the Dean in 2014 had told them... the devil took Sam in Detroit. It was getting kind of hard not to stop the car and turn it around. Dean was very surprised that his sister was actually going along with this at all, actually. She had refused to be part of the demon blood thing. She'd waited outside while they killed and drained the demons, and when they had come out, she'd had her hands over her ears like her head hurt or she was trying to keep out a loud noise. She'd said it was nothing. A headache. She'd been withdrawn all day. But he couldn't really blame her. Sam was about to friggin' commit suicide, basically. And what if Dean couldn't find a way to bring him back after the deed was done?

Dean glanced at his brother sidelong. He couldn't keep his worries to himself any more. "Sam... I got a bad feeling about this."

"Well, you'd be nuts to have a good feeling about it," Sam replied almost jokingly, and Dean shot him a sharp look.

"You know what I mean," Dean said. "Detroit. He always said he'd jump your bones in Detroit. And... here we are."

"Here we are," Sam echoed, a little quieter than before.

"Maybe this is him rolling out the red carpet, you know?" Dean asked. "Maybe he knows
Sam gave Dean a flippant look. "Dean, I'm sure he knows a buttload we don't. We just gotta hope he doesn't know about the rings."

Dean made a face like he was thinking no shit, Sherlock. Sam huffed and glanced back at his sister then almost did a double-take when he saw her. She had her hands on either side of her head again, she was wincing harshly, like she was trying to keep out a loud sound or was in a deep amount of pain. "Whoa, Lex, what's wrong?" Sam asked, twisting around in his seat to face her better, his voice a little higher in concern.

She came out of a trance, staring at him, for a moment seeming dazed. "Just… just my head again," Alex replied weakly. She looked paler than normal, too. "Headache."

Sam stared at her dubiously, and Dean frowned, glancing at her in the rearview. "You sure?" he asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure." She winced, looking physically ill. Her arms were hugged around herself. She looked small and hopeless, reluctant to speak up. "And I mean the subject matter doesn't exactly help."

Sensing his sister's deep upset, Sam gave her a small, sympathetic smile, trying to encourage her a little. But she just looked at him with an agonized expression. And Sam heaved a reluctant breath.

"I know this is gonna be hard for you both, and I know the timing's not the best, but…" Sam drew his shoulders up slightly, looked at Dean, bracing himself for something, his tongue darting out to wet his lips nervously. "There's-there's something I gotta talk to you two about."

Dean frowned mildly. "What?"

Sam glanced back at Alex, then looked at Dean. "This thing goes our way and I… Triple Lindy into that box…" he wet his lips, looked at Alex now. "Y-you guys know I'm not coming back."

"Yeah, we're aware," Dean replied for them both, and Sam looked back at his brother intensely.

"Good. So you gotta promise me something, Dean."


"You gotta promise not to try to bring me back."

Alex looked at Sam with a strained expression while Dean reacted immediately. "What?" he gave Sam a look like he was nuts. "No, I didn't sign up for that."

"Yeah, you are," Sam insisted, "you don't have a choice."
"What, you think Alex and I are just gonna let you waste away in there for all eternity?" Dean asked gruffly. "What, kick your ass down into hell and then go back to hunting bright and early Monday morning?"

"No," Sam said decisively, firmly. "No more hunting." He stared at his brother meaningfully, commandingly. "You go find Lisa. You pray to god she's dumb enough to take you in, and you... you have barbecues and go to football games. You go live some normal, apple-pie life, Dean, you quit giving Cas and Alex crap and let them be together. Promise me, both of you, that you'll go live your lives, put all the dark shit from our past behind you and just... just live." Sam looked at Dean pleadingly.

His brother shook his head. "You can't ask me to leave you there," Dean said softly.

"I'm sorry, Dean," Sam said. "You have to."

Dean went silent, his hand tightened on the steering wheel, his jaw clenched mightily. But he said nothing. Sam glanced back at his twin. She was staring unseeingly into the back of the front seat. "Awful quiet back there, Alex," Sam said, unsure if she were even listening. She looked like she were a million miles away, torn up and thinking hard about something else entirely. "Penny for your thoughts?" he tried.

She looked up slowly, first at Sam, then the back of Dean's head. "I'm... I'm gonna miss this," she said faintly, and she sounded younger than she was, and close to tears. She looked at Cas then, and Sam could see how much she loved him as her eyes flickered over his sleeping, peaceful face. "But I guess what has to be done... has to be done, huh?" She sounded hollow. Fearful. But resigned.

Sam looked back at her with an emotionally pained expression. He felt somehow worse knowing she was accepting it like that. "Yeah."

"You're really going to do this, Sam?" She asked, staring at the extra two gallons of demon blood near her feet. They wouldn't fit in the trunk. Sam followed her gaze.

"Yeah," he replied quietly. "I am."

She looked down at her feet and held a hand to her forehead, grimacing in pain. Her cheeks had tears on them. "M-my head hurts," she said softly, and Sam's features twisted in concern. She usually got annoyed by physical pain, but today she was off—seeming to be agonized by everything.

"Hold on," Dean said, similarly concerned seeing his sister so upset and clearly in pain. He was regretting how he'd been acting to her more than ever. He pulled off the road into a gas station. "I'm gonna fuel up. Sammy, you wanna grab aspirin from the convenience store? We're out." The Impala pulled up to a gas pump.

"Will do." Sam looked back at his sister, gave her his best attempt at an encouraging smile and with the familiar creak of the door, he got up and out of the car.

On impulse, Alex sprang from stillness into movement and rushed out of the car, not even shutting her door behind her, she looked almost panicked and went to Sam as he rounded the car, smashing into him in an unexpected, tight hug, and she sobbed loudly, her face buried in his chest—and Sam was surprised, caught off guard. "Hey, hey," he soothed automatically, bringing his arms around her even as he and Dean exchanged a worried look. Dean looked upset, standing there, frozen right outside of the door to the driver's seat, and Sam knew it was because he hated to see their sister upset, and she was upset because Sam was essentially saying goodbye forever. Sam rested his chin
on his twin's head, feeling her shaking with tears, and he didn't want to leave. He was suddenly emotional and cleared his throat, surprised.

"I'm gonna miss you, you know that?" He asked her faintly. He pulled back, his hand on the side of her head, and he held her gaze steadily. "Promise me you'll remember the good times we had, okay?" He tried to smile at her but he could barely manage it. His eyes stung. "Go and... and marry Cas and have kids and be safe and do the stuff I always wanted to do." His voice almost broke. "And tell your kids about their uncle Sammy who really didn't want to go as soon as he did, but had to."

Her expression broke, she squeezed her eyes shut and hung her head, shaking it 'no' as she sniffed loudly. He stroked his thumb down against her hair and she opened her eyes back up, grabbed his arms and she sounded desperate. "I love you, okay?" she asked, making sure he knew, and Sam wasn't ready for this—to hear her say goodbye, to really face what he was about to do, it was too much, and she'd only said that she loved him, out loud, two or three times his whole life. When they'd been kids, preschool age, she always was drawing stick figure families on construction paper and very often they had proclaimed in terrible kiddy handwriting i luv Sam end Deen with backwards e's and an m with too many ridges. Sam had secretly kept one of those all these years, and they'd probably find it in his stuff after... after he was gone.

He swallowed a huge lump in his throat. "I-I love you too, you know I do," he said, and tried to cover over his wavering emotional state with an attempt at a smile. "Look, let's save our goodbyes for later, okay?" He begged. She just looked up at him, grieved, and Sam pressed a quick kiss to her forehead, then hugged her a minute more.

Dean could see how Sam was struggling and he wet his lips, attempted to give his kid brother and sister a way out through humor. "Hey, you two bleeding hearts done over there?" Dean asked in a goofy, faux-impatient voice, and Sam looked up, his face softened as he gave a soft little air laugh. "Yeah, we are, jerk."

Dean looked at Sam, unperturbed and all show. "Bitch."

The brothers both looked at Alex, waiting. And seeing that they were trying to cheer her up, recognizing that they were waiting for her signature addition to the classic Winchester squabble, she gave in, a sad little smile on her face as she raised her hand up and with her thumb and index finger made the shape of an "L" on her forehead. Lossers. Just like old times. Her expression wavered and Sam patted her shoulder gently. "Lemme go get you some medicine, okay, Alex?"

She nodded and let out a trembling breath as he let go of her. "Thanks, Sam."

And he walked into the gas station convenience store. She watched him for a long couple beats and Dean watched her, worried. She finally turned, and looked at him oddly, and Dean felt so damn guilty and bad, all he wanted was to be the big brother she loved again. "What is it?" he asked her, and shut the door to his side of the car finally. She shook her head, eyes somewhere far away for a minute.

"I just... didn't think it would end like this," she said blankly. She sounded alone and afraid.

"Yeah, well," he muttered, and went over to her slowly. He hadn't, either. And he wanted to fall to his knees and weep, honestly, at the thought of losing Sam. He was still hoping, maybe foolishly, that another answer would present itself. But his little sister needed reassurance, so he tried his best to act like he had himself together. "When you gotta save the whole world, I guess you gotta take some losses."
She looked absolutely devastated and he touched her arm gently, hesitating, not sure if that was what she wanted or not, if he'd just piss her off or not. "It'll be okay, Al. I promise. Somehow. We'll get through this. You and me." He remembered Cas, and looked back at him falteringly, grudgingly. He had to force himself to say this next part. "And... him too I guess." Alex looked at him in dawning disbelief.

Dean just shrugged guiltily. He had no other choice, and he had realized that she was going to decide what she would decide... he had no control over her. He had to swallow his misgivings and let her do what she was going to do. It wasn't to say he didn't have a huge problem with her dating the dude who would get her killed down the road, but... today just wasn't the day to rake her over the coals about it. And her stunned reaction to his grudging tolerance made him feel sort of ashamed. She hadn't looked at him like she used to—like he was her hero—in forever, it felt like. All he wanted to do was take care of his little sister. He looked at her sadly, expecting her answer to be no. "Hey, are you and I... we ever gonna be all right again?"

She gave him a helpless smile. It was tainted by sadness and didn't quite reach her eyes. "We always are, aren't we?" she asked him, shrugging slightly. Implying that yes, they would be all right, maybe not now, but eventually.

And that's what he needed to hear—that at least one of his siblings was going to stick with him, that he hadn't ruined the relationship completely, and Dean smiled at her through the pain. Yeah. They always were, and he ruffled her hair affectionately, so glad that he could almost cry. "That's my girl," he told her softly, like he always used to.

Her expression distorted, she looked close to crying. "I am your girl," she told him, and the fierce, certain, no-doubt-about it way she said it went along with the crushing hug she suddenly gave him. "And I always will be." She cried softly against him and Dean felt distinctly worried about her.

"Y-you okay, Al?" he asked her, pulling back and holding her by the arms, studying her face closely.

Even though her face was streaked with tears, she made a face at him that suggested it was ridiculous for him to even imply she'd be okay at the current moment. And he wondered which twin got the sass from which, or if they'd just both been born with it. "No." She indicated the car with a thrust of her chin and then dashed her fist across her cheeks, wiping away her tears. She made a brave, playful face at him. "Now put gas in the car, Dina."

He rolled his eyes and made a face, raised his hands in mock surrender, pulled a face. "Yes ma'am."

He missed the way her face fell when he turned back around. She looked at him like she thought she'd never see him again.

He didn't see. He sauntered over to the pump and began to fill the tank, leaning against the car casually. He rubbed his chin absently, stretched, rolled his neck, trying to ease the tension there. For a couple minutes, he spaced out and watched the purchase amount go up as the tank filled. Suddenly struck by a funny memory that he knew would cheer his sister up, Dean chuckled. "Hey, do you remember that time you and Sammy—" he began and turned then stopped short—she wasn't standing where she'd been, and when he peered down into the car, all he saw was Cas, still sleeping soundly.

And after Sam came back out with no Alex in tow, after they checked the bathrooms and the store and shouted her name and checked with Bobby who was idling nearby... they realized that their sister was gone. Without an explanation or clear warning, she was just gone.
Dearest readers, on a serious note, please be prepared. The next chapter contains some pretty dark content material and some huge reveals.
Waking up was a strange feeling for Castiel. It was a sudden awareness of consciousness, followed by another awareness entirely of how reluctant his body and mind were to leave that place of rest. Before he even opened his eyes, his muffled senses came back to their use, came to clarity—his ears heard the low sound of the car engine as it drove, he could smell the old leather, he felt the car underneath him jostling as it hit uneven parts in a road. The vehicle was slowing down to a crawl. Had they arrived in Detroit?

Cas opened his eyes, looking to his left where Alex was, a little smile dawning across his lips when he thought of her. The smile fell away when he saw that the seat beside himself was empty. He sat up faster than he thought possible, snapping out of the half-lucid feeling. He looked over his shoulder, through the large back window. Bobby's van followed the Impala down a dark alley way. She must be with Bobby, but why? "Where's Alex?" he asked urgently, inexplicably feeling a sense of quickly growing alarm.

When he turned back around and saw the way Sam and Dean glanced at each other and then looked back at him, he immediately knew something was wrong. Dean stopped the car, threw the gearshift up into park, then took the keys out of the ignition. "You wanna tell him, or me?" Dean asked Sam and his tone was dark, inscrutable. Without waiting for a reply, Dean got out of the car.

There was a deepening sense of dread when Dean said that and Cas got out, too, faster than he thought possible—he stared across the car roof at Dean. "Tell me what?" Castiel asked intensely, needing to know now—his pulse had picked up, alarm was coursing through his veins at full strength. Where was she? Where was Alex? Why did Dean have that look on his face? Sam was getting out too, and while Dean's expression was almost angry, Sam looked mournful.

"She ran away," Sam said grimly as he shut his door. "We think," he added.

Castiel felt thunderstruck by something like terrified confusion. "What?" he looked at Dean for an explanation, almost unable to remember how to breathe for a moment.

The oldest Winchester let out a heavy breath and leaned his arms onto the top of the Impala, pinched the bridge of his nose, shut his eyes. "What do you want me to tell you, Cas?" He threw a hand up, giving the impression that he'd given up. "She took off."

Cas was frozen in place, staring at Dean in confusion. He heard what they were telling him, but she couldn't just be gone. No... she wouldn't run away from him, and he knew it and couldn't bring himself to believe that she would. "She... wouldn't do that," Cas said in a stilted, strained voice, his features twisted into a wounded, befuddled expression. He was in shock, unable to respond well at all. "I know that she wouldn't."

"Yeah well she did," Dean said gruffly. "She left her phone, left your friggin' Lortabs on the seat beside you. One minute she was there, the next she was just gone and some motorcyclist was yelling about his bike being stolen. She ditched, Cas, okay?" Dean sounded mad about it. Cas was wrecked. Why would she do such a thing? Without a word to him? No, something about this wasn't right.
Cas looked at Sam. "How long ago was this? Why didn't either of you wake me?" He looked back at Dean, getting more and more upset as the knowledge that she was no longer there became realer and realer. "Why did you just let me sleep? You should have woken me, Dean! The second you knew she was gone!" Feeling betrayed, Cas looked at each brother in turn. He was devastated, infuriated, helpless—all at the same time.

Dean threw his hands up, appearing to be greatly unhappy, and he looked at his brother darkly. "I told you he'd flip out."

Sam's head tilted to the side and he pulled a sour face. "Yeah. You did. And I wanna know why you aren't flipping out, Dean." Sam looked at his brother accusingly and clearly agitated, Dean paced alongside the car a few steps, jammed his fingers through his hair then gestured jerkily. "Look, it's obvious she got freaked out and couldn't come all the way with us and see her twin brother hand himself over to Lucifer, okay?" Dean's expression was foul, he was defensive, but wasn't sure over what. "I mean come on, this isn't the first time she's run away!"

Sam fixed his his brother with a clearly contemptuous scowl, then looked at Cas, drew in a deep, regretful breath. "I wanted to wake you up, Cas, but Dean told me not to. I shouldn't have listened. I'm sorry." He let out a heavy sigh and leaned his back against the car, bowing his head down to scrub his forehead with his hand.

Bobby, binoculars in hand, approached them. He seemed to be able to sense the tension and know the situation at hand, he cast a cursory, concerned glance at all three of them in turn. "I think this is the spot, guys. Everything okay here?"

Cas looked at him bluntly. "No."

Bobby put a hand on Cas's shoulder, squeezed. Cas could see that the man was troubled, too. "Don't worry, son, we'll find her—just as soon as we're outta this foxhole." Bobby left them, walked up the alley to peer through his binoculars.

Castiel looked back at Dean darkly, great amounts of contempt boiling in his veins. Underneath the scalding glare, Dean looked away guiltily. "We have to go after her, Dean," Cas said in a firm, unwavering voice, forcibly setting aside his anger for the moment. He didn't have time for petty disagreements over what should have been done in time past. He needed to find her, now. The urge was overwhelming and he was struggling not to lose his temper.

Dean came around the back of the car, slowly. "Yeah, sure Cas. Let's go after her. Let's just ditch the possible only shot we have at getting Satan behind bars." He fixed Cas with a challenging, cynical expression. "Any idea where she went? Any clue as to where she could have gone? Cuz I got nothing, and right now, the devil's here in Detroit and we gotta do this man, we gotta do this now." At Cas's glare, Dean pulled an ugly face. "Hey, don't get pissed at me, get pissed at her for being a friggin' kid about this and running off at the worst time possible."

"You're wrong Dean, you must be. She wouldn't run away," Cas insisted, then looked away, deep in conflicted thought. Said the next part almost to himself as he shook his head. "Not from me."

Dean's expression twisted into an angry, disgusted expression. "Oh you think you're so damn special, don't you," he muttered angrily.

Cas stared at him with a crestfallen, hurt expression. "I find your attitude toward me to be completely unhelpful right now."
Dean looked overwhelmed, at a breaking point, he wet his lips and ran a frazzled hand over his chin, then chopped his hand through the air. "Listen, my brother is about to commit suicide to save the world and it might not even work and my sister abandoned ship and I got no idea where she is, I'm not in the best fucking mood okay?!" He didn't seem to be able to hold still, half turning away like he was about to walk away, then stopping and heaving a heavy breath, his shoulders tensed up toward his ears. "I'm sorry Cas, okay? I got no choice. We'll go find her after we do this." He hung his head almost, pinched the bridge of his nose again, gathering himself. He looked at Sam meaningfully. "We gotta do this now Sam, while we still have the opportunity."

Sam was nodding grimly. "I know."

Cas looked at both of the brothers in disbelief. Didn't they sense it, too? How something was very wrong and off? Why weren't they as worried as he was? Bobby came back, walking a little faster than normal. "Demons across the street at that old apartment building," he said to Dean. "At least two dozen of 'em. You were right—something's up."

Dean nodded, foreboding filling his face. He looked up at the apartments and Cas saw just a hint of fear dart across the man's face. "More than something. He's here. I know he is." Dean glanced at Cas with an inscrutable and clouded expression, then turned and walked to the trunk of the Impala, his hands in his jacket pockets.

Sam looked at the apartments too, felt his heart hammering sickeningly fast in his chest. This was really it. He was going to do this. He had never been so afraid in his life. Bobby caught his gaze, and Sam knew that they both recognized that this moment meant goodbye. Bobby looked down, sadness flashing over his features, then he braced himself and walked over to Sam. There were tears shining in his eyes, and his voice was soft. "See ya around, kid."

Sam stayed brave. "See ya around." They embraced tightly, and when they came apart, Bobby looked at Sam pleadingly.

"He gets in... you fight him tooth and nail, you understand? Keep swingin'." Bobby blinked back tears. "Don't give an inch."

Sam's expression was rigid. "Yes sir." Bobby clapped him on the arm and turned away as his face distorted in grief. The older man walked off a few steps, kept his back turned to them. Sam struggled to maintain his composure and he wished so badly that his twin were here, wished he knew she were really going to be okay. If he'd known at that gas station was really going to be the last time he saw her... he would have hugged her a lot longer, said a lot more. But he hadn't, and he had to leave it at that. He pushed some of his hair away from his face, caught Cas's somber, conflicted gaze.

Sam went over to Cas, extended a hand to him for a handshake. "Take care of these guys, okay?" He asked. Cas looked at Sam's hand blankly.

"That's not possible," Cas replied, his tone almost depressed, and he looked Sam in the eye. "I can't even take care of your sister."

Sam's expression fell and so did his empty hand, but he tried to keep his brave face on, attempted a smile. "...just humor me, Cas. Please."

Cas seemed to understand, became disappointed in himself. "Oh. I was supposed to lie," he muttered, and then in a strange display, Cas attempted a reassuring, off-the-cuff kind of smile, which looked strange and unnatural. "Uh... sure," he said with false, stilted nonchalance, shrugging a shoulder up towards the side of his face. "They'll be fine."
Sam could have laughed at the guy's expression, if the situation wasn't so dire. "Just—just stop... talking," he told Cas, because this was only making Sam feel worse and worse.

"Apologies," Cas said, dropping the act, once again distraught and clearly in torment. "I find myself deeply upset right now." He looked down at his feet unseeingly and Sam stepped a little closer, took hold of Cas's arm. Cas looked up at Sam.

"Promise me you'll find her, Cas," Sam said urgently, quietly. "And when you do, tell her I'm so sorry. I wanted to say goodbye better than I did." He huffed softly. There was a huge lump in his throat and he squeezed Cas's arm. "Take care of her Cas. I know you will."

Cas nodded, still filled with apprehension and doubt. "I'll do my best, Sam."

Sam nodded. "I know you will. I'm glad she has someone who... cares about her as much as you do."

Near them, Dean was watching silently, leaned over the open trunk of the car. Sam caught his gaze. It was time. Sam expelled a heavy breath, drew his shoulders up, went to Dean who was now pulling out one of the gallon jugs of demon blood that had been stored in the back seat. Dean put it with the other ones, counted the jugs, frowning lightly. "I thought there was one more, Sam but... I dunno, guess not."

"It's fine. It's enough." Sam looked at the jugs of bright red liquid and then at Dean. He felt queasy at the thought of drinking the blood, at the thought of what he was about to do, everything from shame and terror and hope coursing through him. But mostly shame because of what demon blood had done to him in the past. He looked at his older brother sidelong. "You, uh, you mind not watching this?" he asked quietly, and Dean, clearly filled with anxiety over what was about to happen, looked at his brother sadly, then did as he wished, started to walk off toward the front of the car... then turned slightly as Sam lifted the first jug up out of the trunk.

"Sam—you sure about this?" Dean asked softly, filled with obvious dread. "We can try something else, we can find something else, I mean, there has to be another way, man, right?" He swallowed and Sam saw how scared his big brother was. How he didn't really believe there was another way, but as always, was trying to make everything okay, was trying to give him an out. Dean pleaded with Sam silently, then out loud. "You don't have to do this."

Sam looked at the jug of blood that he held. No, he didn't have to. No one was forcing him to do this, not really, but after a lifetime of ducking responsibilities and taking the safe way out, he wasn't going to back down on this one. He was going to do this, save the world, and finally save his family instead of them always saving him.

And he was going to keep Alex safe from the dreams he'd seen. He'd lied to her the day before yesterday. He told her he didn't remember the details of the dreams he'd had where she died in a fire. But he did. He remembered in perfect, horrifying detail. His baby sister, pinned brokenly to a ceiling, blood dripping from her stomach as she screamed... Sam standing below, hand outstretched. Him, the one who had been burning her. All these years he had lived in fear of telling anyone the dreams, he'd lived in fear of them coming true. But when Azazel had died and the dreams had stopped, Sam had been relieved. He'd been assured. But not anymore, not with what Dad said to Alex in heaven. So this, Sam essentially killing himself... wouldn't just save the world from Lucifer. It would save Alex from any chance of that ever happening.

It was too terrible to even think about, the sight of her dying at his hand... under the influence of demon blood, he'd always assumed. That's why he'd stayed away from her when Dean had died and he'd been with Ruby, becoming addicted to the substance of her blood. And Sam had spent
such a long time living in wretched guilt over the dreams, whether or not to tell Dean, whether or not to take the secret to his grave. Sam had always known that he would give his life to save his sister. And now... he was about to. Maybe it was for the best that she wasn't here to see him do this... drink down this thick fiery blood that had caused him to strike her across the face in time past.

You don't have to do this, Dean had just said to him. Struggling against the lump in his throat, Sam shook his head no and looked at his brother in the eye, feeling the bravest and most afraid he ever had. "Yes. I do have to do this." Sam looked at him meaningfully, sorrowfully. "Turn around, Dean."

And Dean did, with tears in his eyes.

Castiel and Bobby hung back as Sam finished the demon's blood, slammed the trunk of the car shut with gusto and then, somehow seeming to be physically larger than he had a minute ago, marched down the alleyway, a man on a mission. Dean followed as Sam strode across the empty street with arms raised in challenge. "All right! We're here, you sons of bitches!" He roared. "Come and get it!" Cas could see two demons in suits come out of the doorway to the apartment. They took hold of Sam and Dean and Cas fought his instincts to save them. He held still and watched them disappear into the building.

His stomach churned, the pain from his wounds was returning and he felt physically horrible, but none of it was comparable to his emotional distress. He was agonized to his core at the thought of Alex out there alone somewhere. He didn't understand why she would leave, it made no sense at all, and the struggle for understanding was tearing him apart internally.

He couldn't hold still, he was pacing one, two, three steps back and forth. He wanted to leave, now, find her, but he didn't even have the first idea of where to begin, how to locate her in this big world without any angelic powers at his disposal. He couldn't stop thinking she wouldn't just leave like that. Something was deeply wrong and every moment he stood here uselessly, doing nothing, he felt like he was betraying his duty to protect her, that she could be out there somewhere needing him and that he was forsaking her. Over and over again, clanging loudly in his mind the conviction that something—was—wrong.

Perhaps this feeling was what people referred to as gut instinct. He couldn't ignore it, and was becoming restless to the point of what he believed to be insanity. But the second he turned to Bobby to tell him he was leaving to find Alex, he caught a movement up in the dark window of the third floor.

A solitary, shadowy figure came to stand at the window, and instinctively, at the chills produced by the presence, Castiel knew that was Lucifer. So that's why, for a moment, he couldn't breathe at all. That was not the hefty, towering vessel of Nick in the window.

"No," Cas breathed out in a stupor of horror. He was frozen where he stood, not understanding how that would even be possible. "Please, Alex, no."

Sam and Dean were roughly dragged and pushed up several floors along a cracked, splintering old staircase then down a narrow dark hallway, and finally into a dank old apartment. Dean grunted in protest as the demon handling him shoved him through the doorway carelessly—his shoulder cracking into the dilapidated wooden doorframe.

The apartment had broken old furniture and walls that were rotted away in places, but none of that
drew the boys stares. Standing there at the far end of the apartment at the window, back turned to
them… not Nick. As the boys were let roughly let go, Dean stared, confused, at the back of the
familiar, slight figure standing at the window. Her fingers had just drawn a pitchfork on the frosty
glass pane.

"A-Alex?" Sam asked breathlessly, moving forward a little towards her… then halting completely
when she turned around to face them. Dean almost had a heart attack when he took in her
appearance. It had only been about two hours since he'd seen her, but she wasn't even the same girl
anymore.

Her color was pale, almost gray, and obscene spider veins crisscrossed underneath the surface of
her skin—she looked like a vase that had been hairline cracked all over. Her eyes were vacant and
yet foreboding, her mouth was twisted into a lifeless smile. "Guess again..." she said, and that's
when they really knew it wasn't her—her voice was quiet and dark yet sing song, a perversion of
her real voice. She took a couple steps toward them, slow, measured. "So nice of you to stop by,
boys," she drawled pleasantly, and the smile on their sister's face stretched a little bigger.

"Lucifer?" Sam asked in abject horror, his voice barely above a whisper.

"That's right," she replied, again in the haunting and wrong speech pattern their sister never used.

Sam and Dean were almost rendered speechless by horror and confusion, both of them confounded
and dismayed by the sight before them. Dean found his voice first. "What are you doing in her, you
son of a bitch?" he asked in soft, disbelieving voice. He could barely breathe—he was completely
and utterly terrified. Lucifer looked at him, and even though it was his sister standing there, even
though that was her face, Dean could barely even recognize her. "Alex, c-can you hear me?" he
asked, perhaps foolishly hoping against hope to see even a flicker of his sister in those cold eyes.

Lucifer almost looked sympathetic, wincing using Alex's familiar features. "Sorry boys... Alex
can't come to the phone right now." The little smile on her face was almost playful and the effect
was sickening. "But I'd be happy to take a message." Overcome with rage, Sam shut his eyes, gritted his teeth, and used the abilities afforded to him by
the demon blood. All the demons in the room fell over, dead. Sam reopened his eyes and looked at
Lucifer dangerously.

"Hm. Neat trick," Lucifer said, almost bored. "But... you forgot one." Alex's eyes went to
somewhere behind the boys and between them. They turned to see a tall man wearing a black
leather jacket. He had striking, dark features set against pale skin and eyes that glittered at them
smugly. He smirked mildly at their surprise. "Oh, that's right," Lucifer said softly as if in surprise.
"You can only kill demons with your little sideshow talent…not angels."

Sam and Dean looked at each other in more rising fear. They hadn't know Lucifer had angel allies
in his war. "Hezion," Lucifer said to the man in leather, "we're about to have more guests. Let's
make sure they're... welcomed." As if on cue, the door slammed open and Castiel burst in,
breathless and horrified and opening his mouth to say something when he was jerked into the room
without hands, pulled like a rag doll through the air and then slammed back-first into a far wall
painfully. Behind Cas, Bobby had crouched slightly into a defensive position, but he, too, was
dragged into the room without even being touched and Hezion took hold of him, touched Bobby's
head and the older man went slack, unconscious, was dropped onto the floor where he ceased to
move.

"Bobby!" Dean exclaimed, and Hezion looked at him warningly. Dean stayed in place.
"Alex, no, no," Castiel said, struggling against the invisible hold over him where he was flattened against the wall.

"Ah, Castiel." Lucifer sauntered over, smiling at Cas with dead eyes—the way Lucifer pronounced his name was different than Alex ever had and the effect was terrifying. "An angel who's married to his work... I should have guessed you'd show up. I've said it before but I'll say it again..." Lucifer looked at Castiel in faint fascination, as if trying to figure him out. "What a peculiar thing you are…"

"What have you done to her?" Castiel asked, his voice high pitched and breathy with alarm. He was taking in how ill Alex looked, how near death itself, and his features were overwrought in pain, in horror.

"Nothing she didn't ask for," Lucifer replied casually… and the expression was too pleasant, was too calm on Alex's face, Lucifer's triumph gleaming through her eyes as she stared at Castiel unblinking, straight in the eyes. And then without warning, her eyes flickered. Alex's face distorted, she lurched slightly, and for the briefest moment, confusion and fear came over her, Cas dropped away from the wall, released from the hold he'd been in—he was reaching for her immediately and she looked terrified, uncertain, lost. "Cas, wha—ahh!" she crumpled forward into his arms with a cry of absolute pain, teeth gritted—and then without warning she straightened oddly and Castiel was slammed against the wall again.

Lucifer looked slightly thrown by what had just happened, frowning darkly and looking at Castiel almost suspiciously. "Interesting..." Lucifer commented warily, eyes sweeping up and down over Cas strangely.

Cas was breathing hard, struggling valiantly as he stared at the embodiment of evil in the body of the woman he loved, his expression agonized and fearful and horrified and enraged all at once. "I don't know how you've done this but I won't let you have her," Castiel growled, fighting Lucifer's hold over himself in vain.

"Too late for that," Lucifer replied mildly, then held a single finger over Cas's lips. "Now do us all a favor… and shut your trap." When her finger came away, Cas looked confused, his mouth remained shut, as if by force.

Sam and Dean, still frozen where they were and in shock, watched as Lucifer, in the body of their little sister, turned to them and folded her arms then tapped a thoughtful finger to her chin. "Well. I'm sure this is not what you expected when you walked into the room, is it, boys?"

"Why?" Sam asked, trembling in both rage and helpless fear. "I'm your vessel, I am. She has nothing to do with this!"

Lucifer looked mildly inconvenienced, then faintly amused. "Well, she does have something to do with it now, wouldn't you agree, Sam? But you're right. She's not my true vessel. This… her? Disgraceful. Worst vessel ever." She laughed suddenly and swung her arm up against the old metal bookshelf that was rusted and falling over—hard enough to break bone. The boys both started, cringing helplessly. The shelf collapsed loudly, and Lucifer looked down at the arm that she'd done it with. "So weak and ineffective," Lucifer commented indifferently, then looked up at Sam, who was tensed and looked ready to spring, yet conflicted because that was his sister's body and being in front of him—how could he attack Lucifer and not her as well?

"You two look so confused," Lucifer commented, smiling now and showing teeth. She began to pace slowly, enjoying the horrified tension that blanketed the room. She gestured with her hands languidly, spoke slowly, in total control of the exchange. "Allow me to explain. I know it's
probably a little... surprising. A bit of a... plot twist, if you will." Lucifer pulled a sympathetic face and paused a moment. "I do apologize for any inconvenience."

Dean watched with growing rage, his fists clenched. But then when Lucifer began to explain, his rage dissipated into hopelessness and unfathomable grief. "Sam. Dean. Your sister asked me for this. Seems like little sis has the same save-the-world complex that you do... that and a couple wrong ideas about this little cohabitation arrangement we've come to." Lucifer grimaced sympathetically and Dean's sadness began to give way to anger again. "I'm afraid that might be my fault, too. Gosh, all I did was tell a few little fibs to a few ears here and there... planted a few choice dreams... had Hezion whisper in her ear... and look what happened." Lucifer spread her hands out in a helpless little shrug then chuckled lowly. "Son of a bitch, Dean could barely see, such was his wrath.

"It's sweet, really, the amount of bravery it took for her to do what she did. Drank a gallon of demon blood on the side of some road before she summoned me. Choked it down, crying the whole time, thinking she was going to save the world, save her brothers, save the angel she loves..." Alex's eyes slid to Cas, who looked positively sickened where he was silent and stuck. "She thought it through, boys. Had a plan. She summoned Michael first and told him she was going to pray to me, say yes to me while Michael stayed hidden nearby, waiting to get the jump on me. She knew she'd be weak enough to be defeated with that pitiful amount of demon blood pumping through her veins..." Lucifer paused, smiled darkly. "We've had more to drink since then, she and I..." There was another little sick smile and Dean's heart was breaking in two to hear what had happened to his sister while he had been angry at her for running away. He cursed himself and his stupidity, his pride. He should have know something was wrong. Cas and Sam had both been right.

"It's too bad I was three steps ahead of her," Lucifer said, and there was a clearly ringing note of pride in Alex's voice. "Clever girl... but not clever enough. After all... I was the one who planned this whole thing, wasn't I? It was almost too easy." The question only served to mystify and terrify the brothers further, who were suddenly feeling like they may not have a single clue what was really going on. Alex's chin raised up, the chilling smile stretched her pale features and her voice lowered, softened. "So, long story short... she prayed to me and I sent Hezion to snatch her up before Michael even knew what was happening. Oh, she was so surprised that it didn't go how she thought it would, tried so hard to hide it..."

Sam was practically seething at this point, Dean wanted to break down and weep and beg Lucifer to just please let her go. His eyes stung with tears—he was barely holding himself together—he glanced Cas's way. The ex-angel pinned to the wall appeared distraught and he'd stopped struggling. Dean looked back at his sister's form, so confused and angry. Why? It made no sense! Lucifer was still pacing languidly. "I brought her here, asked if she'd like to let the devil inside and she said yes, just like that. Guess she thought maybe she could fight me off or something... I don't know. She gave it her best effort. You should be proud. She really thought she could kill me—again..." there was an apologetic wince. "Probably my fault for leaving all those red herrings for her to find." Lucifer's eyes went from Sam to Dean and that little smirk was chilling to the bone. "Well. Bless her heart."

"Why the hell would you even possess her, you bastard?" Dean asked, his voice wavering with emotional torment. "Sam is your vessel, why would you do this?"

"Watch your tone, Dean," Lucifer said softly in warning, and the cold, dead eyes stared him down for a long moment. Lucifer turned to look at Sam again. "Alex here is... my insurance policy, if you will."
"Insurance against what?" Sam demanded, both at the end of his rope and terrified of the answers. Lucifer rolled her eyes slightly, as if bored with the exchange. "Sam. I know you have the horsemen's rings."

Dean's heart dropped even as Sam attempted to appear unfazed. "I don't—I don't know what you're talking about."

"Really? You're going to lie to this face?" Lucifer asked, pointing to Alex's face and circling the finger around a couple times. She sighed and patiently continued. "Come on Sammy. The magic keys to my cage? Ring a bell? I've never lied to you." Lucifer paused, pulled a face, then shrugged in false modesty. "Well. Avoided telling you the details, yes. Manipulated you. Mm, a little. But never let it be said that I lied to you, never to you Sam. Do me the same favor and be honest."

Sam's shoulders heaved up and down as he stared at Lucifer, trying to hide his fear. "I know what you plan to do," Lucifer told him, even as Dean's sickened feeling doubled as he realized this whole entire thing was a trap, from day one, all of it. And they had walked right into it. "A wrestling match inside your noggin. I like the idea, and hey, I've already beaten one Winchester today, why not another? Go for a record, hm?" Lucifer laughed softly, a chilling effect. "Just you and me? One round?"

She raised her eyebrows, held out a playfully warning finger, voice bordering sing-song again. "No tricks." She held one hand out to her left, palm up. "You win, you jump in the hole." She held out her other hand to her right, palm up. "I win… well. I win. I'm interested." Her hands came together, fingers steepled in thoughtfulness. "Like you, Sam, I value honesty. So I'll tell you now: It won't work. I'm stronger than you. So much stronger. But… if you decide to back out now… I keep this little consolation prize." Lucifer gestured at Alex's body, looked at the brothers with haughty eyes, reveling in the victory he seemed to know he'd already won.

"What to do, what to do..." Lucifer said softly, thoughtfully, mockingly. "Question is, now that you know that I know your endgame… now that you know the risk… are you still willing to chance it?" Dean and Sam looked at each other in mutual devastated horror. Everything further that Lucifer said drove the feeling of dread deeper. They had already lost.

"Let's talk options, Sam," Lucifer said, pacing back and forth again slowly, leisurely. "One: save your sister's life and let me have you instead, my true vessel. Two, walk away, let her die—by Michael's hand, or by the effect I'm having on her. Your choice." Lucifer stopped pacing, looked disingenuously sorrowful. "And by the way? She's currently dying of every kind of cancer known to man. This little hundred-twenty pounds of meat just can't quite handle me." Lucifer smirked and looked at Cas. "It's... a pretty tight fit in here, I have to say." The smirk widened at Cas's tortured expression and useless struggling. Lucifer looked back at Dean now. "Get me out of her soon, maybe the damage can be reversed."

"You son of a bitch," Sam said sharply, drawing Lucifer's attention. "I was gonna say yes anyway! Why would you do this?"

There was a humble shrug followed by a truly empathetic expression that was even more disconcerting than the other chilling smiles and stares. "You're mine Sam. You've always been mine, and I always knew you'd say yes… all I had to do was make it impossible for you to say no." Sam's jaw flexed wrathfully, his fists clenched at his sides and Lucifer smiled again. "Even if you were already going to say yes… you have to admit this was entertaining," Lucifer fiend surprise. "No? I'm the only one?" There was a low chuckle.

At Sam and Dean's scalding glares, Lucifer got mildly exasperated, set Sam with a look that was
both warning and full of appeal. "I'm not to blame here Sam. I may have created the opportunity, but she's the one who said yes. She practically begged me to get inside her." Lucifer shrugged Alex's mouth up into a helpless, pitying expression. "Who was I to turn her down? She was so polite." Alex's face grew thoughtful, Lucifer paused a couple beats, as if listening to some far away sound. "She's begging me right now, too… but for escape, for release… she's in so much pain…"

"Jesus Christ, Sam, get her outta there now, please!" Dean begged, his voice high in urgency.

Lucifer looked at Dean superiorly. "Feeling guilty, are we Dean?" Lucifer approached him by a few steps. "She thought about telling you this idea of hers but… well, she knew you wouldn't let her risk her life. She knew you would never let her endanger herself. Ironic, isn't it? You ensured her harm by trying to prevent it." She clicked her tongue in chiding, then her eyes slid to Sam. Alex's arms spread wide and her face was filled with a triumphant, challenging expression. "So how about that wrestling match? What do you say Sam?" Her voice became impossibly soft and sing-song. "A fiddle of gold against your soul says I'm better than you-ouuu…"

"Sam, hurry," Dean urged. He didn't need to encourage his brother.

Sam was already stepping forward, intense and decisive. "Yes. Do you hear me? Yes!"

Her eyes glittered in triumph just before Alex's head went back. Blinding light blazed in the room, and Dean had to look away. When the light died away, the twins were both motionless on the floor, Cas fell away from the wall and the second he was released, he was crawling over to Alex.

Was the exchange made? He couldn't even tell, and Dean's first instinct was to rush to his siblings, but he knew what had to be done and with a badly trembling hand, he drew out the horsemen's rings from his pocket. They were locked together, and he threw them at the far wall, where they stuck as if magnetic. If this didn't work, he didn't know what he would do. He chanted the phrase Death had made him memorize. "Bvtmon… tabges… babalon!"

At his words, the elements obeyed. Beneath where the rings were stuck, the wall began to crack and sink inwards, the entire room shook and the wall began to peel away now, sucking itself inwards, revealing a dark, circular void. Struggling to stay on his feet, Dean looked behind himself, Cas was sitting on the floor, had pulled Alex's unconscious form up into his arms, and Sam was stirring on the floor. Dean rushed to his brother, hoping against hope that his brother had control, that this plan of theirs would work. "Sammy!"

"Dean!" Sam shouted back, grimacing, struggling, then giving a cry of torment. "I can feel him, oh, god!"

Not even able to hear, just focused on doing, Dean hauled Sam to his feet. "You got to go now! Come on!" Dean looked at the hole on the wall, that was growing wider and wider, sucking more and more cracked wooden wall inwards. "Go now, Sammy, now!" And Sam, on his feet, obeyed, walked forward toward the hole—Dean could see his shoulders heaving up and down in what looked like preparation. And then he relaxed, turned around smoothly, smiling coolly. Dean's world crumbled.

"I was just messing with you," Lucifer said thunderously in Sam's voice. Above the wind, his voice carried authoritatively, and when he spoke, his mouth moved strangely, unlike Sam. "Sammy's long gone." Lucifer turned back to the wall. "Chdr bvtmon tabges babalon!" The wind ceased, the wall was once again as it had been. Lucifer took the horsemen's rings off the wall, looked at them calmly.

Near Dean's feet, Cas looked up at Dean in sheer horror. Limp in his arms, Alex looked as though
she might as well be dead, and if it weren't for the shallow rise and fall of her chest, Dean would have thought she was dead. Lucifer sauntered over slowly, turning the horsemen's rings in his hands. He was looking around the room with a slight frown, and that's when Dean realized distantly that the Hezion guy was gone. Lucifer seemed unhappy about it, but refocused on Dean. Sam's eyes looked at him for a long moment, the smallest sympathetic smile tugged at Sam's lips. "I told you... this would always happen in Detroit." Lucifer looked at Alex's unconscious body and then back to Dean and the smile increased. "I'm sorry for your loss." And he disappeared. Dean stared, breathless and horrified for a second before turning and dropping down to his knees in front of Cas, who held Alex there, cradled her across his lap there on the floor.

"What did he mean, what does he mean?!” Dean demanded in alarm, scared shitless, looking at his sister in a panic—she looked the same, diseased and practically lifeless. "He said he'd let her live!" Cas looked up at him with eyes that were shining with tears, and seeing that made Dean go completely still. Oh no. And he already knew it before Cas said it, but hearing it out loud seemed to suck out all the air from Dean's lungs.

"She's dying, Dean," Cas told him in the softest voice. The men looked at each other and Dean began to shake his head. No. Not Alex. But he looked down and saw how her skin was sapped of all the color of life, how she was barely breathing, how she looked dead already. And Dean didn't even understand what had just happened, didn't know how she could have been lured into this and he'd had no clue, he felt such a tidal wave of guilt and despair crashing over him that he could barely see at all. Just a few hours ago, she'd been fine. How the hell had this happened? What was she thinking? She looked like she might pass any second, such was her appearance, and Dean reached out a trembling hand, placed it on the top of her head. Stunned, silent tears ran down his cheeks.

"H-how long, Cas?" Dean asked, barely able to form words.

Cas shook his head, looked down into her still face, appearing to be lost. He didn't answer for a long moment, and Dean could see there was a tear track down one of his cheeks, that Cas looked physically ill almost with grief. The sight of that made Dean's terror even more pronounced. Cas sounded as shellshocked as Dean felt. "A few days maybe, I... I don't know." Cas's fingers tightened on her, his arms drew her slightly closer to himself, his face twisted up at he gazed into her unmoving face.

Dean stood up and looked down at them, shaking his head again. No. No. This was not allowed, this was not okay, he was not going to accept this. He began to pace back and forth, trying to think of something, anything, some way out of this, some way through. He wanted to shake Alex and scream at her and beg her to tell him why she'd gone and done this. Stupid, stupid girl. Why did you have to try and do what I always do? Why'd you have to try and save everyone? Don't you know that's my job? Dean was getting out of breath, he shoved a hand through his hair and paced harder. He didn't make it all this way, all these years, he hadn't kept those two idiot siblings of his alive all this time to see them fucking die now, no, oh no—he hadn't gone to Hell and been brought back to stand by and let this happen.

But what could he do? What could he do!? She was going to die and so was Sam and without warning, Dean lost it. "Why the hell would she do this, Cas! I'm supposed to be the one who takes the hit in this family, me! And instead I lose Sam and Alex the same goddamn night?! Where the fuck is the sense in that?! What am I supposed to do, Cas? What am I supposed to do?!” He shoved the nearby bookshelf violently, it skittered across the floor and into the wall and Dean put his head in both of his hands, shaking from emotion and fear and despair and anger and grief that was as heavy as all the gravity in the world. It's already over. Your family is as good as dead. No. He refused to accept that and he pulled himself together, put his hands down, looked at Cas, who was
looking back up at Dean cautiously.

Dean wet his lips, controlling himself, speaking calmly again. "How do we stop this, Cas?"

"Stop what?" Cas asked. He was utterly hopeless and it showed. He shook his head, looked back at Alex again. His face distorted again. "It's over, Dean."

"It's not over until I say it's over!" Dean felt how his hands shook uncontrollably at his sides and clenched them into fists.

Cas looked at him almost indignantly, like he couldn't believe Dean's audacity. "Lucifer will meet Michael on the chosen field and the battle of Armageddon will begin." He looked away, somewhere into middle distance, his expression rigid and torn. His voice softened, was heavy with sorrow and weariness, defeat. "I wish I could see some hope in this. But... I see none."

"Where is this chosen field?" Dean demanded, angry about Cas just sitting there, giving up, accepting it all.

"Even if I knew, Dean—" Cas started heavily.

Dean was almost on the verge of breaking down and crying and it translated into an angry, overbearing near-shout. "You listen to me, you junkless sissy, we are not giving up! You say you love her well get on your fucking feet and prove it! Help me find a way to fix this!" He was breathless with emotion and Cas looked at him silently. Guilty? Reluctant? Dean couldn't tell, all he knew was that he needed help, he needed help!

"Boys?" Bobby's voice came from somewhere behind Dean. He was pushing himself up, a little dazed. "What happened?" He saw Alex and his expression fell. "Christ," he breathed, then looked around the room. "Sam?" he asked, expression distraught in useless hope.

Dean's mouth wavered, he struggled to keep it in a thin line. He shook his head. "Gone."

*Gone.* Without a trace. He could be anywhere, anywhere. Dean wracked his mind desperately, at the end of his rope. No revelation, no idea came to him. And then suddenly it dawned on him. He looked at Bobby breathlessly. "I-I think I know how to find him."

Castiel sat on some dirty steps that were off of the alley where the Impala and Bobby's van were parked. He was holding Alex, hadn't let go of her for a second. She was still and limp in his arms, breathing shallowly and unconscious. Cas was beside himself at how quickly everything had crumbled. Just yesterday they had been happy—had woken up together. She'd been so *alive* and he thought that they would spend the rest of their lives together, that he would learn to be human with her at his side, that they would somehow find a way to stop her death in 2013. He'd pictured a life for them together, he'd been hopeful despite some misgivings. The thought of being with her had been the one bright spot for him in the midst of losing his powers, of losing who he'd been before. But now, today, the one he loved was withering away from him, was a day or two away from fading out completely. And he could do *nothing* except watch it happen. He cradled her across his lap, her head was curled into his side, supported by one of his arms. Her legs were hanging over one of his. This wasn't supposed to have happened. None of this.

Dean was on his cell phone, sitting in the Impala a few feet away, Cas could hear his rumbling voice indistinctly. Bobby's van was nearby too, and Cas could hear a female voice reporting the latest news over the radio.

"*Reports are flooding in—a seven point six earthquake in Portland, eight point one in Boston,*
more in Hong Kong, Berlin, and Tehran. The U.S.G.S. has no explanation but says to expect a six-
figure death toll."

It was starting. He stroked his hand down the side of Alex's face mournfully. No. It was ending. Her pallid complexion was profaned by the strange, dark veins that were etched underneath all visible skin. Oh, Alex. He wondered why his chest ached so painfully, why this had happened, why she had done this. He didn't understand how she could have made such a huge decision to try and stop Lucifer on her own without leaving him even a single clue. He'd had no idea she'd been thinking of this, and it almost felt like betrayal. He was grieved to his most innermost parts. He thought the humans called this feeling heartbreak, and it was fitting, because everything inside of him felt broken and the source of all the destruction began there in the left of his chest—pounding despair and misery into his veins again and again at a steady rhythm.

Cas hung his head in shame and guilt for a long moment, unable to believe what he was about to do. But he had no pride left, only heartache and misery and desperation for some way out of this—not for him, but for her. And with that in mind, his head raised up. "Please," he whispered aloud, looking upward to the dark, starless sky. His eyes flickered back and forth over the dark expanse. "I don't deserve an answer and I don't deserve your kindness after everything I've done... after all the sins I've committed against you... but I promise, I swear to you, I will do anything if you heal her, give her another chance. Father, please." He heard sirens off in the distance. "Anything." Cas faltered, almost in tears at the rejection, the silence, the utter indifference God was continuing to show him. "I'm begging you," Cas whispered in a cracked voice. He almost held his breath, staring, waiting, hanging all his hope on a God who didn't seem to care anymore. There was no reply and Cas bowed his head down, attempting not to become overwhelmed in desolation.

What was left for him to do? She would die. And he felt that he would, too. He loved her so much that it hurt. Abruptly, Alex breathed in sharper than she had before, her eyes fluttered open, and she looked up at him in a daze, seeming to be surprised and disoriented. His breath caught, his stomach flipped in surprise and worry, he tightened his arms around her.

"Alex—" he said her name and he sounded both relieved and afraid.

"Cas?" She asked softly. Her voice was cracked and papery, weak. She tried to sit but didn't seem to have the strength, seemed surprised by how weak she was—Cas helped prop her up a little more, shifting her slightly, so that she was sitting more, leaning her side heavily into his shoulder and torso heavily. She looked down, saw one of her hands—grayish and patchworked ghoulishly in veins. Realization and understanding washed over her features. He could quite literally see her remembering everything that had happened during the possession as her face crumpled. One of her hands came up to half cover her face and her body shook with great, silent sobs.

Her eyes were screwed shut, he recognized that she was ashamed and he traced his fingers along the side of her head, pulled her closer so that her face was buried in the front shoulder of his trench coat. Castiel held her securely—unsure why her distress seemed to be his own, why seeing her so distraught was making him feel the same. He was living in fear that every breath she took would be her last, that she would die and he would be alone, without her. And seeing her crying so pitifully made him break inside even more. It would have been better if she hadn't remembered the possession, and he wished he could take the torment away from her somehow. He could feel one of her hands as it came to weakly grasp at the front of his shirt. He didn't know what to say or do, he was still in shock that his Alex, the spark of life itself, could be so dim, so close to being extinguished completely. He couldn't accept this, what had happened to her, but didn't know a way to change any of it. He leaned his head down, mournful, resting his forehead against the side of her head, felt her shaking as she wept. His face contorted painfully as he struggled to keep his composure. He stroked his thumb against her hair over and over again, fought with himself
internally, searched for the right thing to say, a way to make her tears stop.

"I'm so stupid," she managed weakly, through tears, her faint voice muffled. Her voice raised in pitch, became more unbalanced. "I thought I could save you. I thought I could save everyone, I'm so fucking stupid."

He felt insulted at what she'd said. "No, you're not," Cas told her and drew back, holding her steady in his arms. He didn't completely understand what had happened or why she'd believed she could do that, but he knew she wouldn't have done it without good reason, and he loved her and wished he could take this from her. She looked agonized, her pale face was shining with tears, some hairs were plastered against her cheeks. He swept them away without a thought, searching her eyes and blaming himself for her pain, for what had happened. If he hadn't been sleeping, maybe she wouldn't have run off and done what she had. Maybe he could have stopped it. "Listen to me," he implored her, barely able to keep his voice steady, "Lucifer would have found a way to get Sam to say yes. With you or without you." It was true. He wasn't lying for her benefit.

Her expression crumbled even further. "It's my fault," she insisted brokenly and shook her head just barely, seemingly unable to summon the strength for more. "I fucked up the whole world. If I hadn't done what I did, Sam might not have said yes," she looked Cas in the eye, mournful, terrified. "He can't fight Lucifer, he's too strong. Michael's as good as dead. And I did this.

She coughed weakly and blood trickled out of her nose. Cas saw it, felt a wave of fear crash over him. He wiped the blood away with his thumb, trying not to look as terrified as he felt. She caught hold of his wrist feebly and looked, saw the blood. Grew quiet, her eyebrows moving together just slightly. She looked up at him, and he saw that she was afraid, that she knew. He moved his hand to hold hers gently, and he was helpless to assist her in any way. He didn't want her to be afraid—he didn't want this to happen to her. He would give anything to change this. Anything. He tightened his hand on hers and she whispered his name softly, begging him for help that he couldn't give.

Cas bowed his head down toward hers, shut his eyes. He was lost. So lost.

"Cas." Dean's deep, quiet voice startled both of them. Dean was standing off by a few steps with his hands in his jacket pockets. He was looking at them with a pained, agonized expression. At the sight of him, Alex looked like she were dreading his reaction, steeling herself for his wrath. That's almost what Castiel expected too, and he stood up, easily holding Alex as he did. He was prepared to walk away if Dean began to assault her verbally.

But Dean didn't say anything. Didn't throw anything in her face, didn't lash out. Just looked at his sister with heartbreaking amounts of empathy and grief. "You okay, kiddo?" he asked her in the softest voice. She looked away, upset and Dean went closer, put a gentle hand on the back of her neck, appealing for her gaze. She wouldn't look at him, she had her head turned toward Cas's shoulder and her face was screwed up, was trying to keep from crying again.

"Everything's gonna be okay," Dean insisted in a whisper, his hand tightening on the back of her head. He didn't look away from her for a second. She looked at him finally through her emotional agony. "I'm gonna go talk to Sam," he said. "I found out where the chosen field is, where Michael and Lucifer are gonna fight. Chuck told me. It's right outside of Lawrence, at Stull Cemetery, about eight hours from here. Just enough time for me to get there by high noon tomorrow when the showdown starts. I'm gonna take care of all this, you hear me?" She looked at him in a mixture of shame and hope and he shook his head—he appeared as if he might begin to cry at any moment. "Sweetheart. I'm so sorry this happened to you," he told her in agonized tones. "I wish you would have told me."

She nodded, looked down, a fat tear leaking out and streaking down her cheek. "I should have. I'm
"sorry." The way she said it in a voice that was strained and high-pitched and cracked made Dean and Cas look at each other in mutual distress.

"Shh," Dean said, refocusing on his sister and keeping his voice calm and collected, assertive, confident. "I'm gonna figure this out, okay?" he said.

Cas hesitated. "Dean—are you sure about this? If you couldn't reach him here, how can you do so on the battlefield?"

Dean looked at him, shrugged hollowly. Cas saw the depth of Dean's hopelessness briefly, but Dean answered in a voice that indicated he didn't seem to care. "I mean, I got nothing to lose by trying, right?"

Cas said nothing, but Alex sniffed in Cas's arms, looked up at Dean. "I have to come with you, Dean," she said.

Cas frowned, looked down at her, immediately disliking this idea. She needed rest and care, to stay as far away from Lucifer as possible. "Alex, no. You shouldn't travel, you're—"

"Dying," she said, cutting him off quietly. "I know I am. I can feel it." Her expression wavered briefly. "So don't fight me on this. Please." Her voice grew a little more intense, more firm. "This is my fault. And I mean, as long as we're still alive, we have to try and stop Lucifer." She looked at Dean, who was looking at her with unabashedly tear-filled eyes. And as it always did, the sight of him crying made her waver even more. She pressed her lips inwards, trying to compose herself.

"One of our brothers is dying tomorrow," she said to him, her voice breaking, more tears running out of her eyes. "And whichever one it is... I don't think they should have to die alone. I need to be there with you."

Dean and Cas looked at each other again for a long, tense moment. They both knew Alex might not even make it through the night.

"Yeah," Dean agreed softly, nodding hollowly. He swallowed painfully. "Yeah, okay. We do this together. Just like always."

In the dark basement of an abandoned old dance school, Lucifer, in Sam's body, flexed his right arm, shoulder, then hand, pleased with the feeling of strength and belonging. He walked through the five waiting people, who stood with their eyes downcast, shoulders slumped. Lucifer paid them no mind. Not yet.

He was enjoying this feeling, this triumph. Finally—at last. The only disagreeable thing was how Sam was still so insistent upon not cooperating. He felt the boy inside, clawing at the walls. It was almost cute, really. Lucifer looked down at his hand, which clenched and unclenched without him telling it to. He smiled down at the hand almost fondly. "Sam..." he murmured. His hand stilled.

"Come on. I can feel you... scratching away in there." In front of him, a few steps off, there was a cracked old mirror on the wall. Lucifer studied his reflection, Sam's face. "Look... I'll take the gag off, okay?" Lucifer approached the mirror. "You got me all wrong, kiddo. I'm not the bad guy here. Talk to me."

Sam chest heaved up and down, he stared at himself in the mirror venomously. "I'm gonna rip you apart from the inside out!" He raged acidly. "Do you understand me?"

Lucifer didn't bat an eye at the threat. "Such anger... Young Skywalker." There was an almost haughty smile, then a concerned stare. "Who are you really angry with?" Lucifer asked. "Me? Or
that face in the mirror?"

Sam was near tears, helpless and trapped and wretched, struggling in vain against Lucifer's crushing presence and control. "I'm sure this is all a big joke to you, huh?" he asked, fighting so hard internally, but unable to budge at all. Lucifer was too strong. Much too strong. Just like he'd said.

"Not at all," Lucifer said earnestly. "I've been waiting for you... for a long... long time." Sam could feel Lucifer inside of his mind, attempting to coax him into submission, attempting to soothe him, settle him. Sam resisted all the more, mentally kicking and screaming. Lucifer looked into his reflection deeply. "Admit it—you can feel it too. Beyond this little temper tantrum you're having, you feel the exhilaration. And you know why that is? Because we're two halves made whole..." there was the ghost of a smile on Lucifer's face. "Reunited and it feels so good."

Sam withered, disgusted. "This feels pretty damn far from good," he spat.

Lucifer looked a little disappointed. "Stop trying to lie to me, Sam. You can't. I'm in your head. I can see it all—" his eyes flickered back and forth in thought, Sam could literally feel Lucifer paging through his mind and memories, intruding on everything that he thought and felt. "How odd you always felt, how... out of place in that... 'family' of yours." Lucifer smiled softly even as Sam remained silent, unable to deny how true those things were. "You always knew there was something about you, something different," Lucifer continued. "Maybe you called it dark, but... I call it special. And your sister? She was supposed to be the same way, too. Special."

Sam managed a sneer through his panic. "Well you lose that one, asshole."

Lucifer shrugged his lips downwards briefly, unfazed. "Mm, no. After we fight Michael, we'll go back in time. We'll drip the demon blood into precious baby sister's mouth ourselves, purify her, too. And together—the three of us—we'll begin the new world order."

What? Sam's stomach twisted, his pulse rocketed. Alarm overtook his every sense. "The three of us?" He repeated. Surely Lucifer were joking—this had to be some mistake. "What do you mean?"

Lucifer shrugged mildly, sighed. "Your father... was mistaken. Him warning your sister that the danger wasn't past? He meant this." A little smile grew on Sam's face as Lucifer controlled his body. "He didn't know it was me behind Azazel's every move. Me. Always me."

Sam swallowed, dread building up inside—the small relief that he'd saved Alex was fading, replaced by terror that he'd done something far worse, set something sinister into motion. "W-what are you talking about?"

Lucifer lowered his chin, looked into his eyes knowingly. "I think you might already know, Sam. Come on. Surely you remember... the dreams I had Azazel give to you? Only they weren't dreams. They were visions. Previews of what's to come."

Sam was speechless in horror and Lucifer seemed curious. "You thought my endgame was simply to defeat Michael? Oh no, Sam. You must think me unimaginative. Azazel was doing my work long before you were born. Preparing for this. He didn't even fully understand my plans and I didn't want him to. He wasn't my family like you are." Sam was repulsed and gripped by fright as Lucifer kept speaking. "You and I? We'll purge this world of all the filth it holds. Humans. Demons. My disloyal brethren. And we'll fill the earth with the new, perfect creation. Not flawed and defective like the humans, not low black-eyed demon vermin. A new race built on loyalty and love."

Sam stared, aghast. And then his stomach felt like it dropped out completely. "This is where your
sister comes in, Sam. I think I should show you more of what the future holds. All I ask is that you remember that greatness—true greatness—requires doing things we may not always find pleasant. Something tells me you won't like this very much. Hold on."

Without warning, Sam was suddenly plunged into a dark world of pain in his mind where he was disembodied and formless, seeing a dark swirling mist around him. He was confused and disoriented, unanchored. And then the mist parted, he could see, hazily, Alex. The image came into focus and he could see that behind her, a tall, imposing figure approached. Sam realized that was him, but… no. It couldn't be. His expression was so cruel and cold, he looked hellbent on wickedness. Sam tried to open his mouth and warn his sister, but it was like he didn't exist. He had no mouth, all he could do was watch.

The vision continued: Alex turned, saw Sam approaching her, and fear overcame her features—she whirled to run—but Sam stretched a hand out, she snapped backwards in the air toward him, colliding right up against him with her back into his chest. His strong arms held her there in place and it was distinctly inappropriate, the places his hands were—one hand was splayed against her hip, crushing her to him, one was on the front of her neck and half of her face, holding her tight against him. Sam felt himself recoiling internally at the sight, how his sister struggled away. "Sam, please, no! Stop!" She pleaded.

Sam saw himself lean down, his mouth right at her ear, his hands holding her still easily. "I'm not Sam," he breathed in a low, frightening voice. And with the greatest amount of terror he had ever experienced, ever, Sam understood what this meant. What was happening. Alex began to struggle even more, fight, and Lucifer just yanked her back to himself, whispered something in her ear, smoothed her hair back from her neck, leaned down to sensually brush his lips downward against the skin just below her ear.

Sick, revolted, scared beyond wits, Sam tried to escape this visual, tried to get away, tried to scream and help her, but nothing happened. And mercifully, the image faded away, he saw no more. But the terror remained. The mist returned, covering everything with darkness and then parted once more. Sam could hear Alex screaming and grunting with exertion, he saw that she was pregnant and in painful labor, on a dirty floor like an animal as Lucifer stood above her, looking down coldly, contumaciously. There were two black-eyed demon nurses at Alex's side, delivering the baby—no, babies. Two of them. And when the newborns were both out—silent and not crying as normal babies do—Alex collapsed backwards, forgotten for the moment, as the one of the nurses turned to Lucifer. "Twins, a boy and a girl, as you said." The nurse held one of the children in her arms. The babies both had glowing gray eyes—they were clearly not human.

Lucifer nodded approval as he looked over his son and daughter with a glint of cold pleasure in his eyes, then looked down at Alex, who was wracked in agony on the floor, covered in blood, appearing to be ill beyond compare and almost dead. Lucifer seemed almost sympathetic. "And so you have completed the task I asked of you. We both always knew this day would come, didn't we? You've always stood against me. I've given you chance after chance. I have no more chances left to give to you." His expression darkened. "If you're not with me… you're against me."

He held a hand out, flicked his fingers upwards and Alex shot up through the air, twisted and slammed up into the ceiling back-first. "I truly am sorry it had to be this way, Alexandra," Lucifer said softly, but his voice held no indication that he really was sorry.

She was crying, shaking her head, appealing to him with a cracked, barely-there voice. "Sam… please!" She begged, and blood dripped downward onto the floor below from her stomach. "I know you're in there, please, please… don't do this! Fight him!"
Lucifer looked at her and his eyes darkened, narrowed. "I'm not Sam." His jaw clenched, a smile ghosted across his lips. "And there's no one left to save you or him." His hand raised again, flames burst into existence all around her and she screamed as the ceiling became an ocean of fire. Lucifer in Sam's body lowered his hand. Watched in what appeared to be apathy or boredom as Alex burned on the ceiling, just like Mom had. Just like Jess had.

And the vision was over, but the effect it had on Sam would last for years—and in that moment, the shock, the horror, the absolute repulsion was so strong that Sam was suddenly in control again, just briefly—long enough to fall to all fours and vomit onto the basement floor, and all he could think was he had to kill himself. He had to kill himself. He scrambled to his feet, pitching around as if he were drunk, and with his fist he smashed the corner of the mirror, grabbed a jagged shard of glass and drew it back to stab himself in the chest, not thinking clearly, just wanting to die, just wanting to keep what he had seen from ever happening, and his hand flew toward his chest… then stopped. He opened his hand without even thinking, the shard fell out, down to the floor, and Sam felt himself laughing slowly. Deeply. Lucifer shook his head then frowned in faint fascination, wiped the corner of his mouth with the sleeve of Sam's jacket. "What an interesting taste," he commented mildly, spit, then sighed, looked into the nearly shattered mirror. The reflection was odd and jagged, disjuncted. "Sam, Sam, Sam. You can't kill yourself. I won't let you. Not now. Not ever. We'll be together for all eternity, you and I."

"That's my sister you sick bastard!" Sam cried out, and he was at the point of tears—in a thousand years he never would have guessed that would be the devil's plan. He would have killed himself years ago if he'd known this. Lucifer let him cry, but only for a moment. He looked at Sam almost sadly.

"Don't look so surprised. I am the devil, Sam… I'm bound to be a little sick and twisted, aren't I? At least from your perspective." He looked at Sam questioningly. "You and your family are direct descendants of Adam and Eve, the mother and father of this pathetic race. Didn't you know Eve was taken from Adam? They were basically twins, Sam, brother and sister: the same DNA, same bloodline… haven't you read the Bible? The first few books are nothing but incest. God got that much right. It keeps the bloodline pure." At Sam's expression, Lucifer blinked once, slowly. "I'm sorry. I know it's not ideal for you."

"Not ideal for me?" Sam repeated. He could barely breathe. "I won't let you do that to her! It's fucked up and it's not happening, ever! EVER!" His shouts did nothing, garnered no reaction at all."

"I'm sorry... but it is," Lucifer said plainly. The unaffected, unperturbed reply made Sam want to be sick again. He stared in breathless horror, shaking his head, so afraid.

"No, no, no no no!" Sam repeated over and over, reduced to nothing but quivering fear and abhorrence. Lucifer was slowly reeling him in, allowing less and less of Sam to come through—it was like slowly being choked, slowly fading into unconsciousness. Sam fought valiantly, but Lucifer just shrugged, as if helpless.

"Yes. It has to be this way Sam, has to be the same bloodline, has to be twins... like it or not. Has to be the two of you. We'll purify her with demon blood, she'll carry Nephilim twins… and then they'll become the true mother and father of my new race. Our new race. It's only once that we have to do what must be done with your sister." Sam wanted to die when Lucifer said that, panic racing through him because he already knew he couldn't resist Lucifer, couldn't control him at all. Satan was going to rape his sister using his body. Sam would have passed out, such was his distress, if Lucifer didn't have such full control.
"Sam, breathe. It'll be over fast, I promise. I understand that you find it unsavory. I'll do whatever I can do make it easier for you. Maybe we can even persuade her to take our side—perhaps she doesn't need to die in the end. But you should be prepared for that outcome, Sam. That's why I gave you those visions. I wanted you to know what your future held. I wanted you to know you'd lose her too. All the important women in your life have died that way, haven't they? She will too, unless she changes her mind and joins us. Joins me."

"No," Sam spat. "I will never let any of that happen! None of it!" He was having to fight with everything he had to even say anything at this point. His body was betraying him, he could barely even think anymore. _He had to get out! He had to find a way to stop this! To warn them!_

Lucifer looked at him quietly. "In time, you'll feel differently. When I'm king of Heaven, Hell, and everything in between with a new race of children at my feet… your feet… you'll see. You'll be happy Sam. This is how it's supposed to be."

"No," Sam insisted. He tried to shake his head but he couldn't. "I don't care what I have to do—I'll stop you!"

Lucifer sighed. He appeared chagrined almost, dissatisfied with Sam's reaction. "You know, all those times you ran away from your problems, your family... you were running towards me, Sam. _I'm_ the one who understands you. I'm the one you've been waiting for you your whole life. You're special. You matter. And this is how." He looked at Sam in a remorseful way. "I understand it may take you some time to come to accept me. But I'm patient. And I'm loyal… to myself most of all. Sam, you and I are one. At last."

Sam managed one last belted-out threat, felt the words tearing up his throat in a deafening roar and he tried to move his hands toward himself, tried to hurt himself somehow. "I am going to kill you!"

Lucifer was growing impatient, almost rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry Sam, but I've grown tired of this little quarrel. I think it's time we stop arguing. Start doing something… productive. Something _together._" He made Sam look behind them, using the mirror. "Look closely at who I've gathered here. Any of these little devils look familiar to you?"

Sam looked, realized that yes, he recognized every single one. Lucifer explained for him. "That's Mr. Bensman... one of your old grade-school teachers. And that's your friend Doug from that time in East Lansing. And Rachel... your prom date. Sam Winchester, this is your life. Azazel's gang—watching you and yours since you were a rugrat, jerking you around like a dog on a leash. I know how you feel about them. So, what do you say you and I blow off a little steam? Come on… it'll make us feel better." Lucifer's pleasant smile sickened Sam. He was losing ground, he could barely manage to say the single word he got out.

"No—" Sam protested, then felt as if a fist closed over him internally. Lucifer was stamping him down easily, like a bug underneath the heel of his boot. And Sam despaired completely.

Lucifer's eyes darkened, his fist clenched. "Yes." Lucifer turned around to face the demons circled in the room behind himself, his shoulders pulled back, standing at Sam's full height.

The slaughter began, and Sam, screaming inside silently, was unable to do anything.
Dust to Dust

"Love of mine, someday you will die, but I'll be close behind... if there's no one beside you when your soul embarks, I will follow you into the dark."
- Deathcab for Cutie

In the very back of Bobby's van, Cas sat on the floor, his back leaned against the vehicle wall. He held Alex in his arms, she was curled up against him and her head rested against the front of his shoulder. Asleep, her breathing was shallow and uneven. She was heavy in his arms in a way that Cas couldn't quite describe—she wasn't physically heavy. It was the reality of why he was holding her. That's what was heavy.

The day before yesterday, the two of them had sat on the top of a picnic table in the early afternoon, their feet resting on the bench where you were supposed to sit. Birds had been exchanging songs in the tree branches above them, a few families with young children played on the playground nearby. Cas had been aware as they sat there with her that he was part of a real, normal moment of Alex's life—and of his life now, too. His life now, too. The day before yesterday, he'd been truly struck by the realization that they were going to share a life together here on earth. But that future had been shattered.

Today... she was in his arms, wilted like a dying flower.

The day before yesterday, they'd shared turkey sandwiches from a convenience store as they sat on the table instead of at it. As they had done so, Cas had fondly recalled seeing Alex during the year he'd watched over her—he'd been without a vessel and so perplexed and intrigued at how she always sat off alone on things that weren't meant to serve as seats: tables, speed bumps, fences, countertops, car hoods, curbs, sidewalk ledges, tree stumps (anything but an actual chair). So that's why in present day, he thought perhaps most people would have glanced their way and seen nothing but two people sitting on a graffitied picnic table, but to Cas, being part of her life even in the mundane and the ordinary was beyond meaningful. In that moment he'd felt that even though all of this was new and foreign to him—food, sleep, pain, fatigue, powerlessness—he could belong here in this world if she were beside him.

In between their feet, a plastic grocery store bag full of candy had rested. Because "everyone in the world has a favorite candy," she told him after the sandwiches were gone and she pulled the bag up into her lap. His face had twisted up into a questioning, slightly worried look—he had never eaten candy, how was he supposed to have a favorite? At his expression, Alex had given him one of those smiles that told him everything was all right. She had picked up several crinkling, bright packets, caught his gaze with hers, seeming to be endeared to the idea of watching him try candy. "We just have to figure out yours." She had smiled so much that day, her eyes wrinkling up at the edges in beautiful little crinkles. Even when she stopped smiling, little lines stayed, evidence of how happy she'd been. It had made him smile, too.

Today... Cas knew that he might not ever see her smile like that ever again.

The day before yesterday she'd caught a lizard that had scampered across her foot, and she had laughed, looking at the little creature as it wiggled to get out of her gentle grip. She said that she was going to name him Alfonso and Cas hadn't been sure why, but he had smiled when she said that. She did things like that often—things that were unexpected and seemingly purposeless, things that he didn't understand but liked simply because she was the one who did them.


*Today*... he knew that her days were numbered, that this might be the last day she lived and breathed, that the things she did and the light she brought into the world would abruptly cease and leave a perceptible void. The worst part of it all was that he could do nothing to change or sidestep what was coming. More heaviness settled over him; Castiel felt that he would be crushed beneath the weight of it. The day before yesterday he had told her he would go with her wherever she went, that he would stay with her the rest of his now-mortal life. Now he was faced with unimaginable torment because Alex was dying. Castiel felt as if he were dying with her.

When he thought about how he would be left behind to go on living this life as a stranger in a strange land without her... he didn't want to remain. How could he live here knowing she was either in Heaven in total darkness or in Hell being tormented forevermore? How could he face even a single day knowing how she had perished, how he had stood by and watched it happen? She was his friend. His *best* friend. No. She was more than that, so much more, but Cas couldn't put it into words even in the space of his mind. He didn't know a way to accurately describe what she meant to him, what she was. All terms and endearments fell short, no words in any language felt big enough to say who she had become to him. All that he knew was that when she was gone, when he lost her, that he would be lost, too.

He studied her sleeping face morosely, ran his fingers over the side of her cheek. The skin was cold to the touch and the sensation sent grief racing through his body. She was barely alive. He let his hand rest against the side of her head, and everything inside of him was wrecked as the love he felt for her ached through him, tore him apart because *he would do anything to save her from this*. Her color was ashen, the strange obscene blue veins making a profane patchwork of hairline cracks across her skin everywhere. She was demolished and tarnished, and he was helpless to save her or help her in any way. He hadn't known true despair until now, until this. Even now he still thought she was the most beautiful sight he had ever beheld.

*He had to find a way to save her.* But with every minute that passed, he knew with further appalling certainty that he had no options remaining. He wracked his mind incessantly trying to find a way to save her. He had no soul to sell, but if he did have one, he would trade it in an instant to see her live past this. He had no allies in Heaven to call upon for help—he would be killed the instant he attempted it. No doctor could reverse the damage Lucifer had done to Alex simply by possessing her. It was over, and he knew it.

But he didn't understand. The day before yesterday, she'd been *strong* and *alive* and laughing and *his* and now...? Now she was fading away, slipping out of his grasp, and there was no way of holding onto her. He was losing the one he loved, losing her to the darkness *forever*.

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Dean stared nearly unseeingly through the windshield of the Impala as he sped down a dark, mostly-deserted highway, heading west. The radio was off and the car was silent. He gripped the steering wheel with one hand, ground his teeth mindlessly, glancing into the rearview every few minutes to see Bobby's headlights behind him.

Lawrence, Kansas. The minute Chuck had said that's where the "appointed battleground" for Michael and Lucifer's final showdown would be, Dean had felt an even larger sense of dread. It seemed poetic, that it would end where it began—the town he and his siblings had been born in. He didn't use to believe in destiny but you know what, maybe he should. Even though Dean was trying to convince himself that there was still a chance to change everything that was going wrong right now... he really didn't think there was. He'd messed up big this time, run himself out of options, and was finally, *finally* at the dead end of the road. If he was being a hundred percent honest with himself, he could feel it. That this was the end. It was already over. And there was nowhere else to go, nothing else left to do but to go down swinging.
Take care of your brother and sister. Keep them safe, make sure they're okay.

Dad's words were seared into his mind and staggering guilt came with them. Family first. Family first. Family first. That's what Dad drilled into all of them... and with it had come the bitterness at how hypocritical his words had been. We have to take care of each other, he'd say... then disappear for days at a time, leaving Dean to be the caregiver to Sam and Alex, leaving Dean to wonder if Dad would even be back this time at all. John Winchester had put too much on all of his kids. But especially on Dean.

And without meaning to, for no reason, Dean abruptly remembered the first time Alex had walked —cute little wispy-haired baby Alex, maybe about to turn a year old. She'd pulled herself up to stand by using the leg of a chair, then taken two great lurching steps toward him on little fat toddler legs, little Sam army-drag crawling after her, drooling all over the motel room carpet and crooning happily. Dean had whooped as Alex, two little baby teeth in that gummy smile, wobbled toward him. Her mouth had been open in a silent, delighted laugh, she had clearly been amazed at herself, at this thing she had just discovered how to do. Alex is walking Daddy, she's walking! Dean had exclaimed, gleeful and amazed and five years old. He'd hurried forward and caught his little sister as she toppled forward unsteadily after she tried to take a third step. John had glanced up from his journal. That's great, Dean. He'd smiled a little, tiredly, then looked away. Sam had sputtered happily, making pbbt-pbbt noises with his mouth, unaware of how disappointed Dean was that Dad didn't seem to share his rapture at what had just happened.

Even then, at five years old, Dean had known something was wrong with his dad and the way their family worked. Even at that age he'd understood, somewhere deep down, that his brother and sister needed protection and love that their dad didn't seem to know how or want to give. Dean had missed Mom so much, cried at night when he thought of how she had been taken away, how she was never coming back. He'd clung to his brother and sister even tighter, afraid they would get taken, too.

It was unhealthy, the way he treated his siblings throughout their childhood and adulthood, tried to parent them one minute then depended on them for his sense of self-worth the next. For years Dean had felt like the way he'd been there for the twins and raised them was the one thing he'd done well... but he didn't think so anymore. Hindsight was twenty-twenty and Dean wished he could have seen then what he saw now. How bad he'd messed up—how so much of what was happening right now was his fault.

If he hadn't been so domineering and black-and-white, quick to shoot Sam down without a second thought, maybe Sam would have told him about Ruby and the demon blood sooner, would have come to him for help instead of trying to work through his addiction on his own. If Dean could have been more approachable, more willing to accept Sam despite his problems, maybe they would be closer, maybe Sam would have trusted Dean with his secrets.

And Alex. Dean knew he was a total fucking idiot for how he'd driven a wedge between himself and his sister. They'd been so close their whole life that he'd assumed nothing could change that. Well, apparently an angel wearing a trench coat could—or at least Dean's reaction to said angel's interest in his sister. Dean knew he'd done a lot wrong where that whole thing was concerned, that he'd acted like he owned Alex almost. He'd insisted on treating his sister like she was still a kid, he'd insisted on trying to control her life to his standards just like Dad had done with all of them. It hadn't worked—it had just left Alex embittered and unable to trust him. Maybe, if Dean hadn't alienated her so much recently, she would have told him about her idea to kill Lucifer. It was true what Satan had said to him... that in his hellbent quest to protect his sister, he'd done the opposite and made sure she would get hurt. His fault. This was his fault.
It was infuriating for Dean to look back and see how all of their individual flaws had ensured this outcome: Sam, the vessel, Alex a pawn, Dean the one left to try and fix it all but powerless to do so and afraid to do anything, because what if he was just being manipulated again? It was terrifying how every step of the way they had been blindly playing right into the devil's hand. The kicker was how they always thought they were doing the right thing: Sam thought killing Lilith would stop Lucifer from rising, Alex thought she could kill Lucifer because of the lies he'd had planted for her to believe. Dean had set it all into motion by telling Sam he was okay with him saying yes to Lucifer and trying to use the horsemen's rings to throw the devil back into the cage. And that action had in turn prompted Alex to run off, thinking she was saving Sam and giving Michael an instant win. God. What a mess.

*Take care of your brother and sister. Keep them safe, make sure they're okay.*

Dean swallowed a painful lump in his throat, propped his elbow against the window ledge and leaned his head into his hand, rubbing the side of his forehead with painful force. He wanted to destroy something, throw something. His mom and dad were dead. His sister was dying and his brother was possessed by the devil.

*Take care of your brother and sister. Keep them safe, make sure they're okay.*

How *could* he? Their fates were all but sealed, and he'd tried and tried and tried, *God help him* he'd tried… but look what had happened. Dean couldn't take care of them any more, even though that's all he'd ever tried to do. Abruptly, Dean slammed his hand up against the steering wheel, let loose a wretched sobbing sound as the helpless, frustrated, scared tears came. He was unable to hold his grief inside any longer; his heart was broken completely. Dad's words wouldn't stop repeating over and over in his mind and Dean hated himself completely for all of the things he'd done and not done, said and not said.

*Take care of your brother and sister. Keep them safe, make sure they're okay.*

He clenched his hands on the wheel, steeling himself, forcing his emotions to shut up. Dean was going to try. One last time. To do what he was supposed to do: take care of them, keep them safe, make sure they were okay. He knew he was probably going to die in the process, but he accepted it. He just wanted it to be over, for the misery to end. He knew that he'd summon all the inner strength he had when the moment was right, when he was facing Sam once again, but right now he just wanted to die, to be free of this torment and insurmountable responsibility. He hadn't asked for this, he hadn't asked for any of it. He wanted to know why it had to be this way, why the people he loved the most in the world had all paid an impossible price and why he was left untouched, living and breathing just fine. He had dodged the bullet and he hated that fact with his entire being.

Hate it or not, it was what fate had dealt him. So Dean was going to do what he could to make it right and try *one last time*, despite the impossible odds. He refused that Sam should have to do this alone, and he would *try*, goddammit he would *try* one last fucking time. And if he couldn't help Sam throw the devil off his back, Dean would die where he belonged—with his family, with his brother and sister. That was his only consolation. That if all three of them were going to die anyway, at least they would be together.

He blinked away tears, unable to believe how it had so suddenly come to this.

*At least they would be together.*

She was so, so cold, and it burned her down to the bone. Alone in darkness and scared of something but unsure *what*, Alex suddenly jolted awake, breathless, her heart racing at a dizzying
speed. She gasped loudly, gulping for air, as if she'd been drowning. Disoriented, she grabbed for something to hold onto, realized she was being held, and that what she reached for was the familiar material of Castiel's trench coat.

"Alex?" he asked, and she looked up at him with wide eyes, trying to catch her breath. Everything inside of her hurt and she felt weak, drained, lifeless. So, so tired and cold, so cold. Her stomach was wretched, her heart fluttered too fast to be normal, and with every beat of her pulse, pain pounded through her veins. "Are you all right?" he asked. She could hear how worried he was and she looked away. She was so ashamed of herself and felt the gentle way his hand cradled the back of her head. She struggled not to cry.

She was unable to look at him at all, feeling like she didn't deserve his concern. She wanted to be sick, her head was spinning oddly, and she couldn't stop thinking about how cold she was. "It's so cold," she mumbled, and he held her a little closer to himself, his familiar solid warmth comforting and distressing all at once. She shivered, unable to get warm, feeling like winter had settled down into her bones. That's how she had felt with Lucifer inside, his icy fire permeating and overtaking every cell of her body, killing her slowly. Even when Sam had pulled Lucifer out of her and taken him in her stead, the chill had remained.

Alex buried her face so that Castiel couldn't see her expression, because she was having trouble staying calm, staying composed. She'd been tricked, she'd been used, and now Sam was going through the same thing she had gone through, he was being consumed by sharp cold needles of everlasting pain. And she blamed herself for not telling her brothers what she planned to do, she blamed herself for not trying harder to find a way to convince Sam not to say yes. She blamed herself. The shame was unbearable, the knowledge of what she'd done was horrifying. She had thought it was the right thing, and she had been completely wrong, played like a fiddle. Devastated wasn't even close to how she felt. She wished her brothers had left Lucifer there in her, called Michael down to that dank old Detroit apartment, had let her die and Lucifer with her. Then the world would be safe today, the three men she loved most in the world would be saved and alive. But Lucifer had known that her brothers would never let her die like that. He had known their weakness was each other, but especially her. Alex blamed herself for meaning what she meant to her brothers, even though she knew that was a stupid thing to blame herself for.

Sam. Oh god, Sam… Alex's heart hurt viscerally at the thought of her brother out there somewhere, going through what she had gone through. Being possessed by satan had been a lot like being strapped down hands, neck, and feet, gagged and drugged. She could see what was happening but hadn't been able to speak or move or affect the situation at all. She'd been held down and suppressed within herself and it had been terrifying. Completely terrifying. All she could think about was how her twin was in there now, screaming like she had been, begging for a way out. Her stomach churned and alarm screamed along her veins in a frenzy. They had to save him or they had to die trying. There were no other options.

She shook with the sudden onset of tears, tried even harder to turn her face away from Cas, to still her body's giveaway quakes. But Cas knew and she heard him let out a grave, soft little breath as he maybe searched for words. "None of this is your fault, Alex," he said softly in that deep, rumbling voice she loved so much. She shook even harder with silent sobs because he was trying to comfort her and make her feel better. But it was her fault. She was so stupid. She'd been duped and she was going to fucking murder Crowley—she didn't care if he knew it was all lies or not. She needed someone to blame. Becoming angry, she tried to sit up, but floundered weakly and miserably, Cas had to help her sit up better and she became even more miserable, realizing how debilitated she was.

"It is my fault," she managed to get out, her tone sharp with animosity, mostly directed at herself.
Even her voice was weak and sickly, lacking its normal steady timbre. "For believing that I mattered in this whole thing. For being stupid and not telling anyone. For thinking I could save the world." She said the last sentence with great amounts of wounded sarcasm, because it hurt to fail, it hurt to be tricked, it hurt because she had thought for once she mattered. And she hadn't. She'd just been a pawn, and she hated herself for being so weak, for what she had caused to happen.

"You were tricked," Cas appealed, seeming to sense her self-loathing emotions. "Don't be ashamed. How could you have known?" Cas's voice and tone were both heartbroken and Alex felt so mortified, so foolish. She couldn't look at him without wanting to break down completely.

"I'm supposed to be smarter than this," she said brokenly, wishing so badly she could take back yesterday, wishing so badly she knew how Cas could still look at her so tenderly and caringly after she made such a fatal error, how could he still look at her like he loved her when she knew she looked like a monster.

It didn't seem to matter. Cas was as gentle and loving as ever, touching the side of her head, searching her eyes. She couldn't help herself at that point. "Cas," she sobbed, crumbling at his touch, at the look in his eyes. She leaned her forehead in, nestled into him pathetically, feeling stupid and naive and vulnerable to a point that she hated. But as much as she loathed herself in that moment, she couldn't self-protect and turn away from him, not now. She needed him so much, maybe more than she ever had. She clung to him for comfort as she realized that she was already mourning his loss... because she knew she was dying and she was afraid for what would happen to him when she was gone, what would happen to her.

She had a thousand things she wanted to say to him, and she despared because there wasn't enough time left—they hadn't had enough hours together, they had barely scratched the surface of what she wanted to be to him. The helpless romantic in her had imagined a life with him, she had dreamed of waking up with him every day and just being together for the rest of their lives. But her dreams were dashed on the rocks, broken apart completely. Everything inside of her opposed the thought of this ending, but she knew it was, which only upset her more. She clutched his trench coat tighter in her hand. "I wanted more time with you," she confessed raspingly, and felt his arms tightening around her, felt his scruffy cheek against her clammy forehead. "I... I didn't think the rest of our lives meant a couple more days." She shivered and shook with quiet choked tears, wondering when she had become so fallible and vulnerable, so afraid, so pitiful. She tried to stop herself from crying, sniffed.

Her throat felt like it was closing up on her and she tightened her grip on his coat again, because she was so afraid. "I'm scared to die," she choked out in a whisper, letting her most terrifying feeling out into the open, blinking back more tears at the thought of being alone in the darkness up there forever without him, without anyone. She felt very small and helpless, her voice distorted and warbled with withheld tears. "I don't wanna go."

Cas drew back purposefully, sought her gaze, and she could see him as passing lights flickered weakly over his face. He had a hand against her face, his thumb at her jawline and he looked deadly serious as his eyes held her gaze. "You won't be alone," he told her with an earnest, fervent resolve that she hadn't expected. "I'll find you. Somehow, no matter what, I'll find you."

Her heart clenched and softened, burst all at once at his declaration, she wondered how she hadn't loved him how she did now from the first time she saw him—she couldn't find the end of how grateful, awed, and confounded the way he loved her made her feel, but at the same time, it confused her. She shook her head slowly, trying to figure him out but coming away empty-handed and unsure. "I... I don't understand why you love me Cas," she said quietly, both humbled by his affections and feeling entirely undeserving, unsure as ever what he saw in her, why he would
choose to love her and pursue her into the unknown, find her in the afterlife.

Her statement seemed to momentarily catch him off guard—at first because, from the look on his face, he seemed to think why would it be any other way? But then he thought a minute, his eyes dropping away in thought. "I've also tried to understand it," he said slowly, and his eyebrows pressed in together. "But it's too vast." His eyes met hers, he seemed poignant in that moment without meaning to be. "Perhaps it doesn't need to be understood," he suggested, and his voice softened, and his eyes flickered between hers slowly. "I feel it all the same."

Her heart broke because she knew how much he did love her—he had proven it over and over and promised himself to her for the rest of their lives—but even thought she knew that, simultaneously she thought of how he deserved something else, something better than her: a happy story, a long life and joy every day, not this horrific tragedy, not this abrupt tragic ending. She saw the pain and loss and heartbreak in his eyes and knew that she had caused that. She dismayed for him, wished she hadn't done this to him. She hadn't meant to hurt him like this, devastate him like this. But despite her misgivings and inner lamentations, her heart echoed his sentiments: what she felt for him was too vast for her to understand, and she knew that whether or not she understood it, she still felt it. Her heart would never be able to forget him, this angel who had walked the earth and sought her out and given himself to her in every way possible.

He was mortal now, all because of her. He would die too, if not today then some other day. And Alex was consumed with sorrow as she thought of him alone, without her, up against this harsh world all by himself. She held onto him as tightly as she could and buried her face in him, beyond grieved, wishing that they could have both stayed in the day before yesterday, just existed there forever—that day had been theirs and theirs alone. It was the day that they maybe did something crazy by acting like they had forever to promise each other… maybe that was them trying to fight the oncoming monsoon. No matter why they did it, they had. And that day would forever remain in Alex's mind. It was the day that he decided sour gummy worms were his favorite candy. The day that they had sat beside each other and it had felt right, her shoulder brushing his as they shared crappy turkey sandwiches. The day when they'd been happy just being with each other. The day when he had held her close and taken her breath away over and over, then held her in his strong arms as they'd slept, side by side, all night long.

But that day was lost into the void and they could never have it back. Today promised the demise of it all, the demise of them.

Lawrence, Kansas

It was just half an hour before noon, and they had barely made it to Lawrence in time. Chuck had said noon was when the archangels would fight, and the hour was fast approaching. Dean was antsy and nerve-wracked as he turned onto Stull Road and slowed down. The cemetery was about a mile down the road, and Dean pulled over into an overgrown parking lot adjacent to a gas station that was had been demolished years ago. Only the sign remained, hanging sideways and cracked in two. Bobby's van pulled in behind him, parked a couple car lengths away and Dean shut off the Impala, grabbed his keys out of the ignition and sat there, deliberating.

The silence rang in his ears and he wrestled with himself for a second, then spread his hands powerlessly, looked up, let his hands fall down onto the tops of his thighs. "Okay, look..." he said out loud and paused. This was stupid. He wet his lips, unable to believe how desperate he had become to do this. "I don't even know if you're out there or listening or if you even care but..." he trailed off and rolled his eyes at himself, huffed, became exasperated and sullen at the same time. His tone darkened and he looked down. "Ah, forget it," he muttered. "I already know you don't
care." Dean got out of the car and shut the door behind himself.

Bobby was walking around to the side of the van that Dean couldn't see and Cas was approaching Dean—and not wearing his trench coat. With his hands in his jacket pockets, Dean met him at the end of the Impala. Cas appeared to be morose and distracted, apprehensive and terse. Four things that Dean realized didn't even used to be in Cas's emotional vocabulary a year or so ago. Interesting, but what Dean really wanted to know was what happened to the angel's signature wardrobe piece. He looked odd in just his suit. "Where's your coat?" he asked.

"Alex was cold," Cas said somberly, and Dean softened measurably at the answer and what it meant. That Cas had been looking out for his sick, dying baby sister.

"H-how's she doing?" he asked, almost afraid of the answer.

Cas just shook his head and looked downward. Dean's heart sank. "She's weak, in pain..." the other man's expression distorted visibly, his voice weakened with sorrow. "She doesn't have long Dean."

His heart spasmed painfully at those words. Dean had to shut his eyes and grit his teeth to keep himself together. He'd known she was dying the minute he'd seen Lucifer in her, but he couldn't bring himself to accept it. It hurt too much. Dean sighed heavily, sorrowful, and turned to put his back to the Impala. He leaning against it as he looked down and scrubbed his chin and lower jaw with the palm of his hand. He felt agonized. He didn't want her in harm's way, but he couldn't deny her this last request, could he? If she was going to die anyway... god. Not her. She wasn't supposed to, not before he did. "I really don't wanna take her in there, Cas," he confessed softly, staring out into middle distance with a rigid expression. "Goes against every instinct I got."

Cas mimicked his body position and stood beside him, leaned against the Impala too. His eyes traveled the far distance and he seemed guarded and disturbed, seemed to share Dean's sentiments. "I don't want her to, either," Cas said. "But it's what she wants." He looked down, seeming to be reluctant but resigned. Dean looked at him sidelong, unsure how to react to Cas's input. He'd swallowed some major pride in letting his sister ride with Cas and Bobby the way here. He'd always wanted to be the one who would take care of her and it was hard to see someone else, someone relatively new in their lives do that. That, and he hadn't had the heart to take Alex out of Cas's arms. She'd been huddled into him and holding onto Cas by the shirt, and he could see that she hadn't wanted to let go. So he hadn't said a word. Just told them "follow me," and gotten into the Impala.

Cas looked back up momentarily, glanced at Dean's profile, seeming to be concerned. "We don't have much time until the archangels will meet. What is your plan for all of this?"

Dean shrugged shallowly and avoided looking Cas in the eye, uncomfortable because there really was no plan. "Try and talk to Sam."

Cas looked away, brow furrowing deeply. "I doubt that will work."

Dean half rolled his eyes, a knee-jerk reaction to the increasing hopelessness he felt. "Well thanks for the vote of confidence, Cas."

"However, at this point, any effort is better than none. The archangels will be angry to be disturbed," Cas said thoughtfully, ignoring Dean's sarcasm. "It would be better, easier, if you could perhaps speak with Lucifer and Sam alone, without Michael being there." Cas went silent, said nothing else and Dean looked at him, waiting for more, allowing himself to become mildly hopeful at the ex-angel's input.
When Cas remained quiet, Dean prompted him. "Any ideas on how to make that happen?"

"Yes, actually." Cas looked at him again, intent. "Do you still have the holy oil I had given to you?"

Dean frowned in thought. "Yeah, in the trunk. But it's not much, not enough to make a very good circle."

There was the faintest little sly smile on Cas's face, and it reached his eyes. "I wasn't thinking about a circle."

Dean was intrigued. "What were you thinking?"

"An improvised incendiary weapon. Uh, I think you call them fire bombs."

Dean held up a hand, realizing what Cas was suggesting. He hadn't even thought of that. "Wait, wait... a Molotov cocktail? Made with holy fire?" Dean was surprised and impressed at the idea, then frowning questioningly. "Would that work?"

"It would give you five, maybe ten minutes," Cas answered. He was somber again, probably thinking about the magnitude of what they were talking about doing.

"Hey, it's something," Dean said, feeling a little better than he had a minute ago. Not great, but a little better. He looked sidelong at the angel who had proven himself over and over despite the way Dean had treated him. Softening and feeling like now was the time to say everything he needed to say, Dean lifted his hand, clapped Cas awkwardly on the shoulder. Cas looked at him strangely.

"Thanks Cas," Dean said a little awkwardly, deciding not to let any of his misgivings or grudges or judgement get in the way right now. "For everything."

Cas didn't react how Dean thought he would. Instead of looking pleased and accepting of the compliment, Cas's expression darkened and he looked displeased. He looked down toward the ground. "It's... not enough, what I've done for your family," he answered gruffly. "I don't deserve your gratitude."

Dean recognized that self-loathing, guilty tone in Cas's voice and gave Cas a look. "Come on man, don't do that. I don't think we really had a shot in hell from the get-go. But you still tried, you know? You did what you could. And I can appreciate that." Cas looked up at Dean sidelong, and pain flickered across his face, stayed there in his eyes. Dean was slightly taken aback at the intensity of it. "What?" he asked.

Cas's expression only grew more and more agonized. "I comprehend the fact that all people die, Dean. But I..." he trailed off, and revealingly, he looked toward toward the van, where Dean knew Alex was. "For the first time in my existence I can't understand why it has to be that way." He bowed his head down and Dean felt and saw how much Cas meant what he'd just said, how much he wanted to understand, how not okay he was with Alex dying.

Dean didn't know what to tell him, because it set off feelings of helplessness and despair in him all over again. He stared off at the space in front of him, deep in thought for a long moment. When he finally spoke, it was soft and low. "All my life I been watching people I love die. I'll never understand why, Cas. Understand it or not, it happens. Over, and over and over. To everyone ever."

His mouth wobbled a little and he moved his jaw oddly, glanced toward the van. "Even her." He cleared his throat, felt Cas looking at him. "And now you too," Dean observed, realizing that he had no idea what was going to happen to Cas in all of this. He frowned a little, set Cas with a questioning look. "What'll happen to you when you die, Cas?"
Cas shook his head once, answered simply, off in his troubled thoughts, his eyes scanning far distance. "That remains a mystery." He turned his head and looked toward the van again, and Dean watched him a minute, consumed with the irony and guilt of this whole thing. He didn't really know what was going on between Cas and Alex, he didn't understand how robotic, awkward, stilted Cas could enrapture his sister so much. But it was clear the dude cared about her immensely, and Dean felt bad. All this time he had been a man on a mission to get Cas away from his sister, using the excuse that he was saving her and protecting her. But it had been an excuse, and a shaky one he realized now. He shook his head faintly.

"You know, all the times I ripped you a new one cuz I was worried that you'd be the one to get her killed." Dean was unable to smile even humorlessly. "And in the end it was me." Dean looked down, unable to bear the burden of that truth. "In the end it was me."

The men looked to their side as the sound of heavy footsteps approached. It was Bobby. The older hunter looked ragged and worn out, and Dean knew he was probably just as downtrodden as the rest of them were. "You two yahoos busy shootin' the breeze or we gonna figure out a game plan for this whole thing?" he asked, and folded his arms across himself.

Dean cleared his throat, stood up. "Yes sir. Time to make us a holy fire cocktail."

"A what?" Bobby asked.

Dean managed a smirk. "You'll see." He rounded the back of his car and cracked the trunk open.

Alex sat in the open van doorway, legs hanging over the edge. Cas's coat was draped across her shoulders and it swallowed her completely. Didn't do much to warm her, but she still hugged it around herself. She leaned her shoulder into the side of the door, almost too tired to even sit up. Cas had insisted she take one of his Lortabs for her pain a few hours ago when she'd woken up, and even though it made the pain a little better, she felt even more tired and sluggish than before. Her body was protesting every little thing she did, and Alex was beginning to feel more and more ready to be done, to close her eyes and let the hurt wasn't much left in her reserves of energy and life, but she hung on. Mostly for Sam's sake. But when she consciously thought about how she wanted it to be over, a deep instinct inside reared its head, filled her with fear to die, sending her heart rate to double in speed as she felt sickening fright settled over her.

She could see one side of the Impala from where she sat—the passenger side. Vaguely, she could hear Dean's voice, Cas's voice, Bobby too. When the three of them all went to the trunk and opened it, she looked up, finally able to see them now. She caught Cas's gaze. Dean turned and looked at her too, and both of their expressions were tense and worried. Cas said something to Dean and then approached Alex. He looked so different in just the suit—handsome as ever, but different, not quite himself. Still, seeing that he was coming to her immediately soothed her a little, and her heightened breaths slowed.

He reached her, stood in front of her and then knelt down in front of her onto one knee so that they were eye level—his hands founds hers and the fingers intertwined loosely and their hands rested together in her lap. The gesture, the warmth of his hands in hers was so tender, so soothing. He studied their hands for a long moment, thinking, and he was frowning deeply in quiet distress. Alex had to focus on breathing steadily not to become overcome by emotion, not to throw her arms around his neck and beg him to find a way to change this terrible ending, find a way for them to stay together, if not forever, just a little longer, please. As the end came closer and closer, as she got more and more tired, she was beginning to panic. It wasn't fair that it was over. It wasn't right. Everything inside of her protested and despaired. It shouldn't end like this.
Cas finally looked up at her, and the sadness on his face was great. "You're sure about this?" he asked her gently.

She could barely meet that sad gaze of his, she could barely breathe, so she looked down. As much as she also wanted to be selfish and just go be with Cas somewhere quiet until her body gave out for good, she couldn't. Not when her brothers, all three of them but especially Sam, needed her. She almost choked on the lump in her throat as she answered. "Yes. I'm sure." She looked back up into his eyes, regretful and torn.

His face showed conflict, his eyes briefly lowered, staring unseeingly into her collarbone before he looked back up at her pleadingly. "Let me come with you," he asked softly, emphatically. "I know Bobby and I are supposed to follow behind... but..." he trailed off, his face wavered. Alex noticed how his face moved so differently than it used to, utilized broad ranges of emotion that it hadn't when she'd first known him. Right now, he looked like he was begging her. "I don't want to be away from you," he said. "Not now." His hands tightened slightly on hers and at his pleading tone, her chest tightened.

Alex didn't want to be away from him either. She had no idea what Dean was planning, but she guessed she and her brother would drive in and Bobby and Cas were going to follow or flank them. She didn't know how to answer him or what to say. "I'll be okay," is all she could muster, and she tried to smile softly at him through her pain, through the knowledge that soon they would be away from each other forever. But the smile probably just looked like a pained expression.

Swallowing what felt like a rock there in the bottom of her throat, she touched his face gently, searched his eyes, struck by reminiscence, by awe at how much she loved Castiel, how he'd taken her life by storm and changed her forever—softened her heart, cut through her like a knife without even meaning to. A real, unforced little smile that was tinged with wavering emotion spread across her face as she thought of how far the two of them had come, of how fiercely she loved him. She shook her head faintly, remembering the moment that seemed like it had taken place a lifetime ago. "I remember the first time I saw you, Cas..." she gave the ghost of a laugh, a little soft huff of air. "I was shooting at you... not very polite of me." Her smile faded a little as she thought about it. What if those bullets had worked? What if she had killed the one she was supposed to love? She grew quiet and introspective, her eyes flickered up to his. What if they had missed this completely somehow? What if someone else had been assigned as her guardian? Would they have known that something—someone—was missing in their lives?

As Alex gazed into those familiar and brilliant cobalt eyes, she could hardly fathom how things had changed. She wondered how she hadn't known right away, somehow, who he would become to her. When he'd first appeared from behind that old wooden door as sparks showered down over him, she'd had no clue how much he would matter to her, but it seemed like she should have. She shook her head faintly, eyebrows pushing together slightly, because she was so perplexed. "I was so afraid of you at first." She struggled to stay composed. "And now..." she trailed off, almost overcome completely by thoughts of him and their most precious, secret, intimate moments, but at the forefront, yesterday. Waking up in each other's arms, neither of them knowing what darkness laid ahead. They had been so content together. Everything had been okay. And now nothing was.

Alex shivered suddenly, and she knew that no amount of blankets in the world would help. "It's so cold," she whispered, and leaned forward to press her cheek against his shoulder, and felt him shift a little, put his arms around her underneath the coat that was around her. His hands held her securely, warm and large on her back. Her teeth chattered uncontrollably, even though she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to grit her teeth together to stop it. The shivers passed, and she felt spent completely, every muscle in her body exhausted and done, begging her to lie down and just stop fighting it. No. Not yet. Not yet. She feebly tightened her arms around his middle, just felt the
rhythm of his breathing.

Off by the Impala, she could see that Bobby and Dean were embracing, clapping their hands on each other as they hugged. Alex sat back a little, Cas was holding her by either arm, steadying her. She gazed at him, trying not to look as scared as she felt. "I think it's almost time to go," Alex said, voice wavering. She didn't just mean in the car. She was fading away and felt it. She was scared, he was scared. A slight breeze blew her dark hair across the front of her face, and Cas used two fingers to tuck the loose strands behind her ear but it slipped back out as soon as he let go, swung over her face again, and the ghost of a smile came over his lips.

"Even your hair is stubborn," he commented and his voice was fond, sad, quiet. The smile faded and he looked at her deeply, soulfully, moved her hair back again, his fingers staying behind her ear as he leaned in to her, his eyebrows knitting together in anxiety as he softly pressed his lips to hers. Weak as she was, Alex brought her hands up to press against either side of his face, trying to memorize this so she could carry it with her forever, wherever she ended up. Because somewhere deep down in her heart of hearts, she knew—she knew—that this was the last time that he would kiss her. Cas kissed her in equal parts fierceness and tenderness, the simple touch of lips to lips transcending words and Alex was comforted and upset at the same time by the gentle touch of those lips to hers. She gave the softest little whimper, moved her hands back to the back of his head, wishing she could keep this moment forever.

When they drew apart, he searched her eyes with his, brushed his thumb across her cheek as his hand stayed against her face. Pain and regret were both clearly etched onto his handsome features and he looked like at any moment he could begin to cry. "I would have saved you if I could have," he told her in a voice broken with guilt and grief. He shook his head faintly, staring at her in agony. "I'm so sorry this has happened to you."

"But you did save me," she protested, wondering how he could think anything but. "You saved me from silence..." her gaze faltered away, her voice dropped to a bare whisper because it was so true it was hard to say out loud. "From being alone."

His face crumpled and he looked down, his hand coming to his face in grief and he shuddered, she thought maybe he was really going to cry and it made alarm and grief surge forth inside of her. "Please don't, Cas, please," she begged, her voice becoming strained as her sorrow grew more pronounced. That's when he looked back up at her with eyes that were welling with confused, heartbroken tears. His face was distorted and she'd never seen it like that before.

"But Alex, I love you," he said, and he looked so lost, like he was begging her for help with understanding why it was ending this way and she couldn't help him because she didn't understand why it was over either.

She broke down, falling forward to him, clutching him with all the strength she had left as she buried her face in the side of his neck and cried. "I love you," she said, trying to put all the feelings that she felt into the words, trying to show him, somehow, that she meant it, that she would give anything to save him from this sadness she had caused him. His arms were tight around her, almost crushingly so. He was clinging to her just as much as she was clinging to him, just as uncertain and scared as she was. They stayed there, arms wrapped around each other in mutual grief and confusion as they both breathed unevenly through the grief, trying to hold onto each other for as long as possible. They heard booted feet approaching perhaps thirty seconds later, and pulled apart, looked to see who it was.

It was Dean, and he said nothing—made no rude comments, gave no bitchy looks. Just looked at them falteringly, sadly. "It's, uh, ten minutes till noon," he said quietly, not looking at them
squarely at that point. "We gotta get over there if we're gonna do this." He looked at Alex then. "If you still want to."

Alex nodded at her brother automatically, heart hammering sickeningly in her chest at the thought of what they were about to do. Her hands on Cas's shoulders, she looked back at him and he at her. This was it. His eyes were red and his cheeks had shining tear tracks on them. She had no words, she couldn't think of how to tell him goodbye, mostly because she didn't want to. That stupid lump was back in her throat and she could see that he was struggling too. And then, she got an idea. She lowered her hand, reached her pinky finger out—Cas looked down, saw it, and his expression wavered, but then he reached out his hand, too, looped his pinky finger through. He held her gaze, his expression soulful. In a soft voice meant only for her to hear, he reassured her. "I meant what I said. I'll find you." He got that little smile on his face he got when he was pleased with himself—only it was tainted with great sadness and pain. "And if I recall correctly..." he tightened his finger just a little bit, "this means I'm forever bound."

Her heart burst all over again at the comment. He remembered that stupid joke she'd pulled on him. Eyes welling with unshed tears, she gazed into his eyes and nodded. She believed him and she felt at peace, despite the great sadness. "Forever bound," she repeated in the softest whisper, trying not to cry. "I'll—I'll see you later, Cas."

He nodded just slightly and neither wanted to part, but both knew they had to. Their fingers unlaced and Alex shrugged his coat off one shoulder with great effort. "You'll need this." He took it slowly, looking at her uncertainly, like he was going to protest, but then he didn't. He stood, put the coat back on and Alex felt better as she watched him pull it on one arm at a time. There he was.

Dean cleared his throat, came closer, reached for Alex. "I got her Cas," he said softly.

Cas looked at Dean, then back to Alex and seemed to resign himself—he stepped back sadly, watched as Dean bent down and slipped his arm around Alex's back, down to her waist, about to pick her up. "No, I wanna walk," Alex protested, her voice wavering. "Please." She didn't say why, but she didn't think she needed to. It might be the last time she did. Dean's face flickered with pain and then he attempted an everything's fine smile.

"Okay. I gotcha." Dean said nothing more and helped her stand up and looped his arm underneath hers then down around her middle, helping her walk the maybe fifteen steps to the Impala. Alex looked back several times at Cas who stood with his arms hanging at his sides, a pensive look on his face. Bobby stood at the front of the van and gave a grim wave. He'd already said goodbye to Alex, privately, a few minutes ago in that Bobby Singer way. A pat on the shoulder and a gruff "you done all right kid. I'm proud to know you."

Dean got Alex to the passenger door of the car, opened it for her. One last time, Alex looked over her shoulder at Cas. Their eyes locked across the distance for a brief moment and she didn't want to leave him.

"Duck your head down," Dean instructed, and she refocused as he helped her sit down. She lifted her legs laboriously into the car as Dean watched, worried, glanced back at Cas, who still watched apprehensively.

"You're sure about this, kiddo?" he asked softly, leaning down a little, steadying his arm against the car door frame. He looked at her long and hard. "You don't have to come. You and Cas, you two could just... wait this one out, you know?"

Surprised at his resigned acceptance, his offer, Alex looked up at him and tried to figure out if he were being genuine. She saw that he was and she was shocked. As much as she wanted to stay with
Cas, she'd made her decision. "I'm sure," she said quietly.

Dean paused, but asked her again, gave her another chance to get out of what was about to happen. "It's not exactly the safest place for you to be, you know?"

"I know," Alex said. "But that's where our brothers are. So..." she managed to shrug. "That's where I'm going."

Dean's worried face broke into a soft little smile, and she could see that he was both proud of her and hated the idea of her going. But he accepted it. "Okay." He patted the door frame. "Okay." He shut her door for her, walked around the back of the car, gave Bobby the thumbs up, and the ex-angel got into the van together. It started with a thundering rumble. The two of them were going to go in front of Dean and Alex and get in place, cut through the back of the graveyard. Bobby had the little weapon Cas had suggested making and now they just had to wait and see if it would work. Dean swung into the driver's seat of his car as the van pulled past them. Cas looked at them with a tense expression on his face, then was gone.

Alex watched the van leave out of the side of her eye. Her chest hurt and she brushed some leftover tears off of the skin below her eyes. It was time to be brave, one last time.

"Okay, we give them five minutes, then we head in," Dean muttered. He seemed distracted and Alex looked at him from the corner of her eye.

"You think we have a shot in hell at this?" she asked, pretty sure he didn't.

A muscle jumped in his cheek. "Here's hoping," he answered vaguely, then cut that conversation short by explaining the plan. "So basically you and I are gonna drive in right at noon, distract the two featherheads. Cas and Bobby sneak in front behind, get rid of Michael so we get some Sam time. Then we talk to him, see what happens."

Had she missed something? Alex thought hard. Her brain felt muddled. "Get rid of Michael how?"

Dean looked her way, almost smirking. "Holy fire Molotov. Cas's idea."

Alex looked down at her lap, smiling softly at the twinge of pride she felt. "He's pretty clever, isn't he?"

"Yeah, not too shabby," Dean replied neutrally. He cleared his throat, dug in the pocket of his jacket. "Look what I found in Sammy's bag. " He pulled out a little folded up piece of green construction paper. "I was going through it a minute ago, trying to find some friggin' matches and... I found this." He unfolded the paper, which looked old and faded—he handed her the dented paper to her and she saw that it was a kiddy crayon drawing of three very crappy, lopsided stick figures: a stick figure girl with her outrageously long arms stretched out to two stick figure boys on either side of her. *i luv Sam end Deen* it said in kiddy handwriting underneath. Lopsided stars and hearts were sprinkled around the three figures. A badly drawn car—the Impala, she guessed—was beside them. Most kids would have drawn a house.

Her throat tightened as she looked at it, realized what it was. Choked on sadness, she struggled. "I can't believe he kept this stupid thing," she whispered.

Dean looked similarly affected, was nodding and trying to keep his face from crumpling. He took it back, looked at it with a hard to read expression. Alex could tell he was trying to gather his courage to tell her something. Finally, he set it down, looked at her with an emotionally open expression. "You know, Sammy and I were real lucky to have you around, Al," he said.
The look on his face, the realization that he was about to give her a goodbye speech freaked her the fuck out and she looked at him in slight horror because she couldn't accept how close the end was. "Dean..." she protested.

"I mean it," he cut her off. "And I might not get another chance to say this stuff so... just hear me out." He looked down at the drawing a second, then swiveled in his seat, put the paper onto the back seat before he turned to look at her again. "Sometimes I thought about how what it would have been like growing up without you. And I just... it wouldn't have been right, you know?" He put a hand onto the steering wheel, brows knit in thought as he looked out through the windshield of the parker car. "You... you put a lot of sunshine into our lives." He chuckled suddenly, like he was remembering something. "Homecoming, remember that one homecoming we went to? It's one of my favorite memories."

Alex made a face, trying to remember. "...you mean the time I dumped the punch bowl over that asshole principle's head and got us kicked out of the dance and suspended from school?!"

Dean raised his hands, shrugged. "Hey, the dude had it coming!"

Alex couldn't help it. Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked at her older brother and she remembered what she hadn't thought about in years. How Dean had taken her to a homecoming dance when she and Sam were newly turned fourteen—he'd insisted on it, hadn't taken her silent grumpy headshakes for a no. Instead he'd stolen ("borrowed!") an old prom dress from the girl he was dating at the time and told her she better put it on so he could take her whiny ass to the dance. So Alex had grudgingly worn the god-awful blinding purple dress but with boots and a jacket, annoyed the entire time, but also secretly delighted to be part of a normal high school tradition. After dumping punch all over the idiot principle who seemed to have it out for her family—he'd insulted Sam in front of a bunch of teachers and pissed Alex off for the last time. As soon as the punch rained down, Dean and Alex had gotten kicked out—Sam, who managed to escape association from the fiasco, had been mortified and chagrined by his siblings antics. Dean and Alex had ditched the school, gone to a local fast food joint, sat on the roof of the place, throwing french fries at people's heads from above. Dean had laughed about the look on that principle's face for what seemed like weeks.

"Yeah, the dude did have it coming," Alex said, voice fraught with emotion and memory. Dean seemed to be thinking about it too, and he was laughing, had a shit-eating grin on his face.

"That guy's face man, when all that red punch and the lime slices..." he trailed off, chortling. Then Dean's grin faded and he looked at her with softening eyes. "You were prettier than any other girl there that night, you know that?" He sounded guilty now, and Alex's smile left her face. "I didn't tell you stuff like that enough." Surprised at him, Alex just stared silently. Her oldest brother cleared his throat again, seeming to be embarrassed. "Listen, I just, I know I've screwed up so a lot more than anything else but... everything I've ever done I've done trying to keep you safe." He looked at her earnestly through a rigid, regretful expression. "And I will never forgive myself for pushing you away like I did this year." He paused tensely, seeming to have trouble meeting her gaze. "I just need you to know that I love you. And that I'm sorry."

"God, Dean..." Alex swallowed painfully at his confession and openness. There were a lot of things that he'd done wrong and she wasn't over a lot of them... but there was something stronger than all of her resentment. How much she loved him, all the memories they shared, the lifetime they had lived together. Even more tears were gathering in her eyes and she smiled at him through them. "World's best oldest brother," she said simply, emotionally.

He looked equally as emotional. "World's best, coolest, bad-assest sister."
"Assest isn't a word," she told him, smiling despite the pain, almost laughing. She loved this jackass brother of hers so much.

He smiled a little, bittersweet, shrugged humbly. "It is now."

Alex attempted some humor, shrugged her eyebrows up once, summoned the energy to make a face at him. "I'll call Miriam-Webster, let her know."

Dean made a confused face. "The dictionary is a woman?"

Alex looked at him with mock dead seriousness. "Yeah, I mean, she knows everything, so... makes sense to me."

Dean seemed to realize he should have seen where that was going and he laughed, a bit reluctantly. "Touché." He checked his watch anxiously, drummed his fingers on the wheel of the Impala and Alex took in a deep breath.

If this really was it, she had to let Dean know a few things, too. But this was hard. She had to swallow her pride and fear. She clenched her jaw, trying to figure out how to word herself. She glanced at him sidelong, tense. "Dean... what I said to you... last month or whenever. About you being just like Dad in all the worst ways." She pressed her lips together, turned her head to look at him better. He was silent, almost holding his breath, looked like he was preparing himself for the worst, dreading what she was going to say.

"I wouldn't have made it, Dean, if it weren't for you," she told him, saying it aloud and realizing it was so true. She owed her life to him ten times over, and saying this sappy heartfelt stuff aloud was tough but she kept going, watched as her brother's face become deeply affected. She meant every word of what she said and knew that it was what he needed to hear. "I never questioned whether you were on my side or not," she said falteringly, voice high-pitched from effort. "I never had to worry because I knew you'd be there no matter what. If Dad left, if Sam left... you'd still be there."

Her face was crumpling and she remembered how he had covered for her and claimed that he needed a nightlight and that he was scared of the dark when he figured out she was scared of the dark as a kid—how he had always given her high fives and thumbs ups and fist pounds and told her "that's my girl" whenever she did something right or cool—how he had snuck her into the best R-rated movies when she was still to young to legally see them—how he had always brought her books he thought she would like, how he looked out for her constantly and how he'd always, always told her it would be okay then made sure it was. She shuddered with effort not to bawl at this point. "You were my best friend, Dean. You still are."

His eyes were welled up with tears and he scooted closer, hugged her tightly but carefully, holding a hand against the back of her head firmly. She felt him press a kiss to the side of her head and she shut her eyes, tried her hardest to hug him back through her failing strength. Memories of their years together flooded her mind, and despite all the horror and crap and loss and tragedy, she was so thankful that she'd had Dean and Sam with her for it. So thankful.

Dean drew back, hand still on the side of her face and he looked at her with a bittersweet expression, his thumb stroking her hair affectionately. He managed a little smile and she knew he was about to make some kind of joke. "So, been meaning to ask... you really like that Cas guy, huh?"

She lowered her eyes, frowned a little, then looked back up at him. "'Like' isn't the word," she said honestly.
He nodded, looking at her intently, expression hard to read. "I know."

She couldn't tell what he was thinking, what he wanted out of that question and she shrugged, growing withdrawn at the thought of Cas. "Doesn't matter now though does it. It's over. Life."

Dean didn't seem to like her statement. It made him sad. "It ain't over till it's over, right?" He let go of her, shrugged, looked off into middle distance. "Maybe today isn't it for us. We've gotten through worse, right?"

As much as she would have liked to believe that, Alex shook her head, depressed. "I don't think so. You're just trying to make me feel better." She worked her jaw and her voice dropped to almost nothing. "I think we both know this is over."

"Hey, hey." He looked at her with the beginnings of indignant denial on his face. "Don't you give up on me now, Al." She looked at him sidelong at the harsh tone and he paused, wet his lips, softened his voice. "You were trying to do the right thing with what you did yesterday." He had her attention and she looked at him with a strained expression. "It's okay," he told her. "I'm not mad at you."

What? Alex stared in faint disbelief, confusion. She deserved his anger, everyone's anger. "How can you not be mad at me?"

He looked at her earnestly. "I love you too damn much to be mad at you." Regret and grief filtered across his features. "I just wish I could have kept this from happening to you." He leaned in a little, demanding her gaze. "You listen to me. Lucifer was gonna get Sam one way or another. Don't blame yourself for that, okay?"

She withered a little bit under his words and stares, wanting to believe what he said was true, wanting to believe he really felt that way. She looked down at her knees, fatigue washing over her anew. She blamed herself and didn't think she would ever stop. She blinked heavily, took in a raggedy breath. "I feel so tired Dean."

His face showed fear and grave concern, he swallowed and his voice was barely above a whisper. He touched her shoulder gently, pleadingly. "Hang on just a little longer, baby girl, okay? Just a little longer."

She nodded pathetically, didn't look at him, because she wanted to cry again. "Okay."

He glanced at his watch, let out a shaky breath. "All right, looks like it's showtime." He started the car and pulled back onto the road. Alex saw how his hands clenched and unclenched the wheel of the Impala, how his jaw wouldn't stop tensing, how freaked he was, how scared shitless.

She was too, and it was making her sick. She stared out the window at the unremarkable landscape. "My heart's beating like fucking hummingbird's wings," Alex muttered anxiously, chewing on the inside of her mouth. She felt like she'd drank five energy drinks in a row. Dean glanced at her sidelong, chuckled despite himself when he saw her chomping the inside of her cheek.

"You're gonna chew a hole in your face, Al," he said affectionately. He'd told her that constantly growing up... and she hadn't yet. They exchanged the smallest little smile at that memory. He gestured at the little box of cassettes on the floor near her feet. "Hey, do me a favor and find Pyromania, will you? I need some Leppard right now."

Of course you do, Dean. Alex bent with effort, pulled the box closer and rifled through his tapes until she found the one he wanted. It clacked around in its plastic box. "Side one or side two?" She
asked, sitting up and feeling out of breath from the simple task.

He slowed down and turned, pulling them into the entrance of the graveyard. He looked at the graveyard ahead with a terse expression. "Side two," he told her, and she slid the cassette into the tape deck.

"Gunter, glieben, glauchen, globen," the song began, then the cowbell started the beat. "All right! I got something to say!" The electric guitar began to whine the riff she'd heard a million times. "Hey it's better to burn out! Yeah, than fade awa-a-a-y!"

Dean took in a huge breath, expelled it noisily, once again giving away how nervous he was. And then he did something he hadn't done in years. He held his hand out to her, looking hopeful that she would take it, and she looked at him with a puzzled look on her face—he used to do that, hold her hand when she was younger, when they were heading into a scary or new situation; it was his way of silently reassuring her that she was going to be okay, that she wasn't alone. He'd never been embarrassed about doing it, ever—how many times had he walked her to a classroom at a new school? How many times had he gotten made fun of for holding his little sister's hand? But he'd never let it bother him even once, not outwardly anyway. He'd just told her "they're jealous they don't have such a cool sister like I do. Now go kick some ass, Mouse."

And now he was asking her for the same gesture, the same indication that he wasn't alone. Alex scooted closer, reached out, put her hand in his, and held on tight. She felt a little better then, too. Their hands held there on the seat of the Impala and Dean's shoulders relaxed a little, he nodded and looked out at the graveyard, took in another deep breath. His jaw flexed and he swallowed. She could literally see him gathering his courage and squeezed his hand silently, felt him tighten his grip too. "All right. Here goes nothin'," Dean muttered, and gunned the engine a couple times, slowly drove them into the cemetery.

As the car crawled over a small slope, they could see that two familiar figures stood in the center of the old abandoned graveyard. Sam's tall imposing form, Adam's shorter and more proportioned. They both turned at the approach of the Impala, their expressions masks. Dean pulled right up to them, looked at Alex and let go of her hand with one final squeeze. He parked the car, shut it off and got out, leaned onto the door. "Howdy, boys." He paused, looking between the archangels with a gruff expression. "Sorry. We interrupting something?" He shut his door, walked forward a little bit even as Alex pushed her car door open, barely able to even summon the strength to even do that. She used the window ledge to haul herself up to stand. She was having a hard time breathing and when she looked at her brothers—the one she'd known a lifetime, the one she'd only met recently—her emotions were almost impossible to control. How the hell had this even happened? Dean looked back at her glancingly, worried. She shut the door and it didn't close all the way because she couldn't summon the strength.

Lucifer, in Sam's body, looked at Dean cooly. "Dean. Even for you, this is a whole new mountain of stupid." It was chilling because he looked exactly like Sam, but the demeanor was different, the way he held himself was different, his eyes were cold and lifeless, calculating and cruel. Those eyes slid to Alex, he looked amused and perplexed all at once. "And you brought your dying sister... now why would you do that?"

Dean was staying guarded and calm. "You promised to save her, so you gonna make good on that or what?"

Lucifer's eyebrows rose slightly, he pretended to be thoughtful, narrowing his eyes and looking off to the side before he looked back at Dean challengingly. "Nah."

Dean looked like he'd expected as much. "All right then, I'm done talking to you. I'm talking to
Sam now." Lucifer's eyebrows raised in faint amusement.

Michael stepped forward at that moment, his expression foul. "You're no longer the vessel, Dean," Michael said. "Neither of you got any right to be here."

Dean looked at Adam tensely. "Adam, if you're in there somewhere, I am so sorry."

No emotion or feeling crossed Adam's face. "Adam isn't home right now," Michael said.

Alex caught a flash of beige on her peripheral and her heart jammed in her throat, knowing Castiel was nearby. "Well, then you're next on my list, buttercup," Dean said, oblivious. "But right now, I need five minutes with him."

"You little maggot," Michael said, distaste sullying his face and voice. He began to advance on Dean. "You are no longer a part of the story!"

A deep, commanding voice from behind them suddenly rung out. "Hey, assbutt!"

Castiel had stood up to his full height from behind where he'd been hidden and Michael turned to see him holding a bottle from which a flame was burning—and Cas threw it squarely at the archangel, who screamed as it hit him and exploded, engulfing Michael in scorching flames. Dean stumbled back from the heat and piercing sound that accompanied the blaze, and beside the passenger-side tire, Alex leaned away, hands clutching onto the hood as she shut her eyes. She couldn't crouch down. Her leg muscles were too shaky and spent.

When the noise was gone and the heat faded, everyone looked again and Michael was gone. Dean looked at Castiel breathlessly. "Assbutt?" he asked incredulously.

Cas shrugged, like he was silently saying it was the best I could do at the time. "He'll be back—and upset—but you got your five minutes." Cas's gaze went to Alex, and she thought he was about to come to her, but then Sam's voice stopped him.

Lucifer set Cas with a venomous stare. "Castiel. Did you just Molotov my brother with holy fire?"

Cas took a slight step backwards, suddenly aware he was the object of the devil's wrath. "Uh... no?" Alex's stomach dropped in alarm as she realized how angry Lucifer sounded, how dangerous.

Lucifer's jaw tightened. "No one dicks with Michael but me," he said wrathfully, and Sam's hand raised up, fingers held together like he was going to snap them—

"Lucifer, no, no, no please!" Alex begged in a rush of frantic pleas, and she chanced taking a few stumbling steps forward, leaning heavily onto the car as she did. Lucifer turned and looked at her coldly, annoyed, fingers still raised by his head as Cas's face filled with emotional pain at her clear struggle to stand and move.

"Alexandra, you're really not looking too well," he said snidely. "Why don't you just leave this matter to the men?"

She ignored the insult. "Please, please, don't hurt him," Alex begged—she was shaking perceptibly. Cas had taken a couple steps toward her the second Lucifer had turned halfway to look her. Lucifer's fingers relaxed, his hand lowered, he turned to face her straight on. He got the smallest little wicked smile on his face.

"Hm. Well since you asked so nicely," Lucifer said darkly, and began to walk towards her.
Dean quickly moved to block Lucifer from getting to his sister—his expression tense and warning and grim. "Sam—" Dean started. "Talk to me, Sam." Lucifer paused momentarily, his expression torn between amused and annoyed. And then he swept Dean aside easily with a wave of his hand, sent him flying nearly twenty feet across the graveyard where he collided painfully with a tombstone and groaned, stayed there.

"Dean!" Alex cried, even as she was roughly grabbed by the front of her jacket and lifted up until her feet dangled above the ground. She let out a sound of wounded surprise. Lucifer looked at her with a cold expression.

"Let her go!" Lucifer turned his head to see Castiel standing in a wide stance just a few feet away—weaponless, angry, afraid. A faint little inconvenienced smile came over Sam's face and Lucifer moved his free hand in a 'come here' motion—Castiel was grabbed by an invisible force and dragged through the air, whirled around a hundred-and-eighty degrees where he slammed into the driver's side of the Impala, shattering the window with the force in which he collided. He groaned, seeming to be stuck there, half-standing, his back pinned against the car. Dean was moaning in pain somewhere nearby by Alex couldn't see him anymore. She had her hands weakly grasped around Sam's wrist that held her up high so easily. Barely able to breathe, Alex searched Sam's face for a sign that he was in there.

"Sam, are you in there Sam?" she asked desperately, knowing he could hear her because she'd been able to hear, too.

Lucifer turned his head to look back at her, and even though the face was that of her twin's, he had never looked so unfamiliar to her. He ignored her question. "I didn't finish what I was saying," he practically growled, and he strode over to where Cas was, holding her up above the ground the entire time, making it even harder to breathe than it had been before. He dropped her roughly to the ground where her feet collided and sent pain shooting up her leg bones even as he whirled her around so that her back pressed into his chest, so that she faced Cas. Lucier made her stand there and fear cascaded over Alex as he inexplicably reached into her jacket.

"Since you asked me so nicely not to hurt your precious Castiel..." Lucifer breathed down her neck, "how about you do the honors?" he pulled out her angel blade from where it had been hidden and he grabbed her wrist with his other hand, made her hold the handle of the blade, crushing his other hand over hers, forcing her to wield it. Cas looked at her in something like horrified realization as he heaved with effort and pain.

Realizing what Lucifer was about to do, Alex panicked and began to whimper as she started to freak out at the most basic level, squirming and fighting wildly, with every ounce of strength she had left, which wasn't much. Her whimpers turned to screaming protests as she tried to push backwards, staring at Cas wide-eyed in horror and realizing she had no way of breaking the grip on her. "No, stop! No!"

It all happened so fast—Lucifer moved himself and Alex forward, too strong for her to resist. "No, no," Alex begged, and smashed the palm of her hand up against Cas's lower left-hand ribcage, trying with all of her sapped strength to push herself away from him, trying with everything she had to save Cas from what was about to happen.

Castiel just held her gaze anxiously, his expression tense and worried as his hand came to cover her hand that was pressing uselessly against his chest. His fingers curled around her hand tightly, as if he were reassuring her and telling her it was okay, that he didn't blame her, that he accepted what was about to happen. His breathing quickened even further, like he was preparing himself. "Don't watch this, Alex," he implored her urgently, even as Sam's hand clamped down even tighter onto
hers. Alex began to scream again, as if somehow her wretched protests could make this stop "I'm so sorry," Cas choked out, and his eyes were filled with immeasurable pain and regret, helplessness, unwillingness to leave her.

"No, please, Sam, **no!**" Alex sobbed frantically, feeling Sam's steely fingers almost breaking hers as his body tensed and he drew the blade back, puppeting her. "**No, nooo!**" she was almost hyperventilating at that point, dying of terror.

"*Yes,*" Lucifer said through gritted teeth, and with a thrust of his wrist, he made Alex stab Castiel through the heart brutally. Cas screamed and his head went back as his grace blazed out of his eyes and mouth in blinding blue light, Alex screamed, Dean shouted from somewhere nearby—and Lucifer let go, Alex fell over as Cas did too, lifeless, leaving wing prints charred across the Impala. Sobbing deliriously, crumpled over Cas's still form and holding onto two fistfuls of his trench coat in her hands, Alex was shellshocked and horrified. He was dead and her heart felt like it had stopped beating. She heard Lucifer smirking as he stood over them. "Till death do you part," he mocked heartlessly, cruelly. And the comment made Alex see red, she closed her shaking feeble hand around the hilt of the angel blade in Cas's chest, preparing to do something incredibly stupid —she looked up at the devil just in time to see a bullet hit him in the shoulder.

Lucifer turned slowly and challengingly to look at Bobby, who had the colt raised high. Bobby shot him again, straight through the heart. Nothing happened. Lucifer only looked down at his bleeding chest, annoyed, then back up at Bobby, his features twisting with hatred. Lucifer raised his hand up and jerked it oddly—Bobby's neck snapped.

"**Nooo!**" Dean shouted—he was standing nearby, slumped over slightly. Alex almost passed out as she watched Bobby hit the ground. Lucifer's neck whipped to the side and he fixed Dean with a menacing glare.

"*Yes.*" Lucifer shoved Dean back and into the Impala's windshield violently. The impact of Dean's head cracked the glass into a jagged circle. Groaning, Dean laid there, dazed, but Lucifer grabbed him by a leg, yanked him down the hood and pulled him up, punched him in the face hard enough to make him whirl, see stars, and momentarily lose clarity. Crumpled over the hood of his car, Dean saw the blood dripping down from his mouth onto the shining black surface of his car. *Take care of your brother and sister. Keep them safe, make sure they're okay.* Dean gathered himself, turned around, breathing hard and trying to fight the sick feeling in his stomach.

"Sammy, can you hear me?" Dean asked, almost in tears.

Lucifer's face filled with cold contempt and he approached slowly, murder in his eyes, no hint of Sam anywhere to be seen. "You know... I tried to be nice... for Sammy's sake." He brought his hands up slowly to grip Dean by the lapels of his leather jacket. Dean tensed, preparing for whatever was next. "But you... are such a pain... in my ass."

Lucifer backhanded Dean brutally, sending him stumbling sideways, then kicked him in the knee, hard enough to break bone. A pained scream tore out of Dean's mouth and he fell over, clutching his leg. Panting in pain, Dean looked up at Lucifer. For a minute, he contemplated staying down. *Take care of your brother and sister. Keep them safe, make sure they're okay.* Dean dragged himself up, using the bumper of the Impala and keeping all of his weight on one leg. "Sammy, fight him, you hear me?" Dean said, then hissed in pain, but fought through it. His voice rose in urgency. "Sam, I know you're in there, don't let him win!"

Lucifer grabbed Dean by the jacket. "Oh, Sam's in here, all right." He threw another bone-crushing punch, holding Dean with one hand so that he couldn't fall away. "And he's gonna feel the snap of your *bones!*" Lucifer socked him again, let Dean fall down to the ground this time. "Every single
one." He hauled a bleary-eyed Dean to his feet. "We're gonna take our time… I've already won, Dean." Lucifer shoved Dean up against the Impala and began to beat him ruthlessly, not stopping even once, he hit him again and again and again, until Dean's face was swollen and disfigured, raw and oozing blood. And Dean didn't fight back, he just took it, grunting in pain.

Inside of himself, Sam felt every sickening blow his fists beat into his brothers bloodied face, heard his brother's pained cries—and could do nothing. He struggled and begged and pleaded and raged but nothing worked and he was stuck. Dean! Dean fight me! Don't let him kill you!

Suddenly, Sam felt a strange pressure in his side. Lucifer looked down and when he did, Sam could see that there was an angel blade stuck halfway into his side, right in the ribcage. He looked up. Alex was standing there, slightly behind him, clearly about to fall over—she'd thrown the blade but missed and hadn't thrown it hard enough. Sam despair even as Lucifer's fury blazed. "You—leave—my brothers—alone!" Alex shouted in a weakened voice, not backing away, and Sam shrank internally in horror as Lucifer yanked the blade out of himself and cast it down, looked at the glowing blue wound contemptuously. He let Dean go, who fell down to the ground, wounded and dazed. Alex looked frail and deathly, like even standing was a struggle.

Sam felt his mouth opening, felt himself speaking, but it wasn't him. "You know, you may be more trouble than you're worth, Alexandra," he said quietly, but there was a danger there in his voice, a warning. He felt Lucifer's annoyance and impatience and Sam fought even harder as Lucifer took a step toward his sister. Don't you go near her you son of a bitch!

Alex didn't run, didn't move, just looked Sam and Lucifer straight in the eye, spoke to Sam. Tears streamed down her cheeks and he could see how she was in every kind of agony that could exist. "Sam, fight him!" she cried.

I'm trying, oh god I'm trying! Alex get away from me! Run!

Sam couldn't stop Lucifer no matter how hard he tried, and he watched himself bear down onto her and take her by the neck, slam her to the ground ruthlessly. He straddle her crushingly and put both hands on her neck, began to choke the life out of her.

No, no, no! Please don't kill her, don't hurt her!

His hands only tightened on her neck.

I'll just bring her back later, Sam. Stop trying to fight me, I'm getting tired of it.

"Sam, no! Sam!" Dean begged from somewhere behind them. Without even looking, Lucifer gestured a single annoyed hand, Dean slammed into the side of the Impala and hit his head hard.

Beneath him, Alex was choking, gasping for air, struggling, fighting to stay alive, her hands grabbed onto his uselessly. "Sam, please…!" Alex rasped. Tears ran out of her eyes and down into her hair as she looked up at him in fear and pain.

"I'm not Sam," he growled through gritted teeth. And then the strangest thing happened. Alex’s face relaxed, she stopped struggling. She looked at him and it was so obvious that she loved him. Sam reached out to that desperately, to who he was: her big brother, not the devil. Lucifer wavered.

"You are Sam," she wheezed, barely able to breathe, turning blue, but appearing fiercer than Sam had seen her before, ever, more determined and strong than ever. Her teeth were gritted, her expression was intense and furious. "My Sam. And I am never giving up on you ever." She rasped miserably, barely able to speak. "Listen to me, you're not alone, do you hear me? I'm with you,
Sammy. She grabbed one of his arms, held on for dear life and Sam screamed inside, fought with everything he had for his twin, the one he’d been with since conception, the one who he’d shared a childhood with, the one he shared a birthday with—the one whose hand he’d held in his as they crossed the street as kids—the one who had kept all the secrets he ever told her—the one who had tried to make him chicken noodle soup that one time and exploded the microwave when she put the entire can in there—the one who knew his favorite things and his biggest mistakes and had always been willing to give him just one more chance.

Sam could feel himself gaining traction as he thought of how much he loved her and how much he wanted to save her from everything Lucifer had planned for them. As he held onto this solid anchor, Sam found a new strength within himself and began to wrestle Lucifer back, began to regain control over his body. Sam was able to loosen his grip on her neck and Alex could breathe again—but then as soon as it had begun, Lucifer suddenly rushed back over him and kicked Sam downward internally. Lucifer brutally pressed Sam's hands down with deadly force, and Sam felt Alex's neck snap beneath his hands. Her head lolled to the side, eyes shut, body still, life gone. *No! Oh god no!*

Dean, who had crawled over was several feet away—he froze. "Oh god, *no, Sam, no...*" he pleaded in a broken sob. Inside, Sam was screaming. But outwardly, he just stood up, annoyed, and grabbed Dean up by the front of his jacket and slammed him down onto his back, then dragged him over to the Impala, slamming him into the metal siding harshly. "How many of you people do I have to *kill* today?" he snarled.

Dean tried to reach for Sam through his heartbroken tears. "Sam, it's Okay," he choked out. "It's okay. I'm here," he said. "I'm here. I'm not gonna leave you, Sam."

*Pathetic,* Lucifer told Sam. *Pathetic how he thinks he can reach you. You're mine, there's no escaping now.*

Lucifer punched him again, then again, but Dean just took it tearfully, repeated himself, voice choked with emotion. "I'm not gonna leave you."

*Stop!* Sam despaired, wretched and agonized. *Just stop!*

*No. I'll never stop, this is just the beginning. Now watch as I kill not only your sister but now your brother with your own hands. All they've ever done is held you back. All they've ever done is weaken you!*

Lucifer drew his fist back for another punch, one that would kill Dean… but just then, a cloud moved away, the sun came out and glinted off the roof of the Impala, catching Lucifer's eye. He looked, saw his own reflection in the window, then past that, a little green army man stuck permanently in one of the ashtrays of the car. On the back seat, a drawing of stick figures and big sloppy kid writing was laid errantly—*i luv Sam end Deen* was surrounded by lopsided stars and hearts. And Sam saw these things too. Lucifer wavered inside underneath the surge of emotion and memories the army man and drawing produced.

All Sam could hear was the wind whistling around him as he remembered playing army men in the back of the car and how Alex always used to chew on the little toy soldiers heads and arms and Sam would complain and Dean would say not to complain, that Alex was just making the army men more realistic, like they had sustained combat zone battle wounds. And then Sam thought of how they had carved their initials onto the floorboards together in secret one afternoon and how Dean had jammed legos into the air vents of the car and how Alex had stuck chewed off army men heads into the passenger ashtray and the summer heat had melted it all into a hard mass and rendered the ashtray completely useless. And Sam remembered sitting on the hood of the car on
starry nights and sharing a few beers and laughs with his siblings after hard days and watching
Alex catch frogs and then shove them down the back of Dean's shirt to make Sam laugh… and a
million memories of them flooded his mind: his brother and sister, the two people in the world who
had fought with him and for him and beside him and never given up on him, ever. And love, sheer
overwhelming love washed over Sam as he realized that Lucifer was wrong.

*No. They never held me back. They made me better. They gave me something to fight for,*
*something to believe in. And I believe in them more than I believe in you! They strengthen me, you
son of a bitch!*

And Sam gathered all of his strength as the memories of his life careened through his mind,
spilling out in a monsoon, and with a deafening roar, Sam surged upwards inside of himself and
cast Lucifer aside and he gasped, stumbled back, in control of himself again and momentarily
shocked by it.

Blinking rapidly, gasping and out of breath, Sam looked at his hands, the hands that had just killed
his sister and agony came across his features. "Oh god," he said, and looked back at her. She laid
like a broken doll on the dead grass and he walked toward her as if in a horrified trance, like maybe
he thought it had all been a bad dream. She laid there without moving, clearly dead. "No, oh no—"
his hands were on either side of his head as he looked at her in terror. He did that. Oh god, he *did
that!* She was so innocent and precious and he had *murdered* her, snapped her bones and ended her
life, he'd let Lucifer do it, he hadn't been strong enough or quick enough, and he *despised* himself.

"Sam?" Dean asked, mumbling, almost at the point of passing out where he was sitting slumped
beside the Impala.

Sam turned, tears streaming down his face as he heaved from labored breathing. "It's okay, Dean,"
he told his barely conscious brother, filled with terror and absolute grief. "It's gonna be okay—I've
got him. He's not gonna hurt anyone ever again. I'm ending this now." Sam reached into his pocket
with shaking hands and tossed the horsemen's rings down, about seven feet to the left of Alex's
body. "Bvtmon tabges babalon!"

The ground caved in around the rings and the earth shook, air began to suck down into the
widening hole, a loud and powerful wind filled the entire cemetery and whipped at Sam's hair and
clothes. This was it, the end for him. Sam turned back to Dean, afraid, breathing heavily, distraught
and tortured by what he had done. Dean stared at him with a slack jaw, only one of his eyes able to
open—the other was swollen shut. Both of the brothers were in tears, and Sam nodded at Dean. *It's
gonna be okay. I've got him. I'm going to save you, Dean.* Sam looked at his sister's dead body
again and his misery doubled, his horror and guilt were beyond comparison. He turned to jump
into the hole, to end this once and for all and let the carnage end—he had wanted to save her from
Lucifer, but in the end he wasn't able and he would never forgive himself. He took a step toward
the edge of the hole, tensed, preparing to jump.

"Sam!" A sudden voice behind him startled him and Sam whirled. "It's not gonna end this way!"
Michael shouted. "Step back!" Adam's familiar face glared at him and Sam's heart spasmed in fear
but he didn't budge, in fact, he slid his foot back, edged closer to the hole.

"You're gonna have to make me!" he shouted back through his agony. His eyes burned with tears,
he slid back a little more.

Michael's glare deepened. "I have to fight my brother, Sam!" Michael insisted in a shout above the
wind. "Here and now! It's my destiny!"

Sam looked at Dean, who stared back fearfully, silently urging Sam to jump but also horrified that
he would. Sam looked down at Alex's dead body. *No. It may be your destiny, but it's not mine.* Sam wasn't going to let Lucifer return, bring back Alex and hurt her, use her, kill her all over again.

"*Listen to me, you're not alone, do you hear me? I'm with you, Sammy.*"

Her last words to him, said raspingly and without a flicker of doubt, with so much love. And as the image of her dying at his hands replayed in his mind, he didn't have to think twice about what to do next.

With a gut-wrenching sob, Sam closed his eyes and spread his arms, let himself begin to fall backwards… and with a shout, Michael lunged forward and grabbed onto Sam, attempting to pull him back, but Sam grabbed tight and held on with all of the strength he had, pulling the archangel down with him.

And Sam and Michael fell together, down, down, down. The circle of sunlight above them vanished completely and inescapable darkness swallowed them whole.

Above the ground, the hole closed with a blinding flash of light and loud horrible crack.

And then all was silent.
Dean Winchester was the only man left alive in the world. That's how he felt as he cradled his sister's dead, broken body in his arms.

He'd dragged himself over to her, fighting the pain of his broken leg the whole way, and now he held her and wept. He was the only one left.

Bobby laid silently nearby dead and broken, Cas's body was on the other side of the Impala. The silence was gut wrenching. Just wind whistling over the grass, just the call of crows now and then. Just the sounds of Dean's own wretched hiccuping sobs as he thought of all he had lost in the span of not even five minutes. His whole world was gone. Destroyed. Alex was growing cold and stiff in his arms, her skin was blotched and pale, distorted by the gruesome veins that Lucifer had left when he possessed her. He hadn't been able to save her. Just a few feet away, the horsemen's rings laid on the ground where his brother had thrown them, his final act here on earth. Sam was gone. He wasn't coming back; Dean hadn't been able to save him.

Whispering over and over again how sorry he was, Dean rocked his little sister as the exhausting, overwhelming grief suffocated him. He hadn't come this far to lose them in the same damn day, this wasn't right or fair or okay at all. And he wondered why the hell they had perished so close together like that, why the hell it had to happen that way, why he was the one left behind. He would have traded himself for them without hesitation, but he couldn't. It was too late. He thought of how the twins had been born a minute and forty-seven seconds apart. Maybe they were supposed to die close together, too. His heart broke in half at the thought.

This wasn't supposed to happen. The thought of gathering their bodies—Alex, Bobby, Cas—the thought of salting and burning them on the very ground that Sam had fallen into Hell through was too much. Dean imagined going on without them, without the only people in the world he really loved, knew, trusted… and couldn't imagine it, despaired at the thought of being totally alone, the only one left standing after all these years of hunting.

He thought of his gun, tucked into the glove compartment of his car.

_Just let it be over. Just let me be done. I can't take this suffering anymore._

Castiel remembered when Alex had been forced to kill him. The look in her eyes when it happened was all he could see in his mind's eye. He remembered the physical pain when the blade stabbed into the cavity of his chest, he remembered hearing himself scream in pain as he reacted helplessly, as he died. He'd been afraid, but not because he was afraid of death—he was afraid to leave her. He remembered holding her hand for as long as he could, trying to comfort her as it had happened, knowing how horrible it was but not being able to do anything about it. He remembered how she screamed and cried and fought valiantly, trying to save him. He'd known he was dead from the second Lucifer had looked at him with those cruel eyes. But all he'd been able to think about was her. How he hadn't wanted to die before she did. How he wanted to be there with her when she took her last breath, because he'd felt with everything inside of himself that she shouldn't have to be alone in that moment. And Satan had taken that from them.
Now he was over, now he was done, dead. Except… he wasn't. There was no sense of time passing, but he was suddenly, without fanfare, cognizant of the fact that he was alive and whole again. His eyes snapped open and he gasped in a deep breath of cold, sharp air. Over him there was an overcast, unremarkable sky and Cas blinked rapidly, stunned and breathing fast, hard. How? He felt it immediately… the power and clarity of Grace running through his veins once again, singing in his blood and vibrating fiercely through every atom. Life returned like a tidal wave to the body he was fused with and had died in; he was fully restored, as powerful as he had been before the Winchesters, before he had been demoted three years ago, and he was awed—and then a little afraid. Why?

Who had done this? Why had he been resurrected? And as a higher-order angel again? A sinking feeling came over him internally as he remembered what he had done.

"I promise, I swear to you, I will do anything if you heal her, give her another chance. Father, please."

That had been his plea to God yesterday as he held a sick and dying Alex in his arms. A desperate promise made by a desperate man. The sinking feeling continued. Castiel had sworn to do anything and now God—it must have been God—had restored him and resurrected him, giving him the ability to save her. God had heard him, his Father had granted him an answer… just not the way in which Castiel had expected. What payment would God would require of him now? A question that disturbed Cas to the deepest parts of his mind.

Shouldn't the knowledge that God was not gone comfort him? It did not.

The graveyard was oddly silent and Castiel rolled himself over slowly, feeling every beat of the heart in his chest reverberating through himself in a way that seemed as if it should be painful. He heard no one, nothing. A strange, dazed, off-balance sensation filled him.

Where was she?

Castiel pushed himself up and stood to his full height, feeling oddly heavy in a way that wasn't physical. He saw Bobby, laying still and silent a few feet off from him. And then he heard the soft little sounds of someone crying. He turned around.

He saw Dean sitting brokenly with one leg out in front of him… Alex's body in his arms. And Castiel approached slowly. She looked like she might have been sleeping there as her brother held her, cradling her as one might cradle a child. Dean was shaking, shoulders heaving as he wept, head bowed over his sister.

Deep, strange sadness welled over Castiel when he saw them like that, when he realized she was dead, when he felt that Lucifer and Michael had both been locked away, that Sam was gone, that only Dean had survived. Cas paused, didn't go closer for a moment, puzzled with himself, disturbed. He knew his power and strength, knew that he was able once again to raise the dead, heal the sick. But the knowledge troubled him instead of assuring him, he felt a strangely overwhelming sense of dread and displacement. Something was wrong—with him, maybe. He heard the whispers of angels in the back of his mind again, the call of Heaven. Castiel moved forward again, each step he took seeming heavier than the last.

"You don't need to mourn, Dean," Castiel said quietly, announcing his presence. Dean's head whipped around, he looked up at Cas in shock. His face was bruised, swollen, beaten badly, and tears streaked his bloody face.

"Cas, you're alive?" he asked in a choked voice full of disbelief.
Castiel felt himself smiling sadly as he came to a stop just beside Dean. "I'm better than that." He reached down and touched Dean's forehead with two fingers, healing him instantly. Dean blinked in shock as his every pain was banished and his wounds were healed, erased. And then he looked down at the broken body in his arms once more.

"A-Alex is dead, Cas," Dean said. He sounded hollow, looked back up at Cas in something like wretched hope.

Castiel looked at her still face, feeling his expression tighten. "Not for long," he told Dean heavily, and reached his hand down to touch the side of her face, knowing that by carrying her back into life from death he was binding himself to his promise to God. That by doing this, he was agreeing to do anything that God would ask. Anything. He had no idea what it would be or what it would demand of him. But it didn't matter the cost—as Castiel always would, he chose to save her, accepting whatever fate would befall him by doing so.

Would he be able to remain with her? He didn't know. And that's why when he touched the cold skin of her face and called her spirit and soul back from the dead... he was afraid. Filled with quiet foreboding. And somehow certain that what had just begun was now over whether he wanted it to be or not.

It was dark wherever she was. Still, silent. Obscenely silent.

And then she remembered what had happened.

First, being forced to stab the one she loved through the heart brutally, falling over on top of him in a shock as he collapsed to the ground, dead. She'd stared into his unmoving face in horrified disbelief, whispered his name as a terrified and tear-filled question. He was supposed to be eternal and invincible, he was supposed to survive forever, why was he dead? How had she let this happen to him? Immeasurable heartbreak devoured her as she looked at him through eyes that swam with tears that burned like acid. She felt her strength giving out and had almost given up completely when she realized he truly was gone. She'd almost allowed herself to collapse down and die right then and there with him, such was her grief and pain.

But she could hear Dean crying out in pain and begging Sam to fight the devil. She could hear Lucifer using Sam's voice as his own. And fierce, lifelong love for her brothers gave her a final burst of purpose and strength, inspired a possessive kind of anger all aimed at Lucifer, the one who was trying to destroy everything that was hers. No. You are not allowed to take them too. She'd barely been able to summon the ability, but had anyway, and with a terrible sob and all of the strength she possessed, she'd wrenched the angel blade out of Castiel's chest. Teeth bared in pain that was emotional and physical alike, she'd managed to stand up one last time by grabbing onto the side of her brother's car. She looked down at Cas, for what she believed to be the last time—and his face was still and peaceful, his eyes were closed. Blood blossomed out over the left lapel and front of his trench coat. His legs were awkwardly bent underneath him from the way he'd fallen. He looked broken... and she had done that to him.

She loved him so much and it hurt, it hurt. Just a couple days ago he'd held her hands in his; she had looked into his eyes and seen forever, been desperate to believe they could have a future even though the world was falling to pieces around them. Now, it was all over and that future was shattered. And all of it—all of it—felt like it was her fault.

She'd gone to Lucifer and said yes thinking she was going to save the world. She had cursed it instead. Now she was going to tell him no if it was the last thing she ever did. She staggered around the car holding her angel blade weakly, every limb shaking with exertion and grief and anger and
all-consuming sadness. Lucifer was beating Dean to a pulp and overcome with righteous anger, she tried to save her oldest brother... threw that blade with all the strength she had left, trying not to recognize Sam, trying not to think about how she would be killing him, too. She missed, the blade sank halfway into Sam's side, only annoying Lucifer. She'd sealed her fate by doing that, but she didn't care at that point. She wanted to die and deserved to.

Lucifer turned his sights to her, swept over to her like a gale force and knocked her down to the ground painfully, crushed her beneath himself, began to choke her with Sam's hands. And then she'd seen her twin brother—seen him, felt a surge of protectiveness. Desperate, dying, she'd told her brother to fight. Told him that she was with him and wasn't leaving. And she saw a glimpse of Sam as she'd died. A panicked look came into his eyes, he'd begun to gasp noisily, fighting himself, loosening his grip on her… before the cold and ruthless expression had snapped back over his face. And when that happened, his hands had crushed her completely, taking her life in a startling jolt of pain, then breaking, then nothing.

It was over. She would live here in the darkness, mind drifting apart. Alone. She was dead. Life had ended.

So then, why did she feel a strange sense of being called back? Why was something drawing her out of this blank place she was in? The darkness dissipated as a blazing blue light abruptly took hold of her and pulled her up and out of the darkness, back to life, into another realm of consciousness completely. Alex felt aware of herself physically again and the world around her. Her eyes snapped open and she gasped in with what was close to panic, her lungs empty of air and desperate for breath. Disoriented and confused—the last thing she'd seen was Sam's face over her, filled with hatred aimed at her—she fought to get her bearings.

Alex felt how she was being held and as her eyes regained the ability to focus, she saw Dean looking down at her in complete shock and dawning agonized relief—and then she saw that Cas stood over him, had leaned down, was drawing his hand away from her. Her mouth fell open slackly, her eyebrows slammed together and her newly restarted heart picked up the pace immediately. Castiel? How... how was he alive? How was she alive? And why was he looking at her like that? With a sad little smile, like he was relieved but also full of apprehension, almost like he were mourning something. Was this even real?

Breathless and definitely panicked, Alex looked at Cas, then Dean, then Cas again, reeling, unable to speak at all, realizing that she felt normal again, not weak and drained and at death's door. But she had been dead! How... she suddenly caught her breath. Was Castiel an angel again? She felt her brother's arms tighten around her, felt him stroking the hair on the side of her head, and he was smiling now, almost laughing, but through tears. "Oh my god—oh my god, Al, you're okay," he breathed, voice choked on relief and deep emotion as he looked at her like he just couldn't believe it. Still spinning mentally, Alex just stared, trying to figure out what had happened as Dean turned his head, looked up at Cas in total stunned wonder. Cas looked down at them with a pained expression on his face.

"Cas... are you God?" Dean asked with a reverent sort of awe.

Cas's sad smile stretched a little wider. "That's a nice compliment. But no." He paused, growing troubled. "Although, I do believe he brought me back. New... and improved." He said those last few words with a certain amount of ruefulness salting the words. Cas looked down at Alex with more of that strange expression, and his sad smile faded, something about the look in his eyes gave it away... that something had changed, something was wrong. And she didn't understand any of this, she was filled with a horrible feeling of dread for reasons she didn't even understand. He held out a hand down to her, indicating she take it.
She did, slowly, in an off-kilter trance, still not even sure if she were really alive, still not sure what was happening. His warm, familiar hand grasped hers and then she knew it was real. But how? How? He helped her stand, and as she reached her full height, she stared at Cas in total confusion, barely able to believe he was standing in front of her again. She looked at the place where she'd stabbed him. There was no blood, no wound, no sign it had happened at all. But she hadn't imagined all of what had happened, she couldn't have. "You're... I saw you die," she stumbled out, filled with turmoil, a strange feeling she'd lost her mind but also sheer desperation to believe he really was okay. She was so puzzled, so lost. "I killed you," she said, a question and a statement all at once and she searched his eyes rapidly. His expression was guarded, he almost seemed to be avoiding her gaze.

"I'm... all right now," he told her, and there was a strange quality to his voice. Hesitance. Reluctance. "I was restored." She realized he had still been holding her hand because at that point, he let go slowly. Alex looked down at her hand—pulled it up a little, turned it over slowly, blinking rapidly in stunned wonder as she realized she was as good as new. Her hand was healthy light olive skin again, no longer grayish and profaned by dark blue veins. He'd healed her completely and she looked at him, feeling a smile dawning across her face because he was alive, and she was too and everything was okay, wasn't it? And she was about to hug him and laugh and cry from happiness, but then her smile fell when she took in the way he looked back at her. Something wasn't right and she felt sure of the fact all over again. Dean stood up, was close to her, a hand light on her back, like he was afraid she would fall over. But she felt fine, strong. Why would she fall over? A strange unsettled feeling kept gnawing at her and Cas's eyes fell away, his jaw tightened. Her heart was beginning to beat at an uneasily fast pace again. What was wrong?

She stared as Cas turned, looked at Bobby's dead body over on the other side of the Impala. Cas went to him and Alex suddenly realized. Wait... she looked around, began to search the area, trying to piece together what had happened. And then she realized who was missing and her stomach dropped out from under her. Oh no.

"W-where's Sam?" she asked softly, afraid of the answer, suddenly feeling short of breath. Dean was looking at a small glinting object on the grass a few feet away from them. His expression was all the answer she needed. Alex followed his gaze and her heart skipped a beat, choking her. The horsemen's rings laid on the grass there, alone.

"He did it, Al," Dean said hollowly, staring at the rings. "He wrestled Lucifer back and he... he dragged Michael in with him."

Oh god... her heart wrenched in her chest, her eyes stung with the automatic onset of tears. Her entire nervous system seemed to betray her, suddenly turning to mush. But that meant... that meant something she couldn't even fathom. "H-he's... gone?" she asked, unsure how that could even be possible. Sam wasn't supposed to leave, he wasn't supposed to die. Not Sam, not Sammy.

Dean's jaw clenched and unclenched, his voice faltered. "He's gone," he confirmed softly. Alex looked at her oldest brother, shaking her head in denial, but saw nothing but grieved affirmation in Dean's face, and with sickened clarity, she knew it was true.

No. She backed away from the rings as she stared at them in horror, not even knowing where she was going, just shocked and stumbling, then hitting up against the side of the Impala, almost collapsing as the word no ran through her mind a thousand times over. And maybe Dean was able to hold it together marginally because he was the oldest and because he was the big brother, but in that moment, she couldn't. Alex put her crumpling face into her hand, bowed her head down, quaking with grief. Gone? He was gone? How could... why did...? He didn't deserve... this wasn't possible...! Her world seemed to fall apart just as quickly as it had come back together. Dean went
to her and enveloped her in his strong arms—arms that had held her throughout the years and always made things better, but not this time because nothing could and she hung onto him wretchedly, in shock, in denial. Dean held her tightly, crushing her almost, but she didn't care. She felt how he was crying, too, both out of relief that she was there with him and out of heartbreak that Sam was lost.

They heard Bobby gasp somewhere nearby. "Holy Moses!" they heard him comment, awestruck and breathless, confused. "Did you just raise me from the dead?"

"I did," Castiel's voice replied.

There was a short silence. Bobby sounded absolutely blown away. "T-thanks."

"You're welcome."

Dean was murmuring something about gonna be okay, gonna be okay over and over, his hand on the back of Alex's head so tightly that it hurt, his vice-like fingers pulled her hair and dug into her scalp, but the pain seemed so trivial in comparison to the pain of losing Sam. Alex could hear two sets of footsteps approaching and Dean's arms loosened around her, he pulled away, but not far.

Castiel and Bobby stood beside each other and Bobby took one look at the Winchesters and it was clear that he understood. His careworn face was stricken. "… he didn't make it?" he asked softly, and Dean shook his head, let go of Alex, took a couple steps back, pinched the bridge of his nose and struggled to remain composed to some degree. Alone now, Alex just stared at the horsemen's rings, fighting the feeling of total horror and loss and no.

"C'mere, sweetheart," Bobby urged Alex, who was barely able to see at this point. He put an arm around her, led her away from the place where Sam had died and she let him, in a daze of shock. Dean watched blankly, Cas hesitated, then followed after Bobby, who took Alex off about twenty feet.

"Just focus on breathing, okay?" Bobby instructed, stopping Alex and holding her by both arms, trying to get her to look at him. She didn't.

"W-why is he dead and I'm alive?" The question was said softly and with heartbreaking confusion. She stared at the ground, then looked to her side where Cas stood, her face distorted strangely. Bobby looked at Cas too, who was silent and seemed to be waiting. And Bobby realized that he wasn't the person who should be holding her. He let go, stepped back. Even before Bobby had moved away from her and let go, Alex and Cas were moving toward each other, she crashed into his waiting arms and he held her closely as she mourned the loss of her brother. Bobby hung back, gave them their space, watched as they drew back a minute later and just looked at each other wordlessly—Alex through red tear-filled eyes. Cas's expression flickered with empathy and pain when he saw her expression, he put a hand against her face, bowed his forehead down until it rested against hers, and her eyes squeezed shut as she struggled not to weep openly.

She breathed in and out loudly and unevenly and Cas pulled her closer, his hand now on the back of her head and gentle. Bobby didn't mean to watch, but it was hard to look away. Cas loved Alex. And he could tell. It was moving on a level he hadn't expected. Trying to be respectful, Bobby turned away, tugged the brim of his hat down a little bit, looked over at Dean, who had walked over to where the horsemen's rings had been thrown. Bobby felt the grief of it hit him all over again. There was so much bittersweet pride too that Sam had done it, that Sam had saved their asses and sacrificed himself so selflessly. But it hurt. It hurt a hell of a lot. They had known this was gonna happen, hadn't they? Still, it blew chunks. This life, the life of hunting, had no happy endings. So why was he always so stunned and saddened when the inevitable happened? Ripped
up friends, dead relatives, and Sam down in the cage with the devil? Nothing about it was fair or right. But it was still reality.

A few minutes passed, Bobby looked back and saw that Alex had sank down onto her heels into a crouch, Cas had as well in front of her and was holding her hands loosely between them. She seemed quieter, subdued even, but deeply mournful as she looked down blankly at their intwined hands. It looked like Cas squeezed her hands gently as he told her almost too quietly for Bobby to hear that he would be back in just a moment. Alex nodded automatically when he told her that, not fully in the moment, seeming someplace very far away. Cas stood slowly, looking down at her for a long moment with the oddest, most pensive expression on his face.

Cas glanced at Bobby, a question there in his eyes, and Bobby nodded. He wasn't going to leave her alone. A muscle jumped in Cas's cheek, he nodded tensely, glanced at Alex again, then turned and headed for where Dean was.

Castiel approached Dean slowly, who looked down at the horsemen's rings, just in front of his feet. His expression was stony. When Castiel reached him, he stood beside him and said nothing for a long moment. At last, he spoke, soft and somber. "I'm sorry for your loss, Dean," Cas said, and Dean glanced at him sidelong but said nothing, just returned his gaze to the ground after a couple of seconds.

Silence spanned between the two of them for another minute and Cas scanned the cemetery, just thinking. He looked back at where Alex was. She was still squatted down and had her arms wrapped around her legs, she was staring unseeingly into middle distance with a strange, pained look on her face. Bobby was next to her now, talking to her, a hand on her shoulder. Cas felt more pain just looking at her like that. Even though he could heal her physically, he couldn't take away the trauma and pain of what had happened… and who she had lost. Guilty for reasons he wasn't sure of, Castiel joined Dean in looking down at the ground, at the horsemen's rings.

After a moment, he spoke again. "I have to find out why I was resurrected," he said out loud, slowly and full of dubiousness, maybe hoping Dean could offer advice and insight, maybe looking for help or input. "There must be a purpose."

Dean barely reacted. "Maybe God just likes you, huh?" A cynical, halfhearted question.

Castiel shook his head in deep, troubled thought. "That can't be it. I've gone against every law Heaven instituted over and over again."

There was a soft, tired sigh. "Maybe that's why God likes you."

Cas's eyes darted to Dean. "I very much doubt that God likes me, Dean. But I'm indebted to him, all the same." He paused heavily. "I have to return to Heaven and discover why I was given back my life yet again."

Dean looked at him with a strange expression. "Why don't you just chalk it up to good luck and let it go, man?"

"I don't believe in luck," Castiel replied, not looking at Dean, just staring into far distance, not seeing what he looked at. "I have to find out why I've been put back. I think I already know... but perhaps Joshua can tell me plainly."

Dean's brows furrowed slightly. "Joshua? The one who God talks to?"

"Yes. Him." Cas's eyes drifted upward even as the weight of reality settled over him. He could hear
the whispers of the heavenly host in his mind, indistinct and abuzz over what had just happened with Michael and Lucifer. He realized something and it worried him even further. "With Michael in the cage, I'm sure it's total anarchy up there. The only archangel left now will be Raphael. But he may not be there anymore, either. I don't know."

Cas paused, felt Dean watching him. Is this why God had brought him back? To return to Heaven and restore the peace that had been lost? Now that he had thought it, he couldn't seem to find any other logical conclusion. He looked at Dean, who was looking at Cas almost mistrustfully now. "I think God must have brought me back to... to bring peace back to what's inevitably been left in shambles. I just don't know what he'd choose me."

Dean's growing foul expression puzzled Castiel. "What, so that makes you like the new Master Yoda of the clouds?"

Cas's eyes narrowed in thought. He didn't recognize that name. "Who is this Yoda you speak of?"

Lacking his normal fire, Dean shook his head almost ruefully. He sounded absent from the conversation, like summoning the energy to speak was the most difficult task he had ever been faced with. "Man, you have got to catch up on pop culture. Little green guy, talks funny?"

Confused as to why Dean would draw that comparison, Cas tried to understand, but couldn't. "...that doesn't sound anything like me."

There was a glimmer of impatience, almost scorn in Dean's expression now. "The point is, God gives you a brand new shiny set of wings, and suddenly you're his little bitch again?" Dean shook his head, but his frown was more pained and let down than anything else. "After everything we went through, man? You're just gonna ditch us?"

"You misunderstand me, Dean, I never said—"

Dean cut him off tensely. "What about Alex, huh?"

A question that somehow seemed to bludgeon Castiel in the stomach. He understood what Dean was asking and he was wondering the same thing too. He looked toward her again, pained in every way. Remembering his promise to God. He answered Dean the only way he knew how. "My allegiances are torn."

"Wow Spock. Real heart you got there," Dean said acidly, glaring straight ahead of himself sullenly.

Cas felt himself reacting to Dean's comment in a mixture of indignant surprise and confusion. "First you endlessly criticize me for my role in your sister's life and now you're angry with me for what's happened? For the choice I'm faced with?" There was a pause and helpless anger surged forth. "Dean, I did everything I've done for you."

Dean gave the angel a dirty look. "For me, Cas?"

"Yes," Cas replied immediately, empathetically. It was true, but there was a part he'd left out, and Dean was obviously angry he hadn't said it. Cas was frustrated by everything and Dean's predictable attitude was exacerbating the situation. "And for her," Cas admitted, but her knew Dean already knew that and said as much. "You know I have."

Dean suddenly changed, became deeply emotional in a way that wasn’t angry. "And I owe you my life several times over, I owe you everything, but you sound like you're about to get flighty—I mean, now, of all times? Sam just died, Cas. Do you get that? Do you?" His eyes were red, watery.
"And you're just gonna drop her—me—and run back to Heaven?" He shook his head, looked away, voice wavering as he tried to sound tough. "That's great Cas."

Suddenly understanding how much Dean was grieving and afraid of losing even more than he already had, Cas's anger faded into sadness. He didn't always understand these things intuitively, in fact he almost never did unless it was with Alex. He understood her the best and sometimes he forgot how little he understood everyone else in comparison. And for all the ways Dean had made him angry and alienated him and hurt him in the past, all he saw when he looked at the man beside him now was a brother, someone he cared deeply about, and was hurt to see pained. "I'm not going to just 'drop' you or her, Dean," Cas told him. "I could never do that."

Dean looked at Cas guardedly, struggling to control himself and to appear strong. Cas's jaw tightened, he looked away. "But I have to go find out what's required of me now that I've been brought back."

Not what the other man had wanted to hear. Dean's face darkened. "Yeah, uh huh. Well when you see your buddy God up there, if you see him, you tell him I'm coming for him next."

Cas watched him sadly. "You're angry."

"You're damn right I'm angry," Dean said, and his voice was gaining a familiar gruff edge to it. "I mean, what about Sam? What about me, huh? Where's my grand prize? All I got is my brother in a hole!"

Dean was being irrational, and Cas reminded him of such, trying to help him see the good in it. "And Alex and Bobby, alive again." Dean's face twisted oddly, he shook his head, looked down. Cas didn't know what else to say. "You got what you asked for, Dean, what we worked for. No paradise. No hell. Just more of the same." Genuinely confused, Cas looked at his friend for a moment. "You knew it would end this way—you knew what the risk was. Why are you acting as though you didn't?" Dean was silent and stony.

Cas attempted to console Dean, tell him how the world would be a better place for what had happened the day when Sam Winchester defeated the devil and flung him into his cage. "Sam's sacrifice—" he started.

"Enough, Cas!" Dean exploded. Bobby and Alex were startled by the outburst that was loud enough for them to hear from about twenty feet away. They looked at the two men in concern and Dean saw it, steadied himself, shut his eyes, held his hands out, controlling his temper. When he opened his eyes again, he seemed regretful, but didn't apologize. Just glanced Cas's general direction. "I'm not like you. When I lose someone, I can't just accept it and be on my merry way."

Hurt and chastised, Cas looked down and away, wondering why he tried at all. "I was merely attempting to comfort you."

Dean made a face, gave a cynical little huff. "I'm a little past a pat on the back right now."

Cas understood that Dean was reeling from the loss of his brother, but he couldn't comprehend why the man was lashing out at him in this way. All he'd done was help and sacrifice and bleed for the Winchesters, and Dean never thanked him, not really, had only continually lamented about what Cas hadn't done and wouldn't do. And Castiel wished Dean could understand how he needed Dean to help right now with figuring out what to do about God bringing him back. But Dean didn't seem to grasp Castiel's dilemma, or maybe he did and just didn't care.

"You agreed to this, Dean," Castiel said, a little firmer and harsher than he meant to. "And this is
for the best—the world is safe again, Lucifer is gone. You knew the stakes, you knew what this would cost."

Dean's brow tensed. "The stakes weren't fair."

No. They weren't. They never were though, were they? There was a long silence and Castiel thought of what he was up against. He didn't know what his Father would demand in return for Alex's resurrection. All he knew was that he feared he would lose her, that God would tell him he was never to see her again, that he would be punished for sinning against her or for breaking the laws of Heaven. Worse still, that she would be punished somehow, too. But perhaps God would tell him that he had been been given the opportunity to watch Alex, to meet her, to become a disjointed part of this broken little family all on purpose. Maybe God wanted him to be the model and messenger of a new era, one in which angels did not file into a line and serve as tools, as hammers as Dean had once put it. A new era where angels pursued choice and free will and didn't chain themselves to the rigid constricts of mindless servitude. The more Castiel pondered it, the more this made sense to him. Why else would God reward him twice now for his seeming rebellion against the grand plan?

God had brought him back because this was what he wanted—victory over the devil. Or perhaps God didn't even actually care about the outcome, perhaps he was more interested in watching this grand story unfold page by page, in the details that made up the tale of earth and humanity, in the twists and turns and surprises. Maybe God wanted his angel children to leave behind the idea of predestination, maybe Castiel had done the right thing, maybe God had been disappointed in all the other angels for never questioning or doubting their roles. Maybe, maybe, maybe… Castiel could think of so many maybes and possibilities. But he couldn't be sure until he went to Heaven and found the answer himself.

Castiel looked at Dean, who looked so forlorn and upset. And as always, Cas set aside his wounded feelings and personal worries and tried to help. The stakes weren't fair, Dean had said. And Cas agreed, but couldn't imagine what could be done about it. So he asked. "What would you have me do, Dean?"

Dean didn't have to think about it. "Get Sam outta there," he replied immediately, desperately. "You resurrected Alex and Bobby, can't you do the same for Sam? I mean you got me outta Hell."

True, but it had been with a whole garrison of angels at his side. Cas thought about it pensively, uncertain. "That was different."

Taking Cas's reflective answer as a no, Dean clouded over mournfully, looked away. "I guess I just thought maybe you were done playing by the rules, Cas." It was easy to hear how sorry for himself he felt. "Guess I was wrong."

Cas looked over at Alex once more and he felt that familiar swelling, bursting feeling in the vicinity of his chest. She looked so sad, so lost, and it didn't have to be that way. He had the ability to change it now. "Maybe..." he pondered softly, almost to himself as a thousand memories of her and then imaginings of a future with her ran across his mind, "maybe I am done playing by the rules."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dean asked peevishly.

Cas thought hard, his mind going over a new thought, a stirring possibility. A sense of thrill and elation was beginning to grow in him. He looked at Dean fully. "What would you rather have, Dean?" he asked. "Peace or freedom?"
"Why the hell can't I have both?" Dean asked, taking in Castiel's strange expression, clearly confused and exasperated and sounding close to tears even though he covered it over with anger. "Which one would you rather have?" he asked, and there was a gruffness to the question that Castiel ignored.

He was looking at the one with dark brown hair and hazel eyes. She was looking back at him and Castiel knew the answer, felt his chest almost constrict. Which would he rather have? He raised his chin a little, almost smiling now. "I'd rather have freedom."

And freedom was his for the taking. Cas felt a certain sense of confidence welling in him at full force as he thought of a God who had restored his life twice, who had rewarded him for going against the precepts of Heaven, who looked upon him with clear favor. For a minute, he forgot his worries about what God would demand in return for what he'd been given, in fact, maybe Cas almost believed there would be no outstanding debt... that God had blessed him among all the angels, had given him this angelic power back for a reason. For this reason. To be free.

And feeling as though he could soar on the confidence at the thought of what he was going to do for them—for Alex, Dean, and Bobby—he left there without a second thought, eager to do what he was planning. He hurried, veins humming with anticipation and hubris and purpose. He would bring Sam back. There was no reason for him not to. God had chosen him and given him this power for a reason, and had told him, without words, that freedom and choice was what he desired for the angels. And if not for all of the angels, for Castiel.

Wings black as night carried him down, rending the dimensions apart as Castiel delved into the underworld, into harrow hell, where time was distorted and everything was darker than pitch, but on fire all the same.

He left behind a shocked Dean and a startled, afraid Alex. They didn't know where he had gone, and Alex shot to her feet when he disappeared without a single warning. He said he'd be right back, where had he gone? And wrecked by the loss of her twin she stared at the place he'd been with a gripping fear that she wouldn't see her angel again.

There was no reason for that specific fear, no logic behind it... but she felt it all the same.

Sam woke alone in a rainy graveyard he had died in, gasping for air as he laid in the mud, soaked to the bone. He sat straight up, heaving breaths noisily as he squinted against the pelting raindrops. He was very disoriented. It was dark—night time? He remembered falling down into darkness that burned as he pulled Michael down too... then nothing else.

Standing slowly, looking around, Sam was aware of how he felt... nothing. Cold, wet, dirty, yes, but otherwise apathetic. Almost bored or disinterested. Just... fine. Should he feel fine? He realized he did feel unsure—definitely unsure as to why he was alive again, what had brought him back. Where were his brother and sister? He wondered that, then realized he didn't really care where they were. Huh. Strange. He didn't let it bother him, instead he headed for the adjacent road, walking through the downpour steadily. Not feeling like himself, the way he remembered being before, but not finding the ability to care about it, either.

Castiel followed Sam invisibly, who hitched a ride from a stranger. When Sam didn't ask to use a phone, when he didn't appear concerned or shaken at all, Castiel felt the first flicker of doubt, the first beginning of the thought that maybe he had made a mistake. He decided that no, it was just that Sam was just reeling—different humans dealt with shock in different ways. That's what Castiel told himself so that he didn't have to give credence to the feeling of fear that flitted briefly across his mind.
Castiel decided he would come back and check shortly on Sam, make sure he reunited with his brother and sister. And even though his next instinct was to go to Alex—time worked strangely in harrow hell and he'd been gone for only a few minutes in his mind, but here on earth it had been probably eight hours or more. She would be wondering and worrying.

And he almost did, but then he heard the whispers of his brothers and sisters in Heaven and he resolved to find Joshua first. He wanted to be able to tell her everything, explain his promise and plea to God and know what his debt was, or if there was one at all. He left Sam and his powerful wings carried him through the veil that separated earth from Heaven. He had been gone for what felt like forever, and when he arrived, when he found himself in the paradise that belonged to an autistic man who drowned in a bathtub in 1953, he felt a sense of peace overtake him. This was the Heaven he favored above all others—it was a serene, verdant garden, neatly kept and orderly. Many flowers bloomed, and the majority of them were yellow. The autistic man stood in a far corner of the place, in his bright red zip up sweater. He flew a kite peacefully like he always did, gazing up at it with a soft smile and rapt delight.

Cas felt himself smiling. He didn't know why he was so endeared to this paradise, but he was. He sensed a new presence and turned around, seeing several of his brothers and sisters there. Rachel was at the front of them and seeing their familiar faces calmed Castiel in a way he had not anticipated. Composed and quietly poised as always, Rachel looked at him with an amazed expression on her face. "You're alive..." she exclaimed softly, perhaps unable to believe it.

"Yes," Castiel replied, even as her face registered confusion.

"But Castiel, we saw Lucifer destroy you," she protested softly.

He spread his arms out slightly like he'd seen all three of the Winchesters do before and shrugged his shoulders up slightly, a gesture he understood to convey humility. "I was brought back—and as I used to be, no less."

Behind her, the other angels exchanged surprised glances. "And Lucifer? Michael?" Rachel asked.

"They're both gone," Castiel answered, approaching her now. "Locked into the cage."

At the news about Michael, some of the angels appeared to grow worried but others, Rachel in particular, seemed to take it all as a sign, a wonder. "It was God, wasn't it?" Rachel asked, filled with hope, her confusion fading. "He's finally returned." The other angels clustered around her now, coming forward from where they had been standing back.

Cas smile fondly, almost proudly. "No. It was the Winchesters. They brought down the Apocalypse, Sam jumped into the cage after overpowering from the devil."

Disbelief showed on Rachel's face, but it was curious, not judgmental or cynical. "How could a mere human do such a thing?" she asked.

More pride swelled in his chest. "The Winchester family is quite remarkable."

Rachel thought a moment, not as interested in hearing about his humans as his resurrection. "But it was God who brought you back, wasn't it? Who else could it have been?" She looked at him with a reverence and awe he had never seen another angel look at him with, and it was startling. "He's chosen you, Castiel," she said in a breathless, revering tone. "To lead us."

"No," Castiel corrected her immediately, gently, feeling certainty and purpose once again, faith in what he was about to say. "No one leads us anymore. God chose me as messenger, to tell all of
Heaven: Things are not as they always have been. We're all free to make our own choices and to choose our own fates."

As he had guessed, the idea of choosing her own fate mystified Rachel and the other angels. But instead of puzzling over it right away, Rachel instead tilted her head to the side and studied him with a veiled expression. "And what fate have you chosen, Castiel?" she asked, with the first hints of guardedness in her voice.

Castiel thought of the most beautiful smile he had ever seen and the touch of warm skin and the feeling of belonging; the one human being he could call his own. He answered truthfully, overcome by even the briefest thought of her. "A simple one. A new one."

Rachel seemed to understand, surprising Castiel. "With her. On earth." He was stilled temporarily because he had forgotten, for a moment, that Heaven would know of his involvement with Alex, that he might face discrimination and judgement for it, for everything he had done. Cas was further startled by Rachel's next question, spoken with curiosity and a hint of apprehensiveness. "What does it feel like? This word, 'love.'"

When she asked that, a couple other angels behind her looked fascinated, a couple others looked dubious and uncomfortable. Castiel thought about it. What did love feel like? "It's... not something I know how to describe," he answered slowly. "It's beyond words, somehow."

"And you felt it?" Rachel asked in soft wondrous disbelief.

"Yes," Castiel said, then looked in turn at the other angels—Abel, Hillel, Ezar, Ruth, Gad, Esther. He loved them, his brothers and sisters, all the thousands of them that filled the celestial planes… but he didn't love them like he loved the humans. He thought maybe this was God's ultimate plan for the angels and realized that he had never known what love really was until he had walked earth, met the Winchesters, fallen into the arms of the youngest one. The one with eyes like promises. He looked at Rachel, stirred. "I believe that God wants us to feel love."

Rachel's brow knotted together. "But the laws… the precepts…" she protested slowly.

"Perhaps they were tests," Castiel suggested. He realized that without solid evidence, a way of proving what he was theorizing about, they wouldn't understand, ever. He wouldn't have understood before, either.

"Tests?" Rachel looked at Abel, who stood beside her, and their confusion was mirrored perfectly in each other's faces. Rachel returned her inquisitive gaze to Castiel. "We don't understand. What does God want us to do if not follow orders?" She almost sounded afraid.

"God wants us to have freedom," Castiel said, trying to convey how it was a good thing, but only further mystifying his brethren.

Rachel was trying to comprehend. "But what does he want us to do with it?"

How else could he explain it? Castiel didn't know how to say it any other way. "To be free."

Rachel was quiet for a moment, processing. She shook her head just slightly. "I don't understand."

Reflecting that perhaps explaining free will to the angels would be like trying to teach poetry to fish, Castiel decided to try again later. He really needed to hurry, to be brief here. His priority was not teaching his brothers and sisters at the moment. "Where is Joshua?" he asked. "I must speak with him."
"We don't know," Rachel said. "He hasn't been seen since he spoke with the Winchesters."

There was yet another flicker of that feeling of foreboding and worry when she said that. "But that was months ago," Castiel said, his confidence fading slightly.

"He's gone, or hiding," Rachel said. "No one knows. It's a mystery."

"Why would..." Castiel began, then saw how Rachel and the angels behind her all looked over his shoulder to the same place at the same time. He felt the presence before he even turned, but turned anyway, filled with trepidation.

Raphael stood there. He was flanked by three male angels on either side. "Castiel," he said lowly, his dark eyes boring into Cas's unflinchingly, idly threatening. "You've returned at last. Have you come to beg forgiveness?" That's when Castiel looked to the angel at Raphael's left-hand side—the familiar, striking pale face and dark black eyes, the whisper of a smirk on his lips. Hezion.

Alarm raised in Cas immediately, he reached for his blade. "What is he doing here?" Cas demanded. "He's a traitor, he was working with Lucifer, I saw him!"

Raphael looked faintly annoyed at Castiel's reaction, Hezion just smiled as if he were accepting a great compliment. "There's no need for thug tactics, Castiel, put your weapon away. Hezion was working with Lucifer because Michael and I told him to. He was what some might call a…"

Raphael's expression flickered into almost a smile, "double agent. Put in place to ensure that Lucifer would obtain his vessel so that the apocalypse would happen. The apocalypse you derailed, Castiel."

Anger surged forth at the realization that this angel had played a part of hurting the Winchesters, in Alex, in any small way and Castiel had to force himself to return his blade to the inside of his coat. Raphael was too strong to fight, and with the angels beside him, Cas stood no chance at all. "The apocalypse is a fight that doesn't need to be fought," Castiel insisted in a growl.

Raphael studied him coolly, an air of superiority in his eyes. "Says who? You?"

In no uncertain terms, Castiel raised his chin, defiant. "Yes."

There was the slightest smirk, the smallest narrowing of the eyes. Then Raphael turned to all the other angels. "Leave us." They obeyed immediately, but Rachel last of all, with a concerned expression on her face. When they were gone, Raphael clasped his hands behind his back, circled Castiel once fully, slowly. Cas watched him hawkishly, suspicious and on his guard.

"You've grown prideful," Raphael observed. "I wonder why it is our Father chose to restore you. You're fortunate I've decided to give you a final chance. Tomorrow—I've called for a full assembly of the holy host." He came to a stop in front of Cas. "You'll kneel before me and pledge allegiance to the flag, all right?"

"And what flag is that?" Cas tested.

Raphael almost rolled his eyes, growing exasperated. "Me, Castiel. Allegiance to me."

"Are you joking?" Cas demanded.

"Do I look like I'm joking?" Raphael retorted.

Castiel frowned slightly. "...you never look like you're joking."
Least of all right now. Raphael was aloof and capricious. "You rebelled—against God, Heaven, and me. Now you'll alone. We'll start by freeing Lucifer and Michael from their cage. And then we'll get our show back on the road."

Just as Castiel had thought, and absolute revulsion rose in him at the thought of it. "Raphael… no. The apocalypse is not going to happen, I made sure of it!"

There was a offhand eyebrow raise from the archangel. "You merely stalled it. The apocalypse will always happen, and I'll ensure that it does—it's God's will."

Cas's teeth were gritted together painfully and he shook his head, forceful. "You know that Armageddon is not necessary! Why do you insist on seeing our brothers destroy each other and tear the earth apart?!"

Raphael seemed nearly bored. "Because it's what I want."

His older brother's apathy merely served to fuel Castiel's growing rage and fear. "You're asserting your own will to be that of our Father's, he accused. "Your desires are not God's will. You are not God, Raphael."

Another soft smile, a glittering insolent pride in the archangel's eyes. "That remains to be seen."

"You blasphemous—" Castiel started.

"Let God come prove me otherwise," Raphael taunted. "He hasn't yet." He fixed Castiel with a haughty gaze. "Don't get righteous with me, Castiel, do you know how sanctimonious you sound? I know the full extent of how you've sullied yourself with that human fleck this past year. You allowed her to corrupt you, twist your mind, drag you down into the filth with her. You reek with the stench of the sins you committed with her."

He looked down his nose at Cas, cavalier. "You've become just like them, haven't you? Confused. Misguided. Self-righteous. Pitiabale. You've forgotten who you are, what your purpose is. I'm giving you a chance to redeem yourself, to be cleansed. Your purpose is to obey the will of Heaven, not to pursue free thinking. Your loyalties are to me, not to the Winchesters."

Castiel was filled with doubt and ambiguity now, but he chose to be stubborn, to cling onto the idea that freedom was what God had given him. "I disagree," he said sharply.

Raphael inspected Cas slowly, genuinely perplexed. "You've broken every law for them. For her. Why? What is so… important about her?"

"Everything," Castiel replied absolutely, not even thinking, just speaking. "Everything about her is important. She is one of the most important humans to have ever existed."

"And you know this how?"

A pause. Castiel wasn't sure and he withered slightly. "Because of what I feel."

"Feel?" Raphael's inquisitiveness was gone in place of pious disdain. "Your feelings are of no consequence to me. Only your actions matter, only your obedience. And you've done nothing but disobey since you set eyes upon her."

Confused, because what the archangel said was true, or Castiel would have believed them to be true a few years ago, he fumbled for words. "God has shown me favor despite my actions, therefore I can only conclude—"
"That you're special?" Raphael asked with a sharp, biting laugh. "That God approves of your sin? Whatever his reasons for bringing you back... I don't care. I know your trespasses, Castiel, and you will listen to me or I will turn you to dust."

Cas looked down, growing more and more upset as he realized the feeling of victory and triumph he'd felt when he rescued Sam was gone, washing away. Raphael was powerful and wanted to restart the apocalypse. That couldn't happen. But how could he be stopped?

"I'm the only remaining archangel, or have you forgotten?" Raphael asked, as if he knew Cas's thoughts and was gloating about how Cas had no allies, no way of fighting back against him. "God left us and one by one, the archangels have been lost," he continued. "First, Genesis fell to earth, then Gabriel abandoned us, Lucifer rebelled and was cast out. Now Michael is lost. Who is left, Castiel? Me. I am in charge now. God has chosen me. Not you."

Eyes sliding up to Raphael's, Castiel was filled with animosity. "And you want me to follow your ludicrous plan, to undo everything I worked for this past year? To let this fight between Lucifer and Michael happen?"

"Yes," Raphael said, unaffected and detached. "You sound upset, Castiel. A human trait that has no place in your existence. Like it not, all the work you've done to defy my plans has been in vain. Tomorrow you'll swear yourself to me, along with the rest of the brethren."

"They won't bow to you," Castiel insisted, growing panicked inside. "They won't let you put the apocalypse back into motion."

Raphael was undeterred, almost amused. "Are you sure? You know better than anyone, Castiel. They're soldiers. They weren't built for freedom. They were built to follow. And do you see what I'm doing? Leading them. Not filling their minds with useless notions of free-thinking and choice."

Castiel stepped closer to Raphael, staring at him with all the wrath he felt. "Then I won't let you."

"Really?" Raphael asked patronizingly. "You?" He raised and opened his hand, his palm facing Castiel as it filled with painful white light.

Castiel screamed as he was blasted far from there, through the heavens erratically. His vessel pulsed with pain and he slammed down onto the ground painfully, back-first, began to cough up blood as what Raphael had done to him took effect. He rolled over, spat the thick red substance down onto sand, trembling violently. He could hear seagulls crying and the rhythm of the surf crashing on the shore nearby. A few feet away from where he was bowed over the sand pathetically, Cas could see a shining pair of dress shoes. He looked up slowly.

Over him, Raphael stood, towering, cold and unfeeling. "I grow tired of your insolence and resistance, little brother," he said in his soft, low voice. "Tomorrow you kneel... or you and anyone with you dies. Including her. I'll be watching you, Castiel." Raphael crouched down, his eyes drilling into Castiel's. "The day you go to that little human again I'll be right behind you, there to take her from you. It's only a matter of time before I find her, so bow to me or I'll torment your little human pet for all of eternity." Horror overcame Castiel at the archangels threats. Raphael stood again, looked down his nose. "Don't think I won't."

He was gloating now, and Castiel was disgraced, breathless, afraid. "Now," Raphael said softly. "Do you see where free will and choice has gotten you? I know how weak you truly are." He let a couple beats of victorious silence hang. And then Raphael disappeared.
Sometimes when the worst things happen, it brings out the best in us, the strongest and most fierce baseline abilities we possess. But sometimes, the worst just brings out the worst. For the Winchesters, who had endured blow after blow and loss after loss, they should have been stronger for it. But even the strongest structure will break when it's been cracked relentlessly, when it's been put to the test just a few times too many.

Relationships as strong and steadfast as Dean and Alex's should have been able to sustain the loss of Sam. But because of the tension and mutual disapproval that had been building between them, because they had already been at a breaking point... the loss of Sam and the disappearance of Cas were combined into the final straw that served to break them apart completely. Less than twenty-four hours after Sam fell down into hell and Castiel disappeared, the two surviving Winchesters tore into each other instead of hanging onto each other for support.

Around three in the morning of May 2, 2010—the twins twenty-eighth birthday, Alex burst back into their motel room from the rainy walkway she'd been pacing for the past hour. She had been calling and calling and calling Cas all day since he disappeared, he wouldn't come, and her grief had turned to raging anger all directed at Dean. She was miserable and mourning her twin, Dean was withdrawn and silent, seemed to have checked out mentally after an initial bout of uncontrollable emotions. Bobby was off to himself a few rooms down, sensing that the Winchesters needed space. The youngest Winchester was at her wit's end.

Dean, sleepless and trying to get drunk on a steady flow of beer and whiskey, was sitting on one of the beds and in a horrible, pitiable state. He was using the laptop and trying to look through news stories, trying to find something to do. Anything but face what he had lost, anything but process it all, anything but think about how Sam wasn't ever going to walk into the room and get on his nerves again, steal his deodorant, make that unamused bitchy face at him.

When Alex stormed back in and startled him out of his thoughts, her hair damp and jacket askew and expression foul, he should have known what was about to happen. He should have known better than to let himself talk to her, he should have known he would say things he'd regret.

"What did you say to him, Dean?" Alex demanded after she slammed the door behind herself. A little startled, a little more than tipsy, Dean looked at her, unclear about what she was asking.

"Come again?" he asked.

"To Cas," she said accusingly. "He won't answer me and you're the last person who talked to him. What did you say."

Dean made a face. Just what he wanted to talk about. "What about what he said to me? That he was going back to Heaven to be the new sheriff or some bull like that." He took a swig of beer as her face dropped in disbelief. What? He looked at her in a way that was heartless and insensitive in the moment. "Why do you look so surprised? He was never gonna stay." Dean had the nerve to be angry at her, but he had warned her about this and she had brushed him aside like he didn't matter.

"I told you and you wouldn't listen," he said darkly, sullen, annoyed by everything, not looking at her now. "I didn't say a damn thing to him."

"I know you did this Dean, I know you did!" She shot back tremulously, growing more and more emotional. "Was it not enough that I had to lose Sam, now you had to try and take Cas, too?!" She made a strange moaning sound, like she was in physical pain then looked up at the ceiling, began to shout like a crazy person. "Cas! Castiel! Cas!" She was frustrated and scared, and Dean could see it. "Where the hell are you?"

"Al. He's an angel," Dean said angrily, standing up and shoving the laptop to the side, pissed at her
for being more worried about Cas than upset about her brother being lost forever. "He was always gonna leave you; why the hell did you think it could end differently?!" Cruel words but the truth as far as Dean was concerned, because no one stayed, ever.

"I mean, have you met us?" he ranted. "We never get happy endings, case in point, yesterday!" His sister was looking at him and listening to every word, wounded and shocked and unwilling to believe, but Dean kept going, angry at the whole damn world, totally irrational because of it, because of how hurt he was, too, at Cas's unexplained disappearance. Alex wasn't the only one who had called him and gotten no answer. "Cas is up there, floating around being God's good little holy errand bitch-boy and that winged jackass never gave two shits about us," Dean said, directing all the anger he felt at his sister. "Did you really think—"

She lashed out at him, struck the beer bottle he'd been holding out of his hand, sending it crashing to the floor, where it burst. "Shut up, just shut up!" she screeched, and for a minute, all Dean could see was a pathetic little kid in front of him when she batted his drink out of his grasp. But somehow it just made him cynical and annoyed instead of wrathful. He was so fucking tired. He looked at where the bottle was busted and light brown beer pooled into the cheap motel carpet.

"I'm gonna pretend you didn't just do that," he said, his tone not kind at all. He turned and sat back down on the bed, giving her a dirty look as he cracked open a new beer. She wasn't even looking at him—had her teeth clenched and mouth in a hard line and was glaring at the wall. At least she had stopped her damn incessant whiny shouting. Dean had a couple cruel thoughts about when she hadn't been able to make any sounds at all and felt ashamed of himself, became quiet and subdued. The things he'd said to her seemed harsh, he felt a pang of guilt. He just didn't know how to handle what he was feeling right now—god, why wasn't there more whiskey? He didn't know how to say he was sorry to her, so he didn't even try.

They fought sometimes, squabbled as siblings do, and they always just pushed it aside, got over it without saying sorry. He figured that time would be the same. He was wrong. "I was looking at some websites and seeing if there were any jobs around…" he started wearily, trying to move forward and push the argument out of the room, let her know he was willing to just let it go and move on… but she apparently wasn't done being angry.

In a rage the likes he'd never seen her in before, Alex grabbed the laptop from him in a flash of movement, threw it across the room where it smashed into the wall and broke. "Fuck hunting!" she screamed.

Dean looked at laptop, which had broken into two halves—screen and keyboard. "That was Sam's laptop," he said, quiet, low, not looking at her.

What Dean didn't know at that moment was that Alex blamed herself for the whole thing, and that the idea of hunting was suddenly the last thing she wanted to do. That she felt like the biggest fool in all of existence for falling victim to Lucifer and landing Sam in the cage. She didn't accept that maybe it was inevitable that Sam would end up down there. She faulted herself and was scared of getting Dean hurt too, she felt like Cas had left her, and she was, in a word, done; at a level of grief she didn't know how to handle and didn't want to trust anyone with. And as a result, she lost her mind a little bit, turned it all into anger, and aimed all of that anger at her brother.

"How the hell can you think about hunting right now, huh?" She asked, loud and impassioned and out of control. "How the fuck can you just try and act like everything's normal?" She was crying now, she almost seemed to be pleading with her brother at this point. "Sam died yesterday!"

And if she'd wanted him to get mad, it worked. Dean shot to his feet, incensed. "You think I don't know that?!" He shouted, and the room fell silent. The two of them looked at each other with
pained expressions, full of agony, and Dean felt himself getting close to tears as he stared at her shining cheeks. "You think I don't know today is your birthday? His birthday?" He asked, hurt that Alex would think he didn't care. He put his forehead down into the palm of his hand. She must think so little of him. His head hurt, he felt the effects of the whiskey.

"It's killing me, okay?" He let his hand slap down to his side. "And that's why I need to chop something's head off, cuz if I don't, I… I don't know what I'll do." He felt defeated. "We gotta just keep going, you know?" he looked at her pleadingly, the one who had always been with him and kept her head down, kept fighting, given him a reason to fight, too. But she didn't seem to share his sentiments, and instead of calming down, she got more riled up.

"Why the hell would we keep going?" She asked, disgusted. "Are you friggin' serious? This is our sign that we need to stop before we screw the world up any more than we already have!"

Dean was indignant at her implication, at what it said about Sam's sacrifice. "We saved the world!"

"We couldn't even save our own brother!" Alex shot back loudly. "He's in the pit and it's my fault!"

"No—" Dean told her immediately and forcefully, shocked at how much she clearly meant that. "No it's not."

She got even angrier, raging like a hurricane at this point. "Stop lying to me, I'm not a child, I know what I did, stop trying to protect me!"

"It's my job to protect you!" Dean retorted, getting mad again, feeling his patience wearing thin.

Her expression turned ugly, nasty. "Is it also your 'job' to run off the only guy I've ever loved?" she asked cynically.

"You don't love him," Dean muttered in dark annoyance, and he wasn't even sure if he thought that or not, he was just trying to hurt her at this point because he was tired of behind hurt. "You just think you do. You've been reading way too many of those bullshit romance novels, he left you, why are you holding out for him?"

Alex looked at Dean like she absolutely despised him, like she was judging him, like she couldn't believe him at all. "You know, you don't even know what love is—" she said acidly. "I've watched you fuck girls for the hell of it and break hearts and screw shit up with every single girl you ever liked and you've never come close to what I have with Cas. You're jealous."

Dean made a face. "Please."

"You've never had a relationship that lasted, you've never been in love," Alex said, driving in the nail of pain and getting under Dean's skin because it was true and it hurt. "You're the one who doesn't know what love is, you're the one who—"

"Alex—" he cut her off warningly, but she only exploded at the interruption.

"Shut up Dean, I'm talking!" Her bellow stilled him and she looked like she was about to lose it—she was turning red, she was breathing uncontrollably. "I have tried and tried and tried to tolerate the shit you give me over Cas but you are not allowed to run my life and you are not allowed to treat me the way you do!" She yelled.

"What way, looking out for you? Making sure you're okay?" Dean was bitter and drunk and getting fed up fast with her ungrateful assumptions, her obsession with thinking Cas was this perfect guy and that Dean was the bad guy. He made a mistake with what he said next. Maybe he forgot who
he was talking to, but the words just came out before he could stop himself. "Look, I didn't say anything to Cas, he left on his own! Maybe he was tired of dealing with all your friggin' issues, I know I am, Jesus Christ. It's bad enough being your brother, holy shit I can't imagine what it'd be like to date you."

The look on her face immediately made him regret his thoughtless jab and Dean scrambled to take it back. "Sorry, I wasn't... I didn't mean that."

The damage had been done and he could tell. "If you're so tired of me, I can leave," Alex said sharply.

Dean's eyebrows raised almost challengingly. He spoke without thinking. "You wouldn't," he said, almost rolling his eyes at the idea.

Alex's expression only grew a few degrees cooler. "And why the hell is that?" She asked quietly.

He tilted his head back a little bit, smug without meaning to be, because he honestly believed what he was about to say. "You need me."

Her eyebrows raised now and she looked absolutely flabbergasted. "You have got to be fucking kidding me." Her face twisted into a vehement scowl. "I don't need you. I've never needed you!"

Furious that she would say that even if she didn't mean it, Dean was firing back a defensive, hurtful answer before he knew what he was doing. "What, when you were helpless and mute and depressed all the time, you didn't need me?" he demanded brusquely, setting her off all over again.

Before he even knew what was happening, Alex grabbed him by the shirt and punched him in the face with all of her strength—a sloppy, impassioned blow that stunned Dean, who Alex shoved as hard as she could—he stumbled backwards and crashed down into the table between the beds, knocking the lamp off. "You're the biggest fucking asshole I've ever met!" Alex raged, standing over him and leaned over, grabbing him by the shirt again as he half-laid half-slumped against the nightstand and bed. "I wasn't helpless then and I'm not now either, do you hear me?"

He saw that she reached behind herself, grabbed her knife, held it high and for a second, he was suddenly worried she'd snapped—she brought the blade down with violent force and speed and it thunked deeply into the nightstand, he jumped as the metal buried into the wood. "Have you lost your friggin' mind?!" Dean asked, freaked out, a hand held out uselessly in front of his face.

She let go with another shockingly hard shove, stood up and looked down at him almost menacingly. "No."

"Then why the hell you stabbing furniture?!" he asked in breathless fear, not moving.

"You gave me that piece of shit knife and I don't want it anymore," she said fouly, then turned, grabbed her bag off the bed, began to shove her stuff into it angrily, shaking as if from low blood pressure.

Dean got up slowly, a little cautious now, then saw what she was doing and copped an attitude again, trying to call her bluff. Not even knowing what he was doing anymore, maybe wanting to fight with her in some weird twisted way. "So now you're gonna run away, that's just real mature, Alex," he said derisively. Maybe he felt like he was losing ground, because he decided to lob another heartless insult to try and make her mad, get her to engage with him again—that and he was scared shitless at the idea of her leaving. "I take it back. You and Cas are perfect for each other, you're both clueless children!"
She zipped her bag shut with more force than necessary, ignored what he said, slung the strap over her shoulder and finally gave him a look. The crazy off-kilter anger was gone. She looked calm in a way that he hated. "I wonder," she said. "How will you survive without someone to push around to make you feel better about yourself?" She made a face that reminded him so much of Sam that it hurt. "I don't need you," she said bitterly. "You needed me. And you screwed that one up too."

Stunned, hurt and cut to his heart itself, Dean watched as she began to walk away. And overcome with gripping fear, he followed. He couldn't lose her too. "You're not leaving," he said, but she ignored him, so he grabbed her shoulder, forced her to turn around roughly. "I said, you're not leaving!" She yanked away from him, eyes flashing.

"Don't touch me! Don't tell me what to do Dean!" She shouted, and for as stony as she'd been a second ago, she was almost snarling at him now. "I am twenty-eight fucking years old and you can't tell me what to do anymore! I needed you once but I don't anymore and if you follow me, I will fucking kill you!" As if to prove her point, she yanked her pistol out and pointed it straight at him, trembling, in tears, and Dean was shocked, he stepped back, looking at the barrel and then at her.

"Alex," Dean said softly, unable to believe what she was doing. She looked pained and enraged and broken and so lost as she pointed the firearm at his face, held it there and tried to convince him that she wanted him to fuck off. Was this a cry for help or was this her losing her mind once at for all? He couldn't tell but he was suddenly so aware of how careful he needed to be, how close he was to losing her too. And he had no one to blame but himself. He thought of how he'd just verbally bashed her and tried to dominate her and manipulate her and he was so sorry and didn't know how he always, always did the things he hated the most.

He felt his eyes glistening with tears, saw that she was fighting tears too. The gun wavered, shook slightly in her unsteady hand. "Don't stop me, Dean," she said just above a whisper. "Let me go."

And that made him so much more scared than anything else that she had done or said to him in the last few minutes. He couldn't speak, he couldn't believe she really was going to leave him. He didn't say anything, because anything he said would be wrong. And she raised her chin a little, as if she were gathering courage. "I can't do this anymore," she said. "So I'm not going to."

"Al... we're all we got left," he pleaded, desperate to see her relent, soften, break down. He was kicking himself for letting it come to this and wished he could take it all back. But she just tightened her jaw further and he could see how much she meant what she said. "Don't go," he begged. "Not like this."

"I'm sorry." Her eyes glistened with tears, little oceans that would spill out and run down her cheeks. "I'm done," she said with quiet anger and apprehension. "I. Am. Done." She lowered the gun slowly and Dean didn't move. He was shellshocked by what had just happened. And she tucked the gun away, said nothing else. Just looked at him for a minute in a way he had never wanted to see her look at him... filled with mistrust and burnt bridges and utter hurt. And without saying a word, she turned and left, shut the door behind her. And it was over just like that. Dean stared at the closed door, alarmed. And he stood there for about ten seconds, panicking, not sure what to do, if he should go after her or let her cool off awhile—she'd be back, right? This was just her reacting to Sam's death and them fighting, she'd be back, right? But what if he let her go and she didn't come back at all? What if she really did leave him?

Dean grabbed his jacket and ran out into the rainy night after his sister. But he couldn't find her. He went on to look for hours, driving around town and checking the kinds of places he knew she would probably go to—abandoned houses, bars, convenience stores, an old rusted warehouse by
the river. But she was nowhere. She had disappeared without a trace. She didn't want to be found.

Not knowing what else to do, Dean stayed at the same motel she'd left from for three long, agonizing days and kept looking for her, hoping she would change her mind, hoping she'd come back, hoping she'd walk back in and let him tell her how sorry he was. But he guessed that she didn't want anything to do with him anymore, because she stayed gone and he heard nothing from her. He called Cas and got no answer. He called Alex's phone constantly and got no answer. Confused, hurt, broken completely, Dean did the only thing he could think of after those three days.

Out of options, out of ideas, and afraid to be alone, he went to the only person he thought might take him in—he couldn't be by himself, he just couldn't, and he'd never been able to. So he went to Lisa, afraid of being rejected by yet another person, but desperate for someone to help him through the pain he was feeling. And Lisa did, for reasons Dean didn't even understand. He wouldn't have wanted him, why would Lisa? But she did.

Dean didn't see or hear from his sister again for months and months and months. He would lay awake some nights and wonder if she were even still alive. Get worried and worked up and decide he was gonna go out there and find her somehow, then realize he had no way of doing that. And so he lived life automatically, went through the motions, checked out on a deeper level and just existed in a way that felt hollow and meaningless compared to life before.

Lisa and her son Ben were the only bright spots for him. They made the hard days easier and long nights better. But they weren't Sam and Alex. No one could replace them, ever.

After Castiel recovered from Raphael's discipline and show of power, he limped through Heaven, trying to find an answer, trying to find Joshua. He was desperate, hurt, confused, and none of the other angels had seen Joshua, he was absent from the throne room. No one had seen him or knew of his whereabouts and Castiel didn't know what to do. Not only could he not find the one angel who God spoke to, but now Raphael—who was so much stronger than Castiel or any other angel for that matter—had threatened to take Alex and hurt her if Castiel did not submit. And he couldn't fall into line with the plan to restart the apocalypse. So what options did that leave him?

Downtrodden and heart sick because he knew he couldn't go to Dean and Alex—Raphael was watching him now—Cas was cornered. He returned to Stull Cemetery, the place where Lucifer had been defeated. He thought maybe if he could just be in a place that was close to where she had been, maybe he would know what to do. But he got there—it was the early hours of the morning and a heavy misty fog blanketed the dim landscape—and he was as lost as before.

If he submitted to Raphael, he would save Alex but he would never be able to risk finding her again—he would be revealing her location to Raphael by doing so. And if he defied Raphael, he would be killed or imprisoned, and useless to protect the one he loved. Was the only way to protect her truly the worst of the two options? To submit and see the world half destroyed? No, there had to be some other way.

Perhaps he could find Genesis, the lost archangel. She had had fallen to earth thousands of years ago as punishment for taking a lower-level angel as her lover. No one knew who he was, the angel she had sinned with, but there had always been rumors that she was still alive. Perhaps she was still down there somewhere, perhaps if Castiel could find her and she would fight with him against Raphael… as he thought about it, he realized how far-fetched it was. How limited his options really were.

Castiel grew frustrated and angry. And then he heard someone approaching behind him. "Ah,
Castiel. Angel of Thursday. Just not your day is it?"

Castiel turned, recognizing the voice and unhappy to hear it. "Crowley," he said cautiously. "What are you doing here?

"I want to help you help me help ourselves," Crowley answered, testing Castiel's patience.

"Speak plain."

Crowley smiled slightly, pocketing his hands into his black peacoat. "I want to discuss a simple business transaction. That's all."

"You want to make a deal? With me?" Castiel had no fortitude for this meaningless line of inquiry. "I'm an angel, you ass. I don't have a soul to sell."

"But that's it, isn't it?" Crowley asked coyly. "It's all of it. It's the souls. It all comes down to the souls in the end, doesn't it?"

Already frustrated because of everything that had happened to him and Crowley's deliberately vague, pompous statements, Castiel felt himself getting agitated. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Raphael's head on a pike," Crowley replied. "I'm talking about happy endings for all of us... with all possible entendres intended." Crowley turned slightly, indicating that Cas go with him. "Come on. Just a chat."

Cas didn't move. "I have no interest in talking with you."

Crowley paused, feigned dissatisfaction. "Oh, all right then. No interest in talking about a little thing that concerns your little playmate Alex E. Winchester... and her eternal fate?" Crowley asked with raised eyebrows. At the reaction that flitted across the angel's face, Crowley smirked. "Mm, that's what I thought. I have it on good authority that you two are on the rocks by no choice of your own. Come on. Hear me out. Five minutes. No obligations. I promise—I'll make it worth your while."

Cas hesitated. He was no fool—he knew who Crowley was, what he did. But he also knew that he was smarter than the demon and stronger. And if this concerned Alex, if this demon had some way of defeating Raphael... he would hear him out. "All right," he agreed guardedly. "You have five minutes."

Crowley smiled pleasantly. "Right-o. Off we go, then."

They were suddenly someplace else—at the back end of a long hallway. It was dim here and a yellow light cast over the entire place, making it feel dirty and dank. The noise echoed oddly, classical music played over muffled speakers—countless people stood in a line which stretched into the distance, into the other end of the hallway which seemed to have no end. Above this line, a sign hung that said Next In Line: 6,611,527,124.

Castiel and Crowley emerged at the end of this line. "Where are we?" Cas asked, taking in the slumped, defeated looking souls lined for miles and miles.

"You don't recognize it, do you?" Crowley asked, and there was a hint of pride to his voice. "It's Hades, new and improved. I did it myself."

"This is Hell?" Castiel asked, not sure if this is what he had imagined or not.
"Yeah. See, problem with the old place was most of the inmates were masochists already. A lot of 'thank you, sir. Can I have another hot spike up the jacksie?' But just look at them." A wide, jaunty smile broke Crowley's face. "No one likes waiting in line."

"And what happens when they reach the front?" Castiel asked, not sure if he understood this concept well.

"Nothing," Crowley said. "They go right back to the end again. That's efficiency."

Cas almost rolled his eyes. "Enough of the wasteful talk and bragging," he said. "You have four minutes left. Tell me what this has to do with Alex."

The angel and the demon began to walk down the hallway beside the people who waited in line. They all stared ahead of themselves blankly, unseeingly. "What are you planning to do about Raphael?" Crowley asked.

Had Crowley simply brought him here to gloat? Castiel's patience wore thinner and thinner. "What can I do, besides submit or die?" He asked, hating the thought of both.

"Submit or die?" Crowley repeated. "What are you, French? How about resist?"

If only he could. "I'm not strong enough to go up against Raphael and you know it," Castiel replied peevishly, troubled, yet again reminded at how dour his dilemma was. "And he's threatened her. He's threatened both of the Winchesters. But her especially. I won't risk it."

Crowley gave him an almost amused side eye. "Very rude of your big bro, if you ask me. And you're right, you're not strong enough... not on your own, you're not. But you're not on your own, are you? There's a lot of angels swooning over you. 'God's favorite,' the trendsetter, the rebel. Buddy boy, you've got what they call sex appeal." He chuckled knowingly. "I think baby Winchester might agree."

Cas glanced at him gruffly. "She probably would. Get to the point."

"Angels need leaders, so be one," Crowley said. "Gather your army and kick the candy out of each and every angel that shows up for Raphael."

Castiel stopped walking, looked at Crowley directly. "Are you proposing that I start a civil war in heaven?"

"Ding! Ding! Ding! Tell him what he's won, Vanna."

Cas was disturbed. "You're asking me to be the next Lucifer, to rebel and seek my own gain."

"Please. Lucifer was a petulant child with daddy issues. Cas, you love God. God loves you. He brought you back. Did it occur to you that maybe he did this so you could be the new sheriff upstairs? Did it occur to you that perhaps this is his blessing for you and the misses? Don't you think she's worth it, Cas old boy?"

"Yes but... the amount of power that it would take to mount a war..." Castiel trailed off.

"More than either of us have ever seen, yeah," Crowley conceded. "But what if I said I knew how to go nuclear?" That smirk had returned.

Cas felt as though he were playing with fire at this point, but he had to know what Crowley was getting at. "What do you mean?"
"Purgatory, my fine feathered friend. Purgatory," Crowley began to walk again and led Cas down a little side hallway off of the main one. It looked like an old school or business building—unremarkable and not well maintained. "Just think about it. An untapped oil well of every fanged, clawed soul. I mean, what's that over the years? Thirty million? Forty million? Just sitting there, plump and rich for the taking."

Interesting prospect, Castiel had to admit… "How would you even find it when no one ever has?" he asked, still not liking the idea that Crowley was the one who brought this idea to him.

"We'll need expert help."

"From whom?" Castiel demanded.

Crowley stopped walking, talking with his hands now. Cas glanced at the painting he had stopped beside—a very unpleasant portrait of Crowley wearing some sort of uniform. Confused, Cas looked at it for a couple of beats as Crowley continued to speak. "From experts, of course. I know of three eerily suited 'Teen Beat' models with time on their hands, you might know them…"

Hunters? The Winchesters? Cas was quick to cut that idea short. "No. Not Dean and not Alex. I can't risk giving away Alex's location to Raphael and the two of them are together. That wouldn't work. Sam however…" Castiel thought of how Sam seemed so detached when he'd been brought back. Would he retire along with Dean and Alex? Or would they begin to hunt again? Would Sam split off from them completely? It was a strange feeling like premonition that told him Sam would not return to his brother and sister. It was troubling to think about. "I don't know about him."

Crowley seemed mildly inconvenienced. "We'll need more than one hired hand but… fine. I know of a certain big, bald patriarch I can take off the bench to get us on the right track, maybe another couple hunters who might be convincible, too. The point is… the hunters can get us to the monsters. The monsters can get us to Purgatory. I know it."

And Purgatory could give him enough power to destroy Raphael. It was tempting. But Castiel tried to sound unconvinced. "And what's your price in all of this?" he asked.

"Just half."

Cas was taken aback at the audacity of this demon. "Half?"

"My position isn't all that stable, ducky. Those souls would help me just like they'd help you. Besides, wouldn't you rather have me in charge down here?" He smiled, trying to appear comely. "The devil you know…"

Castiel shook his head, turned away, trying to think this through, weigh his options. "This is pointless," he said wearily. "Your plan would take months, and I need help now."

Crowley already seemed to know that. "Granted. Yes. But just to show you how serious I am about this scheme… how about I float you a little loan? Say, fifty large? Fifty-thousand souls from the pit. You can take them up to Heaven. Make quite a showing, knock Raphael onto his ass, let him know what's what. It's either this or the apocalypse all over again. Everything you've worked for—everything that Sam and Dean and sweet wittle Alex have worked for—gone."

Cas's teeth ground together. Crowley was right and even though instinctually Castiel knew he should not be working with a demon… he still kept listening to Crowley, kept hearing him out.

"You can save us, Castiel," Crowley appealed. Castiel turned back around to look at the demon once again. "God chose you to save us. And I think… deep down… you know that. Why else
would he have brought you back?” Crowley was charming and smooth, assured, and Castiel believed what he had said.

Cas thought hard, looking down, shaking his head slowly, thinking of Alex, on earth, and how he needed to keep her safe. "The risk involved…” he said. "And there's no telling how long the war could drag on. I can't leave her unprotected for that long, and I can't task angels because Raphael could find a way to trace them.” He was trapped, he had to make this impossible decision, he was faced with the idea that he might never see her again, and he couldn't fathom that. It hurt to even think.

Crowley shrugged, spread his hands out. "I've got quite a lot of black-eyed help around, could keep tabs on the wifey."

His eyes jumped to the demon's and he bristled for a couple different reasons. "You're suggesting demons watch over her?” He asked sharply. "What do you take me for?"

The demon only smiled obligingly. "An angel with no other choice," he replied. "Come on, have I let you down yet? They'll watch her, make sure she's all right in that big bad world out there without her hubby to keep her safe. They let me know the second anything's amiss, then I let you know."

Castiel narrowed his eyes, looked at Crowley carefully. "Who was the one who told her about Lucifer's lies?” he asked without any sort of lead in.

Crowley's eyebrows rose in reply. "And why do you suppose I'd know that?"

Cas was exasperated. "You always know everything."

"Yes, well, not everything." Crowley shook his head. "I haven't the foggiest who told her that load. Most likely suspect, our friend Hezion… the angel of bullshit and betrayal." Crowley brushed aside the conversation, cut to the chase. "So whaddya say? Want to shake on it?"

Castiel swallowed deeply, raised his chin. "I have a term, too. You'll find out if her name is written in the book of Hell. If it is, you remove it for eternity, surrender her soul over to me."

Crowley seemed pleased. "Scout's honor," he said, straightening dramatically, raising two fingers in a salute Castiel didn't recognize. "Now." Crowley's smile widened. "Do we have a deal?"

He let the silence hang for several seconds. And not knowing another way to save her, to stop the apocalypse, and to prevent Raphael from destroying everything they'd worked for… Castiel agreed to it all.

"Yes."

Balthazar was in his favorite Heaven—a strip club with hundreds of scantily-clad dancing girls. This Heaven belonged to a mobster, some guy named Al Capone if memory served right. Balthazar smiled at the especially cheeky girl who danced in front of him—she was smiling back at him sensually, working the pole. "You little minx," he said admiringly, even though she wasn't a real person—just an imagining of Capone's mind. Balthazar still loved her all the same. Well, loved her lithe little body, anyway. The sexy mood was cut short as another angel suddenly arrived, right in Balthazar's face.

"Hello Balthazar."
Feeling startled and violated by Castiel's sudden appearance and proximity, Balthazar made a face and took a step back, affronted. "Blimey, Cas. You certainly know how to make an entrance don't you," he complained, then took Castiel in, realized something seemed off about the angel in the trench coat. Balthazar became vaguely concerned. "You seem… different."

"I'm stronger than I once was," Cas said vaguely, purposefully. Interesting.

"How so?" Balthazar prompted, sensing there was some hidden agenda his brother was concealing, but Cas just glanced at one of the dancing girls closest to them and frowned as if in revulsion or irritation, looked away. Leave it to Cas not to appreciate the finer things.

"I'll tell you later," Cas replied. "I've come to you because I need you to do something for me, and quickly."

There was a grave note to Castiel's voice that was intriguing. "Of course. What is it?"

Castiel seemed increasingly annoyed with their surroundings, was struggling to stay hyper-focused on Balthazar. "I need you to take a message to Alex Winchester for me."

Alex Winchester. Balthazar knew that name. "The girl you…" he trailed off, thinking carefully on how to phrase this, "...have a vested interest in?"

"Yes," Castiel replied, then looked down in somber thoughtfulness. "To put it mildly." It was easy to see that Cas was carefully measuring himself and the way he worded his sentences. "It's of the utmost importance that she receives this message, Balthazar." He looked his brother in the eye piercingly, evaluating him. "Can I trust you to deliver it for me?"

Balthazar didn't need to hesitate. "Yes, of course you can. What's the message?"

Castiel looked at his brother long and hard, as if trying to decide something. "I'm trusting you to be discreet with its contents."

"How naughty," Balthazar commented, chuckling. Cas was not amused. Balthazar sighed. Cas had never been one for joking. "Yes, yes. Now what's the bloody message?"

Castiel leaned a little closer, lowered his voice, his eyes bored into Balthazar's. He seemed urgent in a way that was foreign to Balthazar. "Tell her that there is a war in Heaven and that I cannot leave." Balthazar's eyebrows raised slightly at that—so that's why Cas wanted him to be discreet? What war was he talking about? Cas wasn't done. "Tell her that I can't come to see her again until I defeat Raphael, that it's not safe, that I don't know how long it will be…" his grave expression flickered into that of something that seemed to pain him. "Tell her… that I am so sorry that I was torn away—it wasn't my choice or intention. And ask her…” Castiel looked down, his jaw clenched. He sounded miserable, or maybe rueful, or maybe wretched. "Ask her to wait for me, if she will." He seemed to be finished.

"What war in Heaven?" Balthazar asked, bypassing the other contents of the message for what was concerning him at the moment.

Castiel's eyes locked onto Balthazar's, and there was a grim, determined, resigned quality in them. "The one that I will declare today, against Raphael and his plans to unleash the apocalypse I've sworn to stop."

Balthazar's eyebrows raised at his brother's words, at this utter declaration of loyalties. A loyalty to the humans, not to Heaven.
Balthazar was curious, didn't understand, but tried to. "It's true what they've said about you and her, isn't it?" He asked Castiel slowly, softly. Cas didn't seem to know what Balthazar was asking and he made no reply, only looked back at his brother through a face that might as well have been a mask. Cas was different, and Balthazar could tell. He hadn't believed the rumors, but he did now. How unheard of, how strange, that Balthazar's brother would grow that attached and endeared to a tiny little human pinprick on earth below that he would do what he had: fight for the humans rather than the will of Heaven as all angels were created to do. But Balthazar didn't judge—he too questioned his role in the growing chaos of Heaven. He too felt a dissonance that made him want to leave this place.

Balthazar summoned a small smile. "I'll make sure the message is delivered, Cas, and give you the reply she sends."

Cas looked only mildly relieved. He still looked deeply vexed. "Balthazar, you must be discreet. I can barely risk sending you in my stead. If Raphael finds her..." he trailed off, and seemed very weary, very burdened, very worried. "Raphael cannot find her."

Balthazar nodded once. "Understood, Cas. I'll do it at once."

Mild relief flickered across Cas's face despite his distraction and concern. "Thank you Balthazar. You are a good friend. It will be an honor to fight at your side once again." And with the sound of wings, Castiel disappeared.

Balthazar looked at the dancing girl in front of himself, not nearly as entranced as he had been before. A war in Heaven. Seemed like a bad idea and Balthazar wasn't sure if it would work, what good could possibly come from it. Raphael was powerful and had many followers. But if any angel was going to lead a rebellion, it should be Cas—the angel who had rebelled against Heaven several times already, fallen from his state of grace and done the most forbidden thing that existed: been with a human. A human that apparently was worth starting a war over. But fighting was not what Balthazar wanted to do. Shouldn't one be vested in a cause before fighting for it? Balthazar turned, looking over the occupants of the club without really looking, then stopped, seeing a familiar face.

He folded his arms as the other angel smirked at him and stood up leisurely from the leather seat he'd been sitting in close by.

"Hezion," Balthazar greeted neutrally. "Don't you know eavesdropping is rude?"

Swaggering over slowly, Hezion gave off an attitude of smug indifference as he watched the girls dancing for a minute, not even acknowledging Balthazar for a long beat. Finally, he turned his attention away from the strippers. "Does it look like I care?"

"Mm," Balthazar commented mildly, facetiously. "No, not really."

"I'm here because I have a proposition for you," Hezion said.

Balthazar narrowed his eyes and then suggestively looked Hezion up and down. "And what 'proposition' might that be? You know I'm partial to the ladies, right? Not skeevy angels named Hezion who lurk about in the dark?"

There was a low, dark chuckle. "...you sure about that?" Hezion's constant smirk deepened. Balthazar made a bit of a face and Hezion, superior, looked down, amused at what seemed to be a huge joke to him. He forcibly made himself focus, but the air of mocking remained. "Enough of the flirting, Balthazar. I'm here to discuss business." Hezion leaned in just a little, lowered his voice. "Our brother Castiel is planning on starting a civil war. I think we both know there will be a
lot of collateral damage when it begins. We would be wise to look our for ourselves and save our own asses while we can, don't you think?"

Balthazar raised his chin a little bit, fixing his brother with a dubious look. He was curious, but not convinced. Hezion was a bit of a gamble, and everyone in Heaven knew it, too. "Hez old boy, I don't know if you're a forward thinker or an idiot. How exactly do you propose we would do that?"

Hezion smiled to himself like he knew something, some wicked little secret. "The celestial weapons. It's a two-angel job. We can take them, if we're quick."

Balthazar rolled his eyes. He should have known Hezion would have suggested something ludicrous. "And be hunted down and strung up on the gallows? No thank you."

Hezion wasn't deterred, in fact, he seemed amused at Balthazar's comment. "Fair point." His eyes glittered darkly and he raised his eyebrows slowly. "But would they hunt us if they think we're dead?" He smiled at Balthazar's dawning realization. Hezion stepped forward, lowered his voice even further. "We take the weapons—very valuable, I might add—fake our own deaths, go enjoy a life of luxury and leisure on earth, let Heaven tear itself apart in the meantime. It doesn't have to be our concern."

Balthazar was quiet, thinking. Hezion glanced sidelong, appreciatively looking one of the strippers up and down. "A civil war in Heaven just isn't the best use of our time, and call me crazy... but I'm not in the mood to get killed over something I don't care about." He returned his attention to Balthazar. "Castiel lived on earth with the humans, why can't we?" He smirked, looked at one of the girls again. "They have lots of places like this down there... I think you'd like it."

Balthazar narrowed his eyes, a small smile stretching onto his features. He was liking the sound of this very much. "Go on," he told Hezion. "Tell me more about this little plan of yours." As the lights pulsed and sultry music thumped, two of Heaven's more self-interested angels plotted to steal the heavenly weapons. The next day, under the cover of the war that broke out, the two of them would fake their own deaths, take the weapons, and leave the realm completely to hide away on earth.

And because of what happened, Balthazar wouldn't be able to deliver the message to Alex—not because he didn't want to, but because he couldn't risk anyone finding out he wasn't actually dead. He didn't understand the importance of delivering the message, or how important Alex was to Cas, but how could he?

Castiel would instead mourn Balthazar and believe that he had died in an ambush when he'd returned to Heaven just after delivering the message to Alex. He had trusted his friend, had assumed the message had been sent and received. Didn't know that Dean and Alex had separated, that she was out there somewhere on her own with only demons watching over her.

Castiel went to the same park picnic table he and Alex had shared turkey sandwiches on, contemplated what he was about to do. Start a war in Heaven.

He sat where he had sat before—on top of the table, feet on the bench where you were supposed to sit. He was aware of how empty the place beside him was. It was devoid of her and he ached in that familiar place in his chest for her. He missed her. He looked upward, felt the souls scorching his insides, making him more powerful than he had ever been before, strong enough to knock Raphael down a notch and start a war. But he wasn't sure. "Is this really what I'm meant to do?" he asked out loud, seeking an answer, needing a definitive reply. But none came. He had to decide.
And when he thought of the alternative—the apocalypse happening, millions of humans dying, Lucifer most assuredly winning the battle, the future that they had foreseen happening in 2014… Castiel knew that he had no choice. He had to defeat Raphael. Not only to stop the apocalypse from happening, but to keep Alex safe.

He cursed himself internally. Everyone in Heaven and Hell seemed to know how much she meant to him and he was a danger to her without even meaning to be. His love for her only put her into harm's way, made her a target for his enemies to use, to hold over his head. But if he could win this war, defeat Raphael and establish new laws in Heaven, they could be together. He wasn't even sure in what capacity, but it didn't matter at this point to him. He had wanted to live a simple human life with her, but now he was torn. He felt the pulse of Heaven beating through his veins, but at the same time, blood just like hers. He was both human and of Heaven, not one or the other anymore, at least not in his own mind.

His plan came to order as he sat there and stared across the park unseeingly, hearing children laughing as they played on the swing set. He would use the souls from Purgatory, once they obtained them, to become the most powerful angel in existence long enough to kill Raphael and subsequently abolish the old order. He would set Heaven free of the archangel dictatorship that it had known for so long. He would find a way to secure Alex's soul a Heaven. And finally, at last, when it was all done, he would keep his promise to her to remain at her side.

And with his decision made and her in mind, Castiel's wings ripped through the dimensions, carried him back to Heaven. And there he stormed the meeting of the holy host, strengthened by the fifty-thousand souls that writhed inside of him. He boldly approached Raphael, whose face at first showed pleasure—he assumed Castiel was there to bow to him. And then he saw the look on Cas's face and his smile faded. He saw Castiel clenching his fist as fierce power gathered there, and raising his fist and opening the fingers, Castiel blasted Raphael away into a distant Heaven with a loud clap like thunder, with a blaze of light brighter than the sun itself. The host looked at Castiel in surprise and the beginnings of reverent fear.

"There will be no apocalypse," Castiel asserted, and absolute power roiled around the words he spoke, wrathfulness, warning. "And let it be known—you're either with Raphael or you're with me."

And with those words, war broke out in Paradise. And so the long road of good intentions wound on… the road that led Castiel to a thousand tragedies he would forever regret causing. But given the choice over, what could he have done differently? He would never know the answer, but in the years to come, he would always, always wonder. And he would always reflect that this was how he learned that freedom was not indeed free.

For all of time they would tell stories of the angel who started the war in Heaven and ripped everything apart, rebelled against everything he had once believed in, and how when it came down to the bare facts, it was all for the sake of saving one, small human life: the girl who waited, even though she never got the message he sent.
At thirteen years old, Alex was supposed to be braver than she actually felt that day as she in the Great Smoky Mountain range. Thirteen was supposed to have been the year she felt like a teenager, an almost-grownup, but as she huddled there, crouched on the ground against a massive oak trunk, she felt like a scared little kid.

Her heart raced, her breathing was unsteady and sickening, she was the definition of paranoid in that moment. She was on high alert because she knew that he was out there somewhere, was going to get the jump on her any minute, was going to be one step ahead of her like always, and that no matter how ready she felt, he'd get her. Hyper vigilant, she was exhausted from how far she'd run into the woods—a couple miles at least, then she'd cut a quarter of a mile over and then doubled back in the direction she'd come from, hoping she'd be able to throw him off that way, maybe get the jump on him this time. She hated this.

Every little sound made her jump—every little breeze that rustled the trees terrified her, every snap of a twig or rustle in the underbrush made her heart flip flop around like a dying fish. She had found a big fist-sized rock and had stuck it in one of her socks as makeshift weapon and that was now in her jacket pocket—she also had a tree branch she'd snapped in half in her hand. Two measly weapons, but weapons all the same. Maybe he was watching her from somewhere, maybe she was going to get attacked any second—there was a steep ridge to her left and a sloping embankment behind her, she'd picked the most defensible position, but it never seemed to matter. He always got her, he always said she needed to stop taking the defensive, but she didn't know how to take the offensive all by herself like this. That's why she hated these training runs, because she couldn't fall back on her brothers for help. It was all her.

"How many times have I told you?" His voice suddenly said behind her, right behind her. Shit shit shit! If she could have screamed in startled fear, she would have. Instead she just scrambled forward, trying to get away. She knew he was fast. But he grabbed her easily and she gasped, panicking as she floundered for her weapons—she'd dropped the branch and the rock sock was uselessly in the pocket of her jacket—dammit! She was tackled forward, face first down into the dry leaf covered ground. It knocked the wind out of her, it hurt. She could hear how agitated and disappointed he was, his voice was rising fast. She'd made him good and mad, as usual. "You have got to watch your back, Alex, come on!"

She struggled to breathe under his heavy weight. "Your brothers aren't always gonna be there to do it for you," he barked, and she struggled uselessly, tried to break his hold. "And I could hear you breathing a goddamn mile away, you have got to control yourself better or you're as good as dead!"

John Winchester held his daughter there on the ground firmly as she cursed herself for, yet again, doing a piss-poor job. She was thrashing uselessly, teeth gritted, kicking herself for getting ambushed as usual—how the hell did her Dad always stay so quiet?! She heard him take a steadying breath, he stopped shouting now.

"Mistake number one, not taking the offensive," he said darkly, carrying on with the lesson in that
familiar gruff, demanding tone of his. "Okay, now this guy has you, now what Alex, how do you get away from him?" Her hands were pressed flat against the ground, some roots poked into her skin painfully. He was too heavy to just lift off. Alex resorted to dirty fighting, as usual, and her hand darted up behind herself, grabbed a handful of her dad's hair and yanked hard, brutally, knowing Dad wouldn't baby her or react unless it really did hurt like hell. So she made sure it did.

When he yelped, she used the temporary distraction and reprieve to wiggle out from under him and frantically army-drag herself a few feet forward, trying to scramble up to her feet, but he was already recovering, lunging over her again. She flipped over awkwardly, pinned underneath him again. He grabbed at her wrists, slammed them down to the ground on either side of her head and she gave up, pissed but pretty sure he'd won again. When he saw that she wasn't trying, his face screwed up in anger. He smelled like alcohol.

"Fight, dammit!" He shouted at her. "The monsters and demons out there aren't gonna be as nice as me, come on! This is life or death now act like it!" He smashed her wrists into the ground again for effect, trying to make her mad or maybe just because he was enraged. She didn't know, but it definitely made her mad.

She imagined that her brothers needed her help, that if she didn't break free right now, they'd die. And wishing she could cry out in helpless rage like she wanted to, Alex head-butted her dad, bashed her forehead into her dad's nose and chin. Pain exploded there in the front of her skull but Dad was reeling from the surprising move and he loosened his grip on her wrists, she yanked her hands to herself, hit him in the face with her fist, she shoved at him and fought like a caged animal, pulling one of his ears hard, he protested with a shout of "aaah!" and she punched him again with her free hand, then again, he fell sideways and she smashed her now-free knee into his stomach, wavered up to her feet, then fell promptly when he grabbed her ankles and yanked.

On all fours now, she kicked him hard in the face, scrambled a few steps off, hands searching her pockets in a frenzy—where the hell was her rock sock?! Did it fall out?! She heard him behind her and before she could react, Dad grabbed her by the back of the jacket, yanked her sideways and pushed her up against a tree roughly, holding her there forcefully so that she faced her. She wasn't even five foot four yet, he was over six feet tall, and she thought as she often did, how easy it would be for him to kill her. He was breathing hard, his nose was bleeding and his cheek was bruised. All her doing. And the irony was he almost looked pleased with her. "Not bad, but now what?" He asked. "Where's your weapon, huh? Shouldn't have dropped it. Mistake number two."

He saw how she was thinking about giving up and he shook her, getting mad again. "No, don't you do that, Alex, don't give up, stop that shit right now, you hear me?" He waited and she just stared at him breathlessly. She was tired, she was hurt, she didn't want to fight him, she hated these 'training runs' and she just wanted to be left alone. But he was getting more and more pissed at her lack of reaction. "Stop letting your fear cripple you," he told her angrily. "The only person you can rely on in life in the end is yourself, now do it!" He was in rare form, and his anger was beginning to seep into her, stir a wrath she hated to feel because it was so dark, so all-consuming. She didn't like that side of herself. But he wouldn't stop shouting at her. "Stop being a coward, stop being so dependent on me and your goddamn brothers to save you and fucking save yourself!"

She snapped, she went animalistic, broke his grip and began to hit him as hard as she could, swinging blindly and landing a few punches in his torso and chest... then missing one and wildly overcorrecting, she lost her balance, Dad grabbed her by the collar of her jacket like a wet kitten and knocked her down to the ground, done.

He was passionless now. "You're dead," he said, blasé. "He killed you. Easily."
Alex pushed herself up slightly, spit—some leaves had gotten into her mouth. She looked up at her father, who was shaking his head, looking at her with hooded eyes kind of sidelong. "You have no control at all—you're too damn emotional, just like your mother," he said, but he wasn't yelling anymore. This was worse. He sounded apathetic, like she had disappointed him on every level. His jaw tightened, he put his face in his hand for a second and rubbed wearily. "I have tried and tried with you, Alex. This is ridiculous. You're a goddamn pushover, you know that? You wouldn't last a day out there alone. Not a single day." And he sounded forlorn about it, like it was his fault.

She believed him but she also didn't believe him. Alex wanted to look up at him and tell him how much she fucking hated him right then, how full of shit he was, how his lessons were all crazy and meaningless and cruel and how dads weren't supposed to be how he was. And why don't you love me? I love you even when you do this crap to me. I wish I didn't, I wish I hated you for real. She was caught in a place between complete rage and total despair, but he barely glanced at her. He was over it, disappointed and not interested in her being angry at him anymore. "Training run's over," he said and started walking off.

No. Training wasn't over. He had unleashed a fury in her that couldn't just be brushed aside. And seeing red, not thinking at all, just wanting to hurt him like he hurt her, she stood up and charged him, kicking him in the back of the knees as he walked off, catching him totally off guard. Watch your own damn back, you asshole. He fell forward as his legs went out from under him, he went facedown but was already flipping himself over onto his back. Just like she'd expected, and she jumped down on top of him and started pummeling him in the face with her fists so hard that her knuckles bled. He flailed a couple seconds in surprise from how intense her sudden attack had been and then regained control, caught her wrists, flipped her over, backhanded her across the face in anger. The second he did that, his anger fell away, he let go of her. He looked stunned at himself, swallowed, stood up, shaken and stony. "I said training run's over," he repeated. Soft and disturbed. Tears filled her eyes, her cheek stung from the impact of his hand. He looked at her with an indescribable expression and turned away, left her to get up off the ground all by herself.

And those were what Dad called training runs. They all hated them—Dean, Sam, and Alex—but she hated them the most.

Present Day
Battle Creek, Michigan

Alex thought of that memory among others and realized as much as she hated Dad's tactics and choices, his parenting style... he had been right. The only person you can rely on in life in the end is yourself, he'd said. And right now, she was learning that the hardest damn way there was.

It had been four days since she and Dean had clashed so horrifically. Four days since Cas had left without an explanation. Four days since Sam and Adam had died.

Alex took out a small switchblade she'd shoved into her boot. Snick. The blade flipped out, glinting in the dark light of the drafty old warehouse she was in right now. It was around sunset and it would get dark soon.

On the floor she had seven candles arranged on the points of a chalk-drawn septagram, next to it was a bowl. In it, stuff she'd lifted from a local new age place: wormwood, cat's blood, a crow's feather among other things that had taken her several days to round up. Summoning a demon shouldn't have been such a pain in the ass, but it was.

She took her switchblade and braced herself then began the always-fun task of cutting herself open. She hissed through gritted teeth as the point drew blood across the palm of her hand. Satisfied with
the flow, she turned her hand, let the blood drip down into the bowl for a few seconds. The final ingredient. She wrapped a rag around her hand to stop the bleeding. This was the moment of truth. She grabbed a match from where she'd stuck a few in her pocket and struck it with a snap on her thumbnail—a trick Dean had taught her. *Dean.* Her face darkened. "*Et ad congregandum...*" she chanted. She realized she hadn't spoken out loud all day long up until then. "*Eos coram me.*" She dropped the match into the bowl and it went up in a fast roaring blaze, completing the ritual.

Appearing in front of her about ten feet away, Crowley looked mildly surprised at the summons, but not for long. "Funny. I don't remember having a visit with you in my pocket calendar," he said, full of his trademark jaunty attitude.

Alex glared. "Cut the shit, Crowley."

He chuckled. "Ever the polite one. You seem to be feeling a bit *cross,*" he observed mildly, took a step toward her—but only before slyly glancing up and the around to see if she'd placed a devil's trap somewhere.

"Mm." Her eyes narrowed, furthering the deadly note of her glare. "Try again." There was a cold and wrathful kind of humorous quality to her expression and mannerisms.

"*Angry?*" he asked. Gloatingly almost.

"Well," she started evenly, slowly, with faux-thoughtfulness. "I wanna cut your fucking *head* off, so *you* tell *me!*" She ended the sentence at a near shout, baleful as she glowered at him.

He merely raised his eyebrows. "*Angry* then," he supposed, smiling maddeningly. "Something I said?" He chuckled, then stopped when she whipped out her angel's blade. He seemed genuinely surprised, intrigued. "*And where did you get that?*"

Alex's eyebrows shot up. "*You* don't know?" She asked, then made a faux-amazed face. "Wonders never cease, huh?" She looked at the blade and gave it a nonchalant twirl, looking at it in faint interest. "*Found it at the Antiques Roadshow.*" Her eyes flicked back to his.

Crowley strolled forward just a few more steps, smiling cheekily. Right where she wanted him. "Fine, play hard to get," he said, making the mistake of believing himself safe. "Now what—"

She struck another match against the hilt of her blade, dropped it to the ground. The all-but invisible gasoline she'd painted thickly onto the floor caught fire, blazing brilliantly into a large devil's trap which Crowley now stood dead center of. The demon's face registered genuine confused shock as he realized he'd been tricked.

For once, she had the one-up on Crowley and they both knew it. He looked at her in slack-jawed surprise, she gave him a cool, superior little smile, enjoying every second of his stunned silence. Even when the fire burned off, which it was now—the burn marks would leave the trap singed faintly onto the concrete floor. Crowley was trapped until she said so and Alex relished that fact completely. His momentary shock ebbed, he recovered forcibly, but still couldn't manage to be quite as lackadaisical as he had been before.

"Well, this *is* is a new one on me," he murmured, attempting to be his usual jackass self, but he was clearly pissed off about the twist. "*I'll* give you ten points for creativity. I think I get it now," he said, glancing peevishly at the angel's blade. "You summoned me here to kill me, hm? Get some payback?"

Alex's grip tightened on the blade, she imagined cutting Crowley's head off and then playing
soccer with it. "Don't tempt me," she retorted, "Cuz as much as I want to stab you in between your crusty little eyes right now for all that bullshit you spewed at me, the ideas you put into my head... what those ideas made me do... I'm not gonna kill you. Yet." Alex wagged the blade at him meaningfully. "Just watch yourself, Crowley. I'm in a bad mood right now and honestly... I can't promise a damn thing at the moment."

Was that annoyance or a hint of nervousness that ran across the demon's features? She couldn't tell. "Right. So, why the reach around, eh? What is it you want from me if not sweet, sweet vengeance?"

"What I want from you...?" Alex began to walk the outer edge of the devil's trap, nice and slow. The gasoline had burned away, the devil's trap was scorched faintly onto the floor now. "I want you to get comfortable. Cuz I'm keeping you in time out until you do something for me."

She stopped halfway around, put all her weight onto one foot and crossed her arms—a casual and in control stance. She leveled him with a calculating smile.

Crowley looked insulted. "Really? You, trying to blackmail me?" He shook his head slowly, there was a dangerous little eyebrow raise and smile. "Oh Alex... this will not end well for you darling. You'd do best to let me walk before I get good and cheesed off."

She ignored him completely. "Bring Sam and Adam back or you're dead. Those are my terms."

Crowley merely looked inconvenienced and unaffected. He rolled his eyes and sighed. "So predictable, Alex." He smiled pleasantly then, put his hands into his pockets, back to his reigning superiority. "Answer's no."

Alex was milliseconds away from showing him how serious she was about her threats when right beside her, right behind her ear, there was a low, rumbling growl, a snort. She froze as her hair rustled in the force of warm, humid air. Her veins ran cold as she realized she hadn't been as prepared as she thought. A hellhound. And just like that, the tables had turned. Shit. Alex clenched her teeth and bore her mouth down into a hard line, refusing to even look at Crowley for a long second. She was so mad she could spit. Dammit, dammit!

When she finally did look at the demon again, he shrugged, sighed gustily. "You tried, didn't you," he said, as if he thought she should be proud of the fact. He actually seemed genuinely communicative as he began to talk again. "Listen, use your brain for two tics and think. I never wanted Lucifer to get his meatsuit, remember? I was anti-devil the entire godforsaken time. So why would I have told you that tripe if I knew it was all a ploy? The answer is I wouldn't have." For a moment, it could have almost been an apology or an admonition. Then he had to go and be a smug, cocky bastard again. "My feelings are hurt," he mocked. "And here I thought you and I were so much closer than all this."

Alex could hear the hellhound breathing, feel its exhales hitting up against the back of her head and she thought about trying to kill it. She was fast and the blade she was still holding in her hand killed just about anything... but going up against a hellhound? That was kind of suicide. And she just wasn't in the mood to kill herself that day. So she kept staring sullenly at Crowley.

"I'll blame your lapse in judgement on the latest Winchester family drama," Crowley continued. "By the by, I simply must know. How'dya like life on your own in the big, bad world without big brother bear to wipe your hiney and tuck you in at night?" He chuckled darkly at the scalding stare she was giving him. "If looks could kill..." he said, then cocked his head to the side and back slightly, narrowed his eyes, smiling arrogantly. "Now be a good little girl and let me out or I have Fido rip you to shreds." He lowered his chin a fraction, his eyes glittered. "Those are my terms."
Alex imagined killing Crowley and feeding him to his own hellhound, she glared daggers at him… but realized if she wanted to stay alive, she needed to do what the demon said. Silent and resentful, Alex drew her stick of chalk off her pocket and crouched down, drew a thick line through the outer circle of the devil's trap with harsh, angry force. Crowley sidestepped his way out, pleased.

Alex stood back up to her full height. "Now call your bitch off," she demanded lowly.

"Say please," Crowley challenged.

Alex made a face. "Fuck you."

Crowley cracked a grin, laughing lowly, white, even teeth showing. "Oh you." He trailed off into a chuckle, then sighed, greatly self satisfied. He whistled shrilly and Alex could hear claws clicking across the ground away from her and toward Crowley—who pulled a hand out of his pocket and began to pat the air beside himself. It would have looked ridiculous and funny any other day.

"Well," Crowley put his hand back into his coat pocket, sauntered forward, returning his attention to Alex. "Now that we have all that behind us, I'd be happy to discuss a soul deal with you, if you're really desperate to bring a brother back."

Alex's heart clenched and she really did think about it for all of two seconds. Crowley waited with that frustratingly superior, teasing smile on his face. She raised her chin. "Sorry. I don't do those," she growled, not taking her eyes off of him for a second, still holding her blade at her side.

"Mm. Heavens. I wonder why," Crowley commented breezily, even though they both knew he knew all about her Dad making a soul deal, her oldest brother too. "Well then, I guess we're done here." Crowley turned to leave.

"Wait."

Crowley turned back around halfway, looking at Alex expectantly, curiously. She could barely believe she had to resort to asking Crowley this question. Desperate times, desperate measures. She swallowed, tried to remain stone-faced. "Is… do you know… is Cas still alive?" she asked.

A strange little expression flitted across his face. "Pardon?" he asked, as if he hadn't heard right. Annoyed—he was trying to make her ask it again and she couldn't, no, she wouldn't. Alex doubled her efforts to look foul-tempered, hoping he couldn't see how much of a wreck she was inside. "Just answer the damn question," she told him acidly.

Crowley turned all the way around to face her and seemed oddly superior again, eyes flicking over her face in that cool, knowing way he had. "What, he's not at your beck and call like he used to be?" He clicked his tongue, began to mutter. "Not even out of the honeymoon and there's trouble in paradise, my goodness what drama."

"Darling, I happen to know he is alive and well but… is he coming back?" He seemed to be enjoying her distress. "Remains to be seen." At the increasingly crushed, confused look on her face, he rolled his eyes. "Honestly, poppet. Did you stop to think maybe he left 'cause he was tired of all that whining and crying and carrying on?" Crowley looked at her with raised eyebrows. "You do do a lot of that, don't you."

Crowley fixed her with a rare, serious look, almost sympathetic or something. "He's a lost cause, darling. I think it's safe to say he's not interested anymore." As quickly as he'd become genuine, his air of pomp returned. "Now if you'll pardon me, I have souls to torture and maim." He winked. "Toodle-oo."
And without further ado, he was gone, leaving Alex to stare blankly at the spot he'd just been in.

In her mind Alex had planned that to go a lot better and more in her favor than it had. She sank down onto her heels, let out a shaking breath, scrubbed her forehead with the palm of her hand, letting herself feel all the fear she hadn't let herself feel when Crowley had been there. She squeezed her eyes shut and ground her teeth together. "What the hell are you even doing? This is pointless. Maybe she should have made a deal. It was a fair trade, wasn't it? Her soul for Sam's, at least? If she hadn't basically forced Sam to say yes to save her from Lucifer… he might still be there. She felt so miserable and so to blame. All she'd wanted to do was make right what she'd screwed up.

Now what? That was the question harrowing her mind. She had called and called to Cas for three days solid, heard nothing. Today she'd stopped. Every time she called and he didn't come, she grew more worried of two things: one, that he was dead. Two, that he heard and wasn't replying on purpose. He had seemed strange the last time she'd seen him. Distant, removed somehow. Maybe becoming an angel again had changed something for him. Maybe what Crowley said was right. But she didn't understand. She didn't understand. It made no sense—she had believed the things he had told her, she had believed he wouldn't leave her ever again, so why had he? She didn't know if she should be heartbroken or worried or afraid or angry and she looked upward now, silently. She wanted to call him again, but when she spoke his name aloud, pleaded with him and got no answer, the pain was unbearable. The rejection and abandonment was too much.

But she decided that she would ask one last time, that she could stand to call out to him just once more. Her eyes flickered back and forth over the ceiling above her. She heard water dripping and echoing noisily somewhere behind her. Drip, drip.

"Cas? Where did you go?" She paused, her heart hammering painfully in her chest. Her voice was just a whisper. "If… if you're out there… if you can hear me… please. I just need to know why you left." Silence. "Cas. Where are you? Why won't you answer me?" Drip, drip. No reply. Nothing.

At that exact moment, Heaven was being ripped apart by the newly declared war. All across the realm, the skies were dark and shadowed. Millions of souls were displaced from their heavens as angels fighting angels tore the fabric of paradise asunder, as brothers and sisters killed each other in the name of freedom and choice and peace. How ironic it was that peace and freedom should be gained through such violence. Castiel, locked in combat, struggled to survive, twisted his opponents wrist back and then drove the blade into his brother's chest, heard the scream, saw the blue blaze of grace burning hot and then dying out. He stood over his brother Thadriel, sadness filling him at the sight of the wings scorched across the ground. He hadn't wanted this—to have to turn against his own, to have to kill his brothers and sisters. Why wouldn't they listen? Raphael had poisoned their minds. Behind him, a newcomer with foul intentions. Castiel whirled, blocked another attack. His sister Gomer. And as Castiel fought, he couldn't hear one soft plea spoken to him among the millions of deafening, dismayed shouts echoing across all of Heaven.

Back on earth, a girl in a worn out cargo jacket and dirt-stained jeans stood up, heartbreak written across her face. With no reply and no understanding of why, Alex felt herself shutting down on a certain level. Methodically, she gathered her things and left the warehouse, headed out into the darkening world.

She went to Lisa's with no memory of walking across town, only the realization that she'd arrived and that the sun had fully set. She stood on the sidewalk in front of the house, staring for a long time at the bright dining room window. She had trailed Dean here to Lisa's earlier today in a stolen car, made sure he was okay after he left the motel she'd ditched him from.
She'd had every intention of knocking on Lisa's door and telling Dean how fucking sorry she was for losing her mind and pulling a gun on him and lashing out at him. She'd had every intention of begging her older brother to please take her back and give her one more chance; she planned on telling him she knew she did need him, and that she knew he needed her too, that they needed each other right now because they'd lost everyone else. But then she saw him with them, through window. And she hadn't been able to follow through.

Dean was sitting there at the table, smiling at Lisa's son Ben as they passed a bowl of dinner rolls around the table. Alex drew closer, disguised by darkness—even if any of them had looked out the window, they wouldn't have seen her. Lisa, dark-haired and beautiful, Ben bright-eyed and probably ten years old, Dean, tense and weary but trying not to give himself away in either respect. They looked like they could belong together, the three of them.

Alex saw how Dean rested his hand on the table, how Lisa put her hand over his sort of falteringly and gave him a small, understanding, hopeful smile. Dean's expression wavered, he managed a slightly pained smile back at her. Why did that hurt to watch?

As his sister, Alex recognized how much her brother was struggling internally but also how he was actually warming to the idea of being part of Lisa and Ben's life. And with a great welling sadness, Alex realized maybe this was what he needed. A normal life, a real family. Not the fucked up one he had been subjected to with her, Sam, and Dad. Not the endless co-dependency and impossible responsibility Dad had saddled him with. Maybe this was her brother's one chance at happiness, at something like normalcy.

Alex couldn't find it within her heart to take him away from this chance. So she didn't.

Like Dad had said: the only person you can rely on in life in the end is yourself. Maybe she should have known it would always come to this—just her against the world. Maybe she was finally ready. It didn't matter if she was ready or not, she realized. It was what she had to do. What she was going to do.

Alex Winchester shoved her hands into her jean pockets, turned and walked off into the night, feeling a new kind of hollowness inside.

As the weeks turned into months, she never went far. She always stayed within a few hour radius of where Dean was, and she checked on him often. He wouldn't know this for a long time.

One of the first things Dean did when he got to Lisa's was to scrub the angel wing char marks off of the Impala, maybe trying to erase the memories of what had happened in Stull Cemetery. The whole time he scoured the surface of the hood and side of the door, he thought about who those wings belonged to and why they were there. Wondered where the hell Cas had gone, why he wouldn't answer. Bitter and feeling rejected and ignored as well as deeply ashamed of what had happened with Alex… maybe thinking he didn't deserve an answer... he stopped calling.

Lisa and Ben welcomed Dean graciously, mercifully, into their lives, gave him something to focus on and contribute to. Dean gave it his best shot, the whole 'normal life' thing. He got a job—a respectable, normal job doing welding and construction. He went to work at eight in the morning, got home at five in the afternoon. Dinner was at six every night. He helped Ben with homework and building model cars, they played catch sometimes and Ben asked for advice 'man to man' about girls. Dean fixed things around the house for Lisa, helped out as much as he could. Learned what day was laundry day, what day was garbage pickup. In short, Dean fell into routine and used it as a distraction from his deepest feelings of despair, worry, inadequacy, and self-loathing. The whiskey he drank every night helped with forgetting those things, too.
When it got to be too much, driving the Impala the ten miles to his job every day, Dean bought an old Ford F250 off some guy for a thousand bucks, parked Baby in Lisa's garage and covered her up with a tarp. He couldn't stand to drive the familiar car alone, remembering how Sam was lost and Alex had left. Every time he'd looked over and saw the empty seat beside him, it was a reminder of the reality he was trying to forget.

For awhile, he was constantly looking over his shoulder and listening out for his phone, fully convinced that his sister would reappear. But she never did, and, of course, he blamed himself for it completely. He was worried as hell about her—he remembered the look in her eyes when she'd pulled the gun on him and he didn't understand how she could have done that. Sure, the Winchesters were all used to having guns in their faces most of the time but she would never have done that to him before, not in her right mind. And the more he thought about it, the more he realized her doing that meant she was really, really struggling, barely holding it together. And so now she was out there somewhere maybe half out of her mind with grief and confusion—things he felt, too—and he was afraid for her to be alone. But he had exhausted all the ways he knew of finding her. He was at a dead end. He couldn't do a damn thing about it.

He thought of how ironic it was that he could love his sister as much as he did and then push her away so far when they'd needed each other the most. Or, well, when he'd needed her the most.

I don't need you. That's what she'd said to him, and it might as well have been a declaration of I don't love you. The more days that passed, the more he believed just that. Wondered how anyone could love him, especially Lisa.

Lisa didn't know Dean, not like his family had, and he wasn't comfortable with the idea of her knowing him that well either. There were dark things and violence in his past, things that might make her afraid of him or repulsed by him. Sometimes he thought Lisa knew more about him, intuitively, than she let on. But she gave him grace and never tried, always remained respectful. Told him that he was the guy who had basically just saved the world and he was supposed to be a wreck after everything that happened. He appreciated her for it, he loved her for it, for how she accepted him as broken as he was, how she didn't push him to be something else. But he tried. He really tried. To be someone better than who he already was. Because he thought she deserved that, someone better than him.

But he wished he had someone to share his pain with. However, Lisa hadn't been through the kinds of things he had and he knew it would only tear her apart if he opened up to her fully. So he never did.

Sometimes, usually in the middle of the night, when he was plagued by wakefulness and harrowed by thoughts of what had happened and what he'd lost, Dean thought about going and trying to find Alex, then trying together to bring Sam back somehow. But he had promised Sam that he would try and live a normal life. That, and Dean was scared. Of finding Alex and being rejected, of trying to bring back Sam and not being able to find a way. It was miserable. He missed them so much, realized just how damn jacked up and co-dependent he'd been on them now that they were gone. The gap that their absences left was palatable, tangible, never-ending. He wasn't sure if he could ever get used to this 'normal life,' this life without his family. But he had to. And so he kept trying, kept his head down and just focused on getting through it one day at a time.

There were baseball games and family movie nights and drinks with the guys from work. Dean pretended that this guy who went to neighborhood barbecues and stressed over bills was really him. He tried to appreciate knowing where he was going to be sleeping every night. He tried to like having structure and predictability in his life. But in the back of his mind, he wondered why it all felt so damn wrong—then felt guilty about having those thoughts, period.
There were good days, unremarkable days, there were bad days. Lisa and Ben helped him through all of those days just by being there. He really grew attached to them, and the closer they got, the more he thought about leaving because he really felt like a curse at the end of the day. And Lisa and Ben? They deserved better than to be cursed. But he stayed. Because when it came down to it, Dean was terrified of being alone.

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**Six Months Later**

Crowley sat with his feet propped up, ankles crossed onto his large oak desk. His office was dank, dark, creepy… just like he liked it. The gray stone walls, reminiscent of a dungeon, were decorated with displays of old rusty torture tools. Behind him were a series of metal filing cabinets, and above them there hung a ridiculously massive painting of himself shaking hands and grinning with Hitler. On his desk, the things you'd expect to find on any work desk: a cup of pens, a stack of paperwork two feet high, a little bobble-head of Crowley's likeness, and a miniature Judas Chair model—brilliant torture device they thought up in Medieval times, if Crowley did say so himself. A shining golden name plate sat on the desk facing outward, declaring *Crowley: King of Hell, Playboy of the Year 1941*.

Humming a little ditty to himself, Crowley paged through his very thick binder of soul deals, reached for his glass of whiskey, then started slightly when he heard the sound of wind against fabric and looked up, saw that he was no longer alone in his office. Standing in front of him and looking irritated, tense, and sour stood the angel in the trench coat. *Finally.*

Not letting his surprise show through, Crowley raised his eyebrows and smiled, pleased. "Ah, Cas, my favorite halo. Was wondering when you'd come." He uncrossed his ankles, sat up properly.

"What do you mean, when I'd come?" Castiel questioned gruffly. "There's a war in Heaven, a war you had me start. I've been busy."  

"Now, now, let's not play the victim, darling," Crowley said, standing up now and taking his short, low glass of whiskey up with him. He sniffed appreciatively at the rim of the glass, swirled the dark liquid languidly, studied Castiel closely. The angel looked browbeaten, exhausted, foul-tempered.

"What do you want, Crowley?" he asked with dark impatience. "I don't have all day."

Crowley's eyes narrowed, a sudden thought occurred to him. He looked at the angel closely, gauging for his reaction. "Do you not know how long it's been, Cas, since we spoke last?" He asked.

Cas's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. "Six months," Crowley said, and watched as sheer confusion and then realization and then something like dread flashed across the angel's face—all within the space of a couple seconds,. And then Cas tried to hide it, tried to go back to being stone-faced. Crowley just rolled his eyes and sighed. "Yes, go ahead and pretend you knew that. I like the constipated look you get when you try and act like you know what you're doing." Cas said nothing, just clenched his jaw a bit. Crowley looked him up and down, reading the signs of fatigue and despondency that Cas was trying so hard to conceal. "War must be taking quite the toll then, hm?" the demon asked conversationally.

Cas was perturbed and troubled in equal parts. "Time works differently in Heaven, it's not constant or stable like it is on earth," he said. "To me only a few weeks have passed."

"Sad story," Crowley retorted sarcastically. "Where did I put my tiny violin?" At the confused
expression on the angel's face, the demon rolled his eyes. "Never mind."

Unfriendly and ill-tempered, Cas glanced away. "Why did you call me here?" He abruptly seemed to think of something, his eyes snapped back to Crowley, and his voice changed from dark and aggravated to something more urgent. "Is it Alex? Is something wrong?"

Crowley suppressed a smile. Oh, Cas had it bad... which for Crowley meant good. It was just too easy to have this carrot named Alex to dangle in front of Cas. The demon canted his head to the side, a knowing smile playing at the corners of his lips. "I called—and s'not the first time either, mind you—because I did indeed locate Miss Winchester's name in the book of Hell. She's slotted for a room downstairs with extended stay, but here I am, ready to hand the right to her sweet little lost soul over to you."

Genuine shock and displaced confusion showed on the angel's face, it was as if he couldn't believe she would be in the book of hell at all. "How is it that her name would be in there?" he asked, voice a little softer than it had been before. He seemed mildly horrified.

Crowley shrugged. "Don't ask me, ask Fate. Literally, go ask her—I heard Atropos has a hate-on for you after that whole apocalypse jive." Crowley wiggled his eyebrows at the stunned angel, set his drink down, pulled a thick book off the shelf to the right of his desk. "I just have the book mate, I don't decide who goes in or why." Crowley began to leaf through the massive tome. "Doesn't matter now though, does it?" He asked, finding the page he sought, and smiling crookedly up at Cas. "You're going to throw out the rulebook and get her a penthouse suite upstairs. Crisis averted."

He set the heavy book down on his desk and then took a large metal circle that held about fifty keys on it from where it hung on the wall. The right to Alex's soul had to be transferred from the book to another object, anything physical would do. He selected the first key he touched, pulled it off the loop, went back to the book and muttered the incantation. The words *Alexandra Elizabeth Winchester, 1983-2013* disappeared off the page, the key burned bright then faded back to its normal state. It was complete. Crowley picked the key up, waggled it at Cas meaningfully.

Cas watched him for a moment, silent and hard to read, disturbed. He stared at the book where her name had just disappeared from. "How is she?" he asked hesitantly. "How is Alex?"

Crowley pursed his lips slightly in hooded annoyance. "Mm. Well, she keeps killing the demons I send to watch her. I'm getting bloody sick of it, too. Eleven demons in six months!" There was the faintest little look that came over Cas's face that pissed Crowley off. "Oh don't look so pleased about it. You need to hurry it along before I'm out of cronies."

"I need to 'hurry it up?'" Castiel asked, filled with sudden righteously indignant fury. "As I recall, this entire war is contingent on you finding Purgatory."

Crowley paused humbly, thoughtfully. "Well yes I suppose there's that."

"How close are you?" Cas asked intensely, gruffly. "I can't sustain the same pace for long—Raphael is too powerful, too many of us are dying."

"Keep your pants on, would you?" Crowley leveled the angel with a slightly challenging stare. "I'm going as fast as I can. Would be a helluva lot faster if you'd let me pull Dean and Alex off the bench to get me my monsters that will get us to Purgatory..."

"They're not going to be a part of this business," Castiel said firmly, looked down, then added as a self-loathing afterthought: "It's bad enough that I am."
Crowley let out an annoyed heave of air. "Then you, my friend, will just have to wait. You can't just streamline these things." He held the key up again, showed it to Cas, who looked at it, trying not to reveal how much he wanted it to Crowley, who could see it easily, without even trying. "And by the by," Crowley said lowly, "next time I call you, try not to drag your feet, savvy? We're business partners as I recall and I dislike it when I can't get a hold of you."

Cas's eyes flicked up to Crowley's, locking. His face was full of balefulness. "How unfortunate that you feel that way," he almost snapped. "Now give me what's mine."

"Was that sarcasm?" Crowley asked, pleasantly surprised and amused, grinning widely, making his eyes crinkle up. He walked around the desk, coming to stand in front of the baleful angel. "My, my. They grow up so fast." Cas was waiting, wrathful and impatient and Crowley was annoyed that no one appreciated his freewheeling sense of humor and comedic timing. He rolled his eyes, supposing he did have to make good on his agreement to Cas and that his fun was over. He sighed dramatically. "Your right to Alex's soul…I surrender it to you for safekeeping, as fulfillment of our agreement." He dropped the key into Cas's outstretched waiting hand. "What do you plan to do with it, if you don't mind my asking?"

Cas had closed his fist around the key and now his arm was at his side again, his eyes were narrowed and his face rigid. "It's none of your concern." And just like he'd appeared—without warning—he disappeared.

Crowley sighed gustily, put his hands into his pockets. "Kids these days. So rude." There was a light knocking on his office door and Crowley raised a hand, opened the door without touching it.

Lola peeked her head in. "Hey Bossman," she said, chewing and popping a mouthful of gum as usual. "Your eleven o'clock flogging and maiming is here." She jerked her thumb in the vague direction of where the torture rooms were. Lola was a demon who was young in appearance, with short, over-styled and unnaturally reddish hair, a petite heart-shaped face, and large expressive brown eyes. She always dressed in a way that made her look like a gothy Spice Girl reject—right down to the godawful body glitter and neon blue eyeshadow.

Crowley smiled at his underling secretary. "Wouldn't miss it for the world." He strolled out of his office, feeling good about his lot in life. Cas, under his control and on his way to getting Crowley some major soul power—clueless, not even knowing that Dean and Alex weren't together anymore, that she was out there on her own. He couldn't have planned it more perfectly, the way that she was out of the picture, not distracting Cas but still motivating him. And, well, there was the whole killing-every-watcher-Crowley-sent thing, but other than that, Alex hadn't rocked the boat since that little try at killing him six months ago. Dean, not making a peep since he'd shacked up with some woman and kid. And Sam… oh, Sam. Hunting and hunting well, getting in some trouble here and there but making a killing. Quite literally.

Yes, things were shaping up quite nicely for the King of Hell.

Later

Time—Castiel had almost no sense of time as the war which broke out across Heaven overtook the celestial planes like a flood. Seeing Crowley and learning that it had been six full months since the battle began had jarred Castiel, badly. In Heaven it had only felt like a few weeks had passed. Upset, worried, and now the holder of the right to Alex's soul, Castiel felt even more lost than he had before. Why had her name been in that book? Why did her death still occur in 2013? Questions he had no answer for but needed.
Cas was scouring the heavens for any sign of Joshua in between trying to convince his brethren that Raphael's regime would end in disaster, in between battles that saw many good angels die. Many had been lost on both sides. Castiel's followers were growing slowly. He spoke to them about free will and choice, yet he was tied down. His choice would have been to go to the one he loved, but he could not.

Six months he had been gone from her, and it didn't feel like that long to him. The second Crowley said it had been that long, guilt and something like panic had gripped Cas at the thought of Alex waiting that long for him—he knew she would have gotten the message Balthazar delivered, but six months was a long time—would she grow tired or waiting, would she worry? He knew she would still be with Dean and that thought was his only comfort.

Immediately upon leaving Hell and seeing Crowley, Castiel had summoned Rachel and told her to go to earth, find Alex, ensure that she was as Crowley had said. To give her a message and tell her that he would come to her as soon as he could, that time had passed without him even realizing, that he hadn't won the war yet. Rachel hadn't returned yet, and Castiel was anxious for an answer.

He still heard Alex sometimes, a simple question of his name, and each time it broke his heart anew and now, knowing how long it had been for her, it hurt even more. He was desperate to go to her in a dream or to visit just briefly, to rest his eyes upon her face, to hold her in the empty space of his arms and talk to her, hear her voice and just be with her, to quench an undying thirst only she could sate. But he was the biggest target in Heaven, the most wanted angel, and the eyes of the enemy were always on him. Going to Alex would be selfish on his part, it would only endanger her. He had to defeat Raphael first. There was just no other way.

Terrified of how precious Alex was to him and how easy it would be for the enemy to use those feelings against him, Castiel had instructed his devotees, the ones on his side, never to mention Alex. He thought perhaps if he could convince Raphael that she didn't matter to him that he could keep her safer from harm. He only spoke of Alex to Rachel, his Lieutenant, the one who believed in him the most.

He had sent Rachel to Alex what must have been a few earth-days ago and Castiel drew in a deeply pensive breath. He stood in a heaven he had never been to, one that had been damaged in the war: it was a big grassy field with a single tree from which a swing hung. This place had once been serene and beautiful, but the grass was blown sideways, dead angel wing marks were burned onto the ground, the sky was ripped up like paper. Sometimes Cas doubted what he was doing and wondered if the fight he had started was worth the outcome he desired.

Then he thought of what he was fighting for, of who he was fighting for.

Finding himself to be reflective and sentimental in his distress, Cas remembered when he had known what it was he felt for her, definitively. When he'd known what the name of what those feelings lodged deep inside of him were. When he had known that he loved her.

It had been the time after he rescued her from Gabriel's hell world and taken her to a hospital. At the time, he'd been unable to heal her because he'd been cut off from Heaven. And he'd stayed at her bedside all night as she slept and he'd watched and tried to understand why seeing her in agony made him feel agony too. Why he looked at her and didn't want to look away. Why he had held her for the first time in his arms that day and looked at her lips, caught himself thinking of kissing her. Those feelings, those sensations... he had thought maybe those things were what the humans called being in love. And when he'd realized that he felt that way toward her, he'd been confused, afraid, nervous. Confused because how could an angel love a human? It was forbidden but it also seemed like something Cas shouldn't be capable of. Afraid because he didn't know how to stop
himself from feeling what he did, wanting what he wanted. Nervous because what if she found out and was made to be repulsed or uncomfortable by him?

He knew now that she had felt the same way, that he had not been the only one considering the word love. He knew now that they had loved one another for more time than either had consciously realized. And he knew that he had loved her first. Even before she had laid eyes on him, even before he had a vessel, she had crossed his mind and never left. She stayed with him there in his deepest thoughts and most meaningful memories and for now, that was all he had to hold on to. In his pocket, he curled his hand around the small silver object she'd given to him. A great amount of sadness and longing alike overcame him. He shut his eyes for a moment.

Being apart was painful to him and he knew that Alex felt more deeply than he did, that she was so much more emotional than him and he wondered how she could bear it. He barely could, so how would she? He imagined her wondering where he was, he imagined her alone and searching the sky and breathing out his name in the form of a question. He could barely fathom this tension, this divide, this loneliness that being without her produced—he wanted the war to be over, he wanted to be past this now.

Missing her was like every goodbye they had ever said… but said all at once.

"Castiel."

His eyes snapped open at the sound of a familiar voice beside him a few feet off. He turned, saw Rachel, and anxiousness came over Castiel. "You've returned," he said, going to her immediately and searching her face for any indication of the news she brought—he found himself incapable of waiting, he needed to know. "What did you find? How is she?"

Rachel smiled, put a steadying hand onto Castiel's arm. "She's fine," Rachel said evenly, soothingly. "She and her brother are fine. I gave her your message and she was glad to receive it."

Utter relief flooded Cas, he felt tension viscerally leave his body, he breathed out as if he had been holding his breath.

Squeezing his arm reassuringly, Rachel held his gaze and, unbeknownst to Cas, continued to lie straight to his face. "She told me she would wait as long as she had to, Castiel."

"What did—" Castiel started. But suddenly three angels appeared in front of them, blades at their sides. And Rachel was glad, because she didn't want to lie anymore; hadn't thought that he would want to know any more than he had asked already. Castiel and his Lieutenant turned their attention to the battle at hand, and Rachel hoped he wouldn't ask again. He would, of course, and Rachel would remain vague, telling him what he wanted to hear… feeling guilty for lying but justified in the end.

Rachel had gone to earth, found the girl Castiel was so attached to, intending to deliver the message… but then Rachel had seen the girl and hadn't liked what she had seen. Perhaps it was sinful of her to lie and deceive, but Rachel was driven by a strong need to protect her brother in arms from both distraction and mistake. And Alex Winchester was both.

Free will was what they were fighting for, so Rachel had decided to exercise it. She hadn't gone there intending to disregard Castiel's request, but then she'd seen this human girl in the flesh and she'd been mystified, confused. Castiel said this human was many things—good, kind, beautiful, lovely—but what Rachel had seen was killing and filth and lowness. Things that would tarnish Castiel. So Rachel had remained invisible and decided not to deliver her brother's message.

Alex Winchester was not fine. She was not with her brother. But Castiel didn't need to know either.
of those things. He needed to focus on winning the war.

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**Even Later**

Crowley yanked Garlington to his feet. "Didya *really* think," he growled, "for even a *second*, you could pull one over on me?!" He sent the scrawny demon flying into the stone wall.

Garlington panted, collapsed down on all fours. He was covered in blood, looked like he'd been through the ringer. "We just knew the girl was important to you, not why or *ahhh*! anything! I was just doing what Meg said, please, *please*, I'm no one, just a peon, *please*!"

Crowley grabbed him up by the collar, held him against the wall, looked at him with cool anger. "So you and your little gang of misfits thought you'd swoop in, kidnap the girl I've a vested interest in, use her as leverage over me?" Crowley almost smiled. "Serves you right what happened, doesn't it." He let go of the demon roughly.

Slack and trembling against the wall, Garlington had the look of a demon who had looked the devil himself in the eye. "She—it wasn't even *possible* what she did!" he protested, voice tight with panic. "There were *five* of us, she killed the others and almost me too!"

"Boo-fucking-hoo." Crowley made a face, rolled his eyes. "Amateurs."

"No, you don't understand!" Garlington protested in rising terror, "It was like she was *on* something or like—"

Crowley backhanded the squeaky-voiced demon across the face. "*Do* shut up," he commanded tremulously, "you sound so *stupid* when you exist." He calmed himself, narrowed his eyes, raised his chin slightly. "Now. Tell your little boss *Meg* I'm coming for her. Sooner or later, that dirty little double-crossing whore is mine." Crowley reconsidered, smiled now. "Actually, sorry. Looks like you won't be able to tell her after all."

Garlington's face registered questioning confusion even as without any further adieu, Crowley stabbed one of his favorite acquisitions—a demon blade from Japan—into Garlington's chest cavity. The demon screamed and Crowley wiggled his eyebrows, satisfied, but still pissed off as Garlington fell over dead. "Cheers."

Crowley looked at his hands. Covered in blood, as usual. "Riveting stuff," he commented flatly, filled with both boredom and annoyance. He turned to his companion. Lola had her arms folded and was leaned into the door frame. One dark eyebrow arched up, there was a little smirk on her face.

"Love watching you work," she said, pushing away from the doorway and sauntering over, looking at the dead demon's body on the floor. She put her hands on her hips. "So, this chick has killed *how* many of our kind now?" She shot Crowley a look. "She's starting to make us look bad. Maybe you should pick less moronic grunts for the job, ones that won't keep getting caught."

The comment seemed to set the King of Hell off. "Maybe you *should* keep your bloody *trap* shut!" He roared.

Lola, being Lola, just made a face at the outburst, blew a bubble in her gum, appeared unimpressed. *Are you done yet?* her expression seemed to ask. The little pink bubble popped.

Crowley sighed, regulated. "Sorry darling. Misdirected anger, you know how I am." He walked over, gave her chin an affectionate little tap. "You're looking very mid-to-late nineties Gwen
Stefani today, by the way. *Really* need to let me take you shopping—it's like your closet just regurgitated itself onto you." Lola just looked at him deadpan.

Crowley walked off a few paces, wiping his bloody hands on a rag he picked up from off the table.

"Any-hoo. The help I've got watching her? They're *not* morons. She's just good at what she does. *So* good in fact that I'm having issues getting replacements lined up. *Apparently* the grunts are getting a little gun-shy over the littles Winchester." Crowley soured slightly. "She's about to piss me off, truth be told."

Lola fixed her boss with a quizzical look. "Why are you wasting the manpower on her, anyway?" She came a little closer, lowered her voice conspiratorially. "The angel would never know if you didn't make good on your end of the bargain."

Crowley shot her a chastening look. "Deal's a deal. I'm a man—ah, demon—of my word." He thought about it. "Most of the time." He chuckled darkly. "Seems like she doesn't need the help though, doesn't it? She's got it well and bloody handled, she's friggin' clearing my stock room of goons."

Crowley pointed at the dead demon who'd been going on and on about Alex. "What this one said?" He paused meaningfully. "Let's not have that get out, understood? I know you and your water cooler talk. Last thing I need's the employees being even more spooked about Alex E. Winchester, A.K.A. pain in my ass."

Lola agreed not to say anything. But it was too late. The demons had already begun, *months* ago, to fear the human girl who carried the angel's blade and killed their kind brutally. It wasn't her size, stature, or even her ability that forbade. It was the dark storm that raged inside of her and boiled out. It was the things she'd done to the black-eyed monsters she'd caught watching her. It was the rumor that she drank their blood and made them watch while she did it.

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**Two Months Later**

Another night where he laid wide awake, not able to stop thinking. Dean tried not to sigh loudly in frustration because *why couldn't he sleep, dammit*—Lisa was asleep peacefully next to him and he didn't want to wake her. Christmas had come and gone last month with no word from Alex, a short little call from Bobby… and that was it. Lisa was really into the holiday and honestly, it had made Dean feel a little better when they finally took down all the damn decorations and reminders of the holiday he wasn't sharing with his family.

Eight months since everything had happened. Eight. Fucking. Months. Dean's thoughts were simplistic and disjointed in his tired state, he was only half lucid. It would be time to wake up and go to work soon and he'd slept about two hours the past five nights in a row. Awesome.

The clock ticked in the loud silence, and beside him, Lisa gave a soft sigh in her sleep. Dean looked at her, smiled a little, if sadly. Most of his smiles were that way, touched by the sorrow that lingered deep inside.

There was a sudden loud pounding on the front door of the house and Dean started, jumped, reacting instinctively and reaching for his gun (underneath the pillow—Lisa hated it, but he insisted). He was wide awake, heart pounding a hundred miles an hour.

Beside him, Lisa was stirring, confused and still half-asleep, "Dean—what time is it?" she mumbled, voice rough. He was already getting up, his gun in-hand.
"Three in the morning," he whispered back tensely, and she heard his voice, realized something was wrong. Waking up more, she saw the gun and got freaked out, sat up straight, looking petrified. He was at the window, pushing the blinds down slightly and trying to see the front door, but he couldn't quite see it from that angle.

"Stay here," Dean whispered, holding a hand up, gesturing for her to not move. "Stay right here. I'll find out." She nodded, clutching blankets to herself.

Dean stole down the hall quietly, past Ben's bedroom—peeked his head in and saw that he was still fast asleep. The kid could sleep through a damn tornado. Dean moved through the house tensely, on high alert, watching every shadow, his heart pounding with an adrenaline he hadn't felt in awhile now. His hunting instincts came back like he hadn't ever stopped using them. He got to the front door—it was solid wood, no way to see who was on the other side. He put his back to the wall just beside the doorknob, held his gun tight and ready near his face, focusing on steadying his breathing. Step one, find out where this person was standing.

"Who's there?" he demanded loud enough that whoever was on the other side of the door could hear him.

"The President of the United States," came a voice that belonged to a female and was distinctly teasing. Dean made a face at the door—he didn't recognize the voice. Who the hell…? She kept talking. "Relax. I'm not armed. Just open the door."

Dean hesitated, not sure if that were a good idea or not. But throwing caution to the wind, he unlocked the door and cracked it open slightly, gun already trained on the place he knew she was standing. Opposite of him, leaned casually against the door frame on the side where the hinges swung from, a woman around his age with long blonde hair and strong, pretty features. She wore a dark rust red leather jacket, had her arms crossed and a nonchalant little smile on her face. She looked him up and down—that's when he remembered that all he was wearing was boxers and a t-shirt and socks pulled up almost to his knees. Also, he was pretty sure his hair was sticking straight up.

"Morning," she commented, grinning lopsidedly, giving the impression of that she was laughing at him internally.

He glanced down, saw that there was a pistol tucked into the front waistband of her jeans. "You said you weren't armed," he said suspiciously.

Her eyebrows rose just slightly. "Oh yeah, I did, didn't I." There was that little smile again. "Oops. I forgot."

Dean looked at her with narrowed eyes. "Who are you?" he asked gruffly, still keeping the gun on her from behind the door, where she couldn't see.

She grinned, easy-going, as if it were a huge joke to her. "What, Dean, you don't remember me? My feelings are hurt."

"Remember her? He'd never seen this chick a day in his life. She saw how he was drawing a blank and lowered her chin, gave him an expectant look. "Think, Winchester. Fifteen years ago? Arizona?" Dean blinked, clueless, trying to remember what the hell she would be talking about. She rolled her eyes at his baffled silence, sighed, looked up and off, like giving him clues was like pulling teeth to her. "You thought you were the shit, I had braces…"

He wracked his brain, came up with nothing. "I'm sorry, who—" he squinted at her, trying to place
her. And then he almost did a double-take. No way, that couldn't be who he thought it was. 
"James?" he asked, incredulous, not able to believe that this woman in front of him could be who he thought she was. His gun lowered a little.

Her expression changed just slightly when he called her James—she looked slightly annoyed, and that's when he knew it was her. "Ah," she said, unenthused. "You do remember me. Also, it's Jamie." She looked at him pointedly. "And I told you a million and one times, so..." she trailed off pointedly. Yeah, she had told him a million times, but he'd never called her anything but James. Well wait, that wasn't true. She'd also told him not to call her Braceface. He hadn't listened to that one either.

Her eyes locked on his and she studied him carefully, then gestured with a nod toward his hand that was behind the door, holding the gun. "Do you mind not pointing your gun at me?"

How did she...? It didn't matter. "Yeah, uh. Sorry." He lowered the gun, looking at her in veiled amazement. This could not be the same Jamie Ward he'd met back in the day. He had been, what, sixteen at the time? They'd been in Arizona, hunting Skinwalkers with Dad. Jamie and her uncle and brother had been on the same job and they'd ended up joining forces. At the time Jamie had been an ungracefully tall, scrawny, knock-kneed fifteen-year-old with braces that took over her whole face and a lisp from how big they were in her mouth. She'd had horrible acne and was a subpar hunter, a snobby rich kid, and Dean had pretty rudely and smugly let her know he thought as much of her.

He remembered telling her she looked like a giraffe and a slinky on separate occasions, he remembered how she kept "accidentally" letting tree branches smack him when they walked through the woods and she'd had the lead for all of two minutes.

What he couldn't get over was how different she looked today—she'd filled out, grown into herself, she had straight even teeth and had actually developed some level of style, she didn't look gangly or nerdy like she used to. He was taken aback and didn't mind letting her know. "Damn, you look... different."

She smiled teasingly. "So do you..." her eyes dropped to below his waistline languidly. "Love the boxers."

He looked down. They were the ones with smiling candy canes printed all over them. Lisa had said they were cute. Dammit. Jamie was obviously laughing at him again inside and Dean was not amused at all. "They were a present," he muttered. This was all beside the point. He was tired and this little class reunion was nice but he needed to know why she was there. "So... wanna tell what the hell are you doing at my house at three in the morning, James?" He saw how that name got under her skin. Score one for me.

He felt himself regaining a little dignity and he even cracked a slightly cheeky smile. "If you need my help on a job or something, sorry. I'm retired."

She stuck her tongue out between her lips briefly, wetting her lips as she pushed herself away from the doorframe, standing to her full height. She was about half a foot shorter than him, maybe five foot six or so. She was suddenly all business and came closer to him, leaning in covertly. It was then that he caught her scent—she smelled faintly of cheap motel soap, gasoline, and deodorant; she smelled like hard work and long nights and tough living and he stared for a second, a little caught off guard and not sure why.

Oblivious to him, Jamie gave him an almost warning look. "It's Alex," she said. Two words that floored Dean, sent fear racing through him.

"What?" he asked, almost speechless, definitely confused. Not what he's expected to hear.
She looked a little confused now too. "Your sister."

"No, I know—what about her?" Dean opened the door some more, looking at Jamie intensely, his voice rising in anxiety. "Have you seen her? Do you know where she is?"

The look on Jamie's face was worrying him, the way she was hesitating was now filled him with dread. "Yeah, we've been hunting together on and off together for a few months and..." Jamie shrugged, looked off, disturbed. "I dunno what's happened to her but it's something bad."

Dean's heart was beating fast again, and he felt almost ill. "What do you mean?"

"She's missing," Jamie said. "As of a few hours ago. Straight up—" she threw her hands wide in a shrug, "—vanished right out of our motel room."

Dean nodded, thinking fast. "Lemme get dressed," he said. "Give me five minutes."

Jamie's eyebrows rose faintly. "Just like that?" she asked, seeming a little surprised that he was just ready to go with her at the drop of a dime without any more information or convincing. Maybe she thought she was going to have to try harder.

"Yes, just like that, now sit tight."

He got to the bedroom, turned on the light without warning, and Lisa protested with a groan, put a hand over her eyes, squinting against the brightness. "Who is it?" She asked, voice filled with nervous fear. "Is everything okay?" He was yanking a dresser drawer open. Jeans, he needed some damn jeans. "Dean?"

He found a pair, started yanking them on. "Old hunting acquaintance," he muttered, completely focused on the task of dressing himself.

"I gotta go," he said, checking his gun and tucking it into the waistband of his jeans then crossing the room at a brisk stride. "Something's happened to Alex and I gotta go." He pulled the duffel bag full of old hunting stuff out—it had Dad's journal, a couple shotguns, some rounds, salt, and some other odds and ends in there. Dean crouched over it, pawing through it all quickly, double checking. Lisa was standing now.

"You're just taking off in the middle of the night?" She asked in disbelief and Dean stood.

"Yes," he answered immediately. "This is my sister and she's in trouble."

Lisa looked at him with a hugely uncertain, worried frown. "Are you sure about this?" She asked, and he heard the quiet fear filling her voice.

Dean shrugged, tossed the duffel onto the bed, went back to the closet and yanked one of his jackets off the hangar, began to put it on. "No, but... I'll be fine."

Lisa had walked to the window, was looking down into the yard where Jamie stood, waiting halfway down the sidewalk, illuminated dimly by the street lamp. Dean shoved his feet into his
hunting boots, didn't even bother to lace them. "That's your old hunting buddy?" Lisa asked. "She's pretty."

Dean shouldered the duffel bag, not missing Lisa's tone. A little exasperated—this was no time for that crap—he went to her. "Relax, Lees. Just get some rest. I'll be back when I can." He kissed her forehead quickly, squeezed one of her shoulders, headed for the door.

"Dean—" Lisa protested. Worried.

He looked back at her. "Tell Ben not to worry. Love you."

She sighed unhappily, resigned. "Love you."

Dean almost jogged out of the house and out to where Jamie waited.

"Hot damn, that was fast," she commented, eyes flickering up to the top of his head. "Hair still needs work though."

"Yeah sure whatever, let's go," Dean said, nodding toward the dark greenish blue Tahoe SUV parked at the curb. He distractedly trying to pat his hair down into his every day hairstyle. "That you?"

"Yup," Jamie confirmed, already on her way over to it. Dean shoved his bag into the backseat, swung into the passenger side even as she hopped into the driver's seat and started the engine. It rumbled to life loudly.

"How far is the motel she disappeared from?" Dean asked, shutting his door.

Jamie shrugged, looking over her shoulder as she shifted into reverse and backed up. "An hour, give or take."

Dean looked at her in bewilderment. His sister had been that close to him when it happened? "Only an hour?" he asked, his voice conveying his extreme surprise.

Jamie glanced at him sidelong. She looked like she were trying to decide if she should tell him something. "Yeah. Alex has this... thing."

Dean frowned. "What thing?"

"This thing where she won't go real far from here." She glanced at him again meaningfully. "Where you are." Dean's heart felt like it burst, he turned away a little, not wanting Jamie to see how emotional it made him to hear that. It was too late, Jamie saw, but said nothing.

Dean cleared his throat. He needed to find out as much about his sister as he could—where she'd been, what she'd been doing. Hearing that she'd been hunting sort of broke his heart. Mostly because maybe he'd hoped she could find normal life, too, like he had, somehow. But maybe not. "So how long you guys hunted together?"

"Mm," Jamie thought for a second, fiddling with something on her dashboard, "Four month or so I guess."

"What'd she do before that?"

Jamie shrugged, glancing into the outside rear view mirror. "Hell if I know. All I know is when I found her she was waiting tables at some shit restaurant and said she wasn't hunting anymore but..."
well, she got roped back into it thanks to me." Jamie's tone was hard to read, it was purposefully light and humorous, unaffected, but Dean thought he heard something else there. He couldn't figure out what though.

"So it's you, Gary, and Glen?" He asked. "And Alex just… hitched a ride on the hunting express?"

Jamie's expression flickered, became a little stonier at the mention of her uncle and brother. "It's me and Glen. Uh." She seemed to reconsider. "Sometimes it's me and Glen. He likes to take off and do his own thing a lot of the time. Gary died a few years after we met you guys."

No doubt thanks to the hunting life. Dean quieted a little. "Sorry to hear that."

"Thanks," she said. "I'm sorry about Sam. Alex doesn't talk much but... she did tell me that."

Dean felt his brow furrowing. Alex doesn't talk much. "What kind of job were you guys on when this happened?" He asked, hoping to maybe start putting the puzzle together before they even got there.

Jamie shook her head, shrugged again. "Your run-of-the-mill pissed off ghost thing. Nothing fancy. Finished it up yesterday."

"And she disappeared from the motel room?"

Jamie looked as uncertain and mystified as Dean felt. "Yeah. Place looks like a friggin' tornado hit it," she was scowling ahead at the road, she held the wheel steady with one hand and rubbed her palm down her her chin once in thought. "I wasn't there when it actually happened. Glen was."

Dean looked at her sharply. "Your brother and my sister… were alone in a motel room together?"

He clarified, not sure if he liked the sound of this.

Jamie gave him a confrontational look at the tone in his voice. "What, you want me to call the police?" She took in his disapproving scowl and gave him a challenging look and some attitude to boot. "How old is Alex? Like, almost thirty? Access your uncrazy side. They're adults and they can do what they want." She smiled a little, like she knew she was about to get on his nerves. "Including each other, if they want."

Annoyed but trying not to show it—that's what she was after, dammit—Dean crossed his arms and sank down slightly into his seat. "Now you're just being a troll," he muttered. He was trying to remember what Glen was like, all he remembered was a snotty, sneaky blond tweenager who had stolen his wallet, taken all the money out, then replaced it somehow—he knew that was Glen who did that, he knew it then, he knew it now. But he'd never been able to prove it.

Jamie reached over and turned the music up—it had been on volume zero. A horrible noise like machine guns and something that was supposed to sound like a guitar faded up in volume and Dean literally flinched away at the racket. "What the hell is that?" he asked, feeling offended and sort of disturbed. On the speakers, a guy was screaming what he assumed were words, but it sounded like a fucking nightmare.

"Music," Jamie replied, already copping an amused attitude at his revulsion.

Dean shook his head emphatically. "No—this is not music," he said, frowning and listening for a few more seconds. "How the hell can you listen to this shit?"

She laughed at his distress, thoroughly enjoying his disgusted, confused expression as the thrash metal blared. She turned it up even louder.
Thank you God—they finally reached the motel and Jamie turned down the torture—the quote unquote music. They pulled into a place called the Cherry Tree Inn, a pretty predictable crappy slum motel. Jamie parked her SUV in between two cars—a beige late 90's Chevrolet Blazer that was jacked up with tires too big for itself and a beautiful black two door 60's Ford Mustang. Dean immediately knew which one belonged to his sister. The Mustang looked sort of like a smaller version of the Impala and his chest hurt again, viscerally.

Jamie was already getting out, Dean followed her, grabbing his bag of stuff, steeling himself for what he was about to find. He looked at Alex's car as Jamie unlocked the door. She pushed it open and Dean went with her inside.

"Glen?" She asked, sounding confused. She switched the lights on. The room was clearly empty. "Fuck," she muttered.

"What, he's gone now too?" Dean asked.

Jamie threw her hands up, it looked like she wasn't sure if she should be worried or pissed. The room was a disaster. The wallpaper was torn off the walls, the lamps were sideways, the TV was busted, the windows too. It really did look like a tornado had blown through. Honestly, it reminded Dean of when Cas had first tried to contact him before his vessel. No. No, this couldn't have been Cas.

Dean walked the room slowly, taking it in, searching for any signs that would point to who or what could have done this. He recognized his sister's duffel bag in the corner, saw one of her jacket's hung over the back of a chair. His heart felt painful in his chest.

Focus, Dean.

"You guys made any enemies lately?" He asked, then realized that was a stupid question and reworded himself. "I mean the kind who could do something like this."

Jamie had her phone out, was distracted. "Take your pick. There was this family of Kitsunes last month actually I… let's just say if Uncle Bob found what Alex left… he'd be wanting some payback." She put the phone to her ear.

"What do you mean?" Dean asked, kneeling down at the foot of one of the beds, looking for any traces of sulfur or foreign substances. He saw nothing.

"Dammit, Glen you asshole, answer—" she muttered, then turned her attention back to Dean. "Your little sister's a bit twisted, let's just leave it at that." She got no answer on her phone and snapped it shut, getting agitated.

"Maybe he just went out to get something," Dean offered. He was distracted, too, apprehensive. Alex was twisted? That didn't fit.

"Yeah, maybe," Jamie responded gruffly. "And there were also these demons that jumped Alex a couple months ago, she friggin’… went to town on them. One of them got away… he might not like her so much right now either." Jamie shook her head, eyes scanning the room. She looked really worried and stressed, but she stayed focused. "Honestly, Dean… it's kind of like she's the one who's out for revenge. I just don't know who or what against."

Dean looked at Jamie, not sure if he believed her. He knew his sister was capable as hell, but… something just didn't seem right about what he was hearing about her.

The door to the room suddenly opened, in strolled a very tall blond guy. He carried a six-pack of beers, had a distinctly laid-back air of confidence. "Yo," he greeted, and it was like with that single
word, he had offended Jamie in every way possible.

"Yo? Yo?" She asked, crossing her arms and looking at her younger brother vengefully. "Yo nothing." Her arms uncrossed, she began to talk angrily with her hands. "Where the hell did you go? I told you to stay here; the whole friggin' reason I left you here was so you could—"

"Relax, relax," Glen cut her off, waved her away, not even batting an eye at her upset. "I needed a six pack, it was fine, don't worry about it. I was only gone five minutes." He pulled the fallen-over motel table back up and set the beers down on it as he spoke, then turned and acknowledged Dean, approached him and held out his hand, smiled tightly. "Dean. It's been awhile."

They shook hands—good, firm handshake. "Glen. You still owe me thirty bucks, man. The guy was tall, probably Sam's height—he wore jeans, a graphic t-shirt and a flannel over it, a hooded jacket over that. He had tousled blond hair, a light, short beard, a strong features like his sister. He was built as hell, huge broad shoulders. He'd changed too, just like Jamie had. They were practically unrecognizable.

Glen let go of Dean's hand. "I'd ask how you're doing but... you know," he said, turned, and motioned to the drinks he'd just brought in. "Beer?"

Dean shook his head. "Yeah, no, I'm good. So, you were with Alex when... this happened?" He gestured at the wrecked room.

"Yup." Glen cracked open a beer. "We were asleep, I hear this, I dunno, wind and a high pitched kind of screeching noise." He took a drink of his beer. "I woke up, she was gone right out of the bed."

Dean raised his chin just a fraction of an inch, looking at Glen carefully. "Which bed?"

Glen wiped the side of his mouth on the back of his hand then indicated the bed on the right. "That one."

Eyeing Glen with a suspicious glance, Dean went to the bed his sister had disappeared from, began to poke around, search for anything out of the ordinary.

"I wouldn't bother, I already checked it all," Glen told him, sitting down on the other bed and leaning over his knees, beer still in hand.

Dean squinted, seeing something small and black behind the bedside table. He pulled the table out more, grabbed the small, light object. A tiny black feather. He turned and looked at Glen balefully, held up the small feather. "Then what the hell is this?"

Jamie looked at the feather and then her brother and practically exploded. "You said you checked that side!" She accused.

Glen obviously felt attacked and raised his hands defensively. "I did!"

Apparently this was an issue for them. "Oh like last month when you said you checked a perimeter and you were texting some bimbo instead?"

"I did check it!" Glen retorted.

"You can't just look at something for one second and call that checking!" Jamie said angrily. "You blew my cover and almost got me killed!"
"It was a one time thing, won't happen again," Glen protested.

"It just did." Jamie was on the warpath. "I swear, if you keep fucking up like this Glen—"

"Can you two stow the family feud for two seconds?" Dean demanded, standing up, feather in hand. Jamie and Glen both looked chastened, Jamie looked at Glen, pointed a warning finger at her sullen brother as if to say we'll talk about this later. She then proceeded to ignore him and went to Dean, who was staring at the feather. "Okay. What is that, Dean?"

He stared at it, looked at the room and didn't have a doubt in his mind anymore. "Angels," he said grimly, then reconsidered. "Or... angel. And I think I know which one."

Jamie and Glen exchanged a look as Dean looked up at the ceiling. "Cas! Castiel! I need you to wing it down here pronto." Nothing happened. "That means now!" He bellowed. Again, nothing.

"What's... a Castiel?" Jamie asked, and Dean looked at her dubiously. Alex had been with these two for months and they didn't know who Cas was? No... something obviously was wrong. Getting more and more worried, Dean returned his attention to the ceiling, probably looking insane. But he didn't care.

"Cas! I don't know what you're playing at, but if you hurt her or if one of your buddies took her—dammit, just get down here now!" Again, nothing, and Dean turned around, looking behind himself then around, flabbergasted. "Where the hell is he?" He asked, mostly to himself, then tried again, stubborn until the end. "Alex is gone, Cas, do you hear me?!"

"What do you mean, gone?"

Dean whirled, Glen stood up in surprise, Jamie's mouth went open slightly. Castiel stood there, frowning deeply, looking at Dean, who was surprised to see him there for two seconds, then recovering. "Nice to see you too," he wisecracked, then indicated the room. "You know anything about this?"

Cas looked different than Dean remembered. Like he felt heavier, like his shoulders were carrying more than they used to. He seemed impatient and stressed. "About what, what are you talking about? Who are these people? And what do you mean Alex is gone?"

Dean was mad. Cas was supposed to be her guardian angel and he didn't know? What the actual hell was going on? "She disappeared in the middle of the night, sight unseen, I found this." He held out the little feather angrily. "Now which one of your buddies does this belong to?"

Cas looked at the feather and his expression changed—went from fuck off to oh god in less than a second. And Dean suddenly realized this might be worse than he thought.

"Give it to me," Castiel demanded, and snatched it without anything further, leaving Dean to blink and watch as Cas went to the table where Glen had set the beers. With a sweep of his arm, Cas sent the beers crashing down, he had drawn a stick of chalk out of his pocket and was drawing furiously.

"He—y..." Glen protested halfheartedly and looked at the mostly broken beer bottles in chagrin.

Jamie watched with flabbergasted expressions as Cas continued to draw as if his life depended on it, Dean approached slowly, fully with dread, not sure what Cas was doing. The angel seemed to finish drawing and set the feather down into the middle of the the symbol he'd drawn, held his hand out over it, shut his eyes and with deep concentration uttered some sort of Enochian incantation. "Zod ma rah kah mah vah rah." The feather burst into flame and disappeared, Cas
opened his eyes, a shocked look on his face.
"What is it Cas, who took her, why?" Dean demanded, needing answers, needing them now.
Cas stared ahead of himself blankly, fear gathering on his features, panic. "Nandriel. No, no…"
And Cas disappeared without explanation.
Lay Me Down to Sleep

"It was pride that changed the angels into devils."
- Saint Augustine

Alex remembered jolting awake as glass shattered and wind roared, she'd fallen out of bed reacting on instinct, reaching for the gun under her pillow, totally unsure of what was happening—then she'd been ripped away from the motel room completely. Like a little leaf she'd been caught in a gale force, spinning out of control in an endless abyss, not sure which direction was up or down or what was happening at all but now… now everything was still and dark.

She felt like she was in a waking dream—her eyes were barely able to focus as they blinked open blearily, she had the distinct feeling that her body was moving faster or maybe it was slower than her mind, like she was out of sync completely. Something was wrong with her, and she realized that as she realized how everything hurt and then that she was tied to something, wrists behind her back. Her head lolled forward onto her chest and she struggled to raise her head—she ached all over, like she'd been in a fight, like she'd collided hard with a hard surface several times. But—she hadn't—had she? She must have been. She could feel cuts and scrapes on her bare arms, feel the back of her head pounding where there'd been some kind of impact. Son of a bitch it hurt.

Alex struggled to hold her head up, survival instincts telling her to focus, focus. Her arms were behind her, she was tied tightly to what felt like a small metal pole, and beneath her was a cement floor. Her legs were sprawled out in front of her and one of them felt broken. She blinked several times over, squinted, realized her hearing was off—everything sounded muffled and tinny. What had happened? She couldn't remember a damn thing and the world was flickering, it was making her feel drunk and stupid. It was probably someone looking for revenge who had brought her here—she hadn't exactly made many friends this past year...

Her eyes regained some ability and she was able to see that she was in a warehouse of some kind and... it kept changing—through a dirty window not far away from her, Alex could see sunlight, and from the angle of light, it looked like it was late afternoon—but then it changed and it looked more like early morning, then it was abruptly night, then it was daylight again and raining, then sunny again, then windy and snowy—like she was somehow leap frogging through time. And then Alex noticed the warehouse changed too every time the outside changed—the interior was decrepit and rusted then nicer and newer, then dirty and abandoned looking, then clean and brand new, then old again. It kept changing and changing and changing and Alex felt sick, distorted, off balance, her visioned blurred again and she tried to shake her head, but she was slow as a slug and could barely manage to blink. She heard echoing footsteps beside her and tried to look up, see who it was. Her muscles were stiff and uncoordinated, she couldn't quite manage to turn her head.

A tall, lithe young woman with skin like mocha walked over and around to stand in front of Alex. She was intensely beautiful, with piercing eyes and striking youthful features, hair that was pulled away from her face tightly. Alex felt a sense of recognition, even though she was very convinced that she'd never seen this person before. Her arms were folded across herself in a mistrustful, cautious posture and she was dressed in a shimmering jet black top and expensive looking black slacks, pointed black heels. Expensive diamond earrings hung from her ears. By all appearances she was ready for some kind of elegant event and Alex was mystified, didn't know who this was or what she wanted. Was she a demon? Some kind of monster? Maybe a skinwalker. The woman arched a single, artfully penciled eyebrow down at Alex, who attempted to speak, but it was like trying to talk through a mouthful of sludge—she felt like she'd been put on slow motion, her every
sense was dulled and struggling. "Who… are?" she managed slowly, thickly. No other words seemed possible to form, it was too tiring and monumental.

The woman seemed fractionally irritated, her eyes narrowing just slightly. "We've been over this, Alex," she said in a low voice that was surprisingly girlish and rasping at the same time. Something about the voice felt familiar. "When you attempted quite foolishly to kill me a few minutes ago?"

Kill her? Alex had never seen this person before. "I… don't…" she managed. If she hadn't been tied down, she would have fallen sideways at that point. She blinked heavily, wondered if maybe she was hallucinating or drugged. Maybe that's why the warehouse kept changing. She was tripping balls.

"Hm. The time displacement really seems to have gotten to you..." the woman crouched down, held Alex's chin firmly. "I'm Nandriel." Shock registered in Alex's mind, and it must have also shown on her face. "You seem surprised," Nandriel commented. There was a veiled, guarded, mistrustful tone to her voice, and the same qualities also came through in her entire demeanor, her eyes narrowed into slits. "What did he tell you? About why I was demoted? Somehow... I doubt you got the full story." Nandriel's face softened into a smile that was cynical at best. "Did he tell you I was imprisoned? Stripped of my powers? Treated like I was the devil himself because I wanted to become a human?" At the confused, dazed look on Alex's face, the angel let go and stood up. Nandriel seemed disturbed, further mystifying Alex. "I'll take that as a 'no.'"

Nandriel sauntered slowly to the window—she stood tall and straight, her movements were graceful, like how a seasoned ballet dancer might move. The angel didn't seem to notice the seasons and days changing through the window, just looked through the glass pane quietly, focused on a distant point. There was a serene quality to her, but there was also sadness and anger, and something else entirely that set Alex's inner red flags raising. Nandriel was her ex-guardian angel, right? That's what Cas had told her, what, two years ago—and Alex had always assumed that Nandriel had fallen like Anna had, become human. She didn't know she'd been in angel prison all this time. Maybe that's why Nandriel felt familiar to Alex, but why was she doing this? What was happening? Wait. Was this some kind of revenge move? But what did I do? Confused and helpless and under the effect of what felt like a mind-numbing drug, Alex twisted her wrists uselessly against the rough rope that held her in place.

Nandriel cast a fleeting glance Alex's way. "Do you know, Alex… I thought I'd be trapped in there forever?" Her voice was soft, thoughtful, and she took a long, slender finger, traced it down across the flickering window slowly, watched the digit with dark, somber eyes. "I thought they would continue to punish me century after century, until the end of time, for my so-called sins." Her voice softened wistfully, pain filling her soft, girlish voice. "All I wanted was to be a human." She turned and looked back at Alex beseechingly. "Tell me, is that truly so wrong?"

Don't answer that. Alex's first thought and instinct, because there was a very clear sense of danger that she was getting now from Nandriel's presence, a very strong intuition to err on the side of caution. She tugged weakly at her wrists again, realizing that even if she were at her full mental and physical capacity, the rope was just too tight. Weapon, where was a weapon. She had a knife in her boot, but that was impossibly out of reach... her angel blade was... back with her jacket, slung over a motel chair. There was no way to get to her little knife, there was no way to pull out of the ropes, and she was under some kind of spell or drug, she could barely even think a single coherent thought. She tried to focus instead, to learn as much as she could about the situation instead, maybe stall whatever was happening. "Why… are we… here?" she asked stutteringly.

Nandriel became visibly bothered, her expression darkened and her eyes slid to Alex for the briefest of moments. "Because I need you for something." She then refused to look directly at
Alex, instead began to look at the ground near where Alex was restrained. "I hope you'll believe me. I wish it didn't have to be this way."

Well *that* was vague as hell, and ominous to boot. Alex's sense of danger was now soaring at an all time high—this was *not* good and she had a really strong conviction that she needed to get out of there, and pronto. But she clearly couldn't do it on her own. That meant there was only one option left. It scared the shit out of her to hang all of her hopes on the one who had disappeared without explanation from her side over eight months ago but she still believed, deep down, if she *really* needed him, if it were life or death... he would come to her. *Oh god please don't let me be wrong.* Filled with a dreadful hope and fear alike, Alex opened her mouth to say the name that filled her every waking thought. "Ca—"

The second she opened her mouth, Nandriel was suddenly in front of her and had clamped a rough, brutal hand across her mouth, preventing Alex from finishing the word. A violent wind blew over the room with the speed the angel had moved with.

"Why would you call him?" Nandriel asked angrily, suddenly unhinged and expressive, the total opposite of what she'd been a minute ago. "Has he answered any of the other times you called him this year?" Her jet-black eyes flickered between Alex's, and there was a cold, indignant scowl on her face. "He's just like the rest of them. Self-loyal. Traitorous. A backstabber, a hypocritical fool." She stood back, let go of Alex brusquely, who attempted to speak again, but found herself voiceless. Alex gaped dumbly up at the guardian angel she had never known, feeling betrayed. She was panicked and sluggish, trying harder to make a sound and finding herself totally unable. Nandriel's beautiful features were twisted in disgust. "How is it you can still love him after he deserted and abandoned you? How is it you have always loved the ones who hurt you and wronged you? Your father; your brothers, and now Castiel who has shown you no concern in nearly a year!"

Silence rang loudly and Nandriel glared down at Alex demandingly. The words stung, or maybe that was Alex's eyes, which fell away and down, guiltily. Nandriel had carefully aimed those verbal barbs like she knew exactly what they would do to Alex: they raised a hundred doubts, fears, and guilts all at once, spoke to Alex's insecurities, made her feel small and foolish. Nandriel's jaw was tight and she was filled with a cold anger. "I know you better than anyone else in this world, child, I know your brainless loyalty and dependence on your broken, defective family. Why? What I want to know is why." She grew silent and studied Alex with somber contempt. "I know you but I don't understand you."

She began to leisurely walk in front of Alex, back and forth, thinking, frowning, her delicate brow knit together and wrinkling slightly. The angel suddenly scoffed and halted, as if she had a realization, looked at Alex in dawning epiphany. "The things you've done this past year... perhaps you don't understand yourself anymore, either." Alex's stomach dropped a little. How much did Nandriel know? The angel's features twisted scornfully. "Do you honestly think he would still love you if he knew? The things you've done? The thoughts you've entertained? ...that tall blond man you were sharing a motel room with when I found you?" Nandriel was haughty now, snide, bitter. "Perhaps you and Castiel are perfect for one another, after all. Both of you disloyal to the other at every level imaginable."

Unable to speak a word in her defense, Alex just shook her head as vehemently as she could. It was a concerted effort against the wooziness that washed over her like a wave. *No, you're wrong, you're wrong!*

"Anyway." Nandriel was suddenly calm and quiet again, thoughtful, measured, seemed to feel almost mildly bad, apologetic. Her voice grew soft and sad. "Castiel won't find you here, outside
the reach of time itself. Even if he wanted to." She looked mildly rueful, and then guilt flashed across her pretty face for just a moment. "I am sorry for what's going to happen here soon, and I am sorry to silence you but... you must remain quiet, now." She looked off to her side, seeming vacant. "Until Raphael arrives."

Alex's eyes snapped up at that. Raphael? Memories of the angry archangel flashed through Alex's mind and she felt her stomach jolt. What was going on? What was happening?

Nandriel paced languidly in front of Alex again, and her inner torment was clear on her youthful but stony features. "I grew fond of you over the years, Alex. I did. But fondness is fleeting and meaningless to me now. What I desire is freedom."

She looked at Alex, who was silent, not by choice—holding onto hope that someone was going to find her here, wherever here was. Jamie or Glen, at least—they'd be looking for her, she knew they would be. Nandriel looked sympathetic, like she knew and recognized the look on Alex's face. "I can see how you're hoping for rescue. But no one's coming for you, Alex. Not this time."

Nandriel was, in a word, wrong. Even as she spoke, cycling Alex and herself through time over and over again, effectively hiding them from anyone who wasn't invited, Castiel had realized Nandriel was outside the reach of summoning after trying for the third frantic time. Close to panicking, he held himself still, forced himself to think, think. If Nandriel, who was supposed to be in prison, who had taken Alex for some unknown reason, was beyond the reach of summoning, she must be in another dimension or perhaps even in a time-loop. Usually, this would hide an angel completely, but Castiel suddenly realized... Nandriel had been present in Alex's life for over twenty years. All he needed to do was find an instance of the angel within time. If he could do this, find her and get some of her blood, there was an Enochian sigil he could use to find her in the current time. So without a second thought, hurried and anxious, Castiel slipped back through the bonds of time, to a night he knew Nandriel would have been part of. The night of the nursery fire.

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Lawrence, Kansas
1983

Castiel found himself in a dark room. It was small and decorated with images of teddy bears piloting airplanes—a whimsical but unrealistic motif. There was a moon shaped night light on a wall beside a little wooden dresser, two cross-stitched circles hung on the wall beside a colorful teddy bear clock. One of the circles said Alexandra in pink letters, the other one said Sam in blue letters. A crib was set in almost the middle of the room, leaving all sides free to stand beside. The room was quiet save for the sound of two babies cooing and gurgling quietly, the clock ticking. Castiel kept himself invisible as he moved toward the crib, reflecting on how strange he found this moment to be, how deep a sadness he felt knowing what was going to transpire in that room in just the span of a few minutes. For a moment, he was paused from his current state of apprehensiveness in favor of reflection. How odd that he was about to see Sam and Alex as infants, but especially her. Another unsettling reminder of how old he was, how ancient.

He peered down into the crib as he walked around to the side that was closest to the window. There they were. The twins, laying beside each other, little arms and legs pumping enthusiastically, like they weren't sleepy at all—Sam, in blue pajamas, was looking up at the airplane mobile that hung over the crib, cooing and drooling as Alex, in pink pajamas, tried to grab her brother's ear. They both had impossibly large eyes, and even at six months old, Sam was noticeably bigger than Alex. Still, they were so small, so fragile, and Castiel suddenly thought of how he could change this—he could change everything if he so chose. And the thought terrified him.
"Come on, let's say goodnight to your brother and sister," came a soft feminine voice, and the lights came on in the room, even as a little boy with a thick mop of brown hair—Dean—ran on shot little legs to the crib and clambered up the side opposite of Cas. Mary stood at the doorway wearing a white nightgown; her long blonde hair tumbled around her shoulders. She hung back for a moment and watched her oldest child with the twins, a little smile on her face.

"'Night, twins," Dean said, leaning down over the babies. "Love you Sammy..." he kissed Sam on the head, who sputtered happily. "Love you Al..." Dean leaned as far as he could and kissed Alex on the head. He was rewarded with a high pitched coo from his sister, who tried to grab Dean's hair but missed. Dean grinned and chortled, then leaned back and rested his arms on the top of the crib railing, put his chin on top of one of his hands. For a minute he just looked at his brother and sister, watched Sam reaching for his toes.

"Dadadada," Alex babbled.

Dean gasped loudly, excited, and whipped his head around. "Mommy, she's doing it again! She's saying dada!" He announced in almost a shout.

"Shh, love, shh," Mary said, chuckling and coming to stand behind her oldest, circle him with her arms comfortingly. "Let's not rile them up, okay?" It seemed to be too late for that. Sam laughed shrilly at Dean and waved his arms uncontrollably, thwacking baby Alex in the face, who blinked in surprise and started, a reaction delayed by a couple of seconds.

"Oh, careful Sammy, you hurted Alex's face!" Dean said, and caught hold of his brother's chubby arm, smiled at him, guided the arm down to Sam's side slowly and carefully. His voice took on a certain note of instruction and wisdom that parents usually used with children. "We have to be gentle with each other."

"That's right, little man." Mary smiled down at her oldest son, and Castiel could see how proud the woman was of her oldest son. She stroked Dean's hair affectionately. "Such a good big brother, Dean," she murmured. "Always taking care of your brother and sister." She pressed a kiss into his hair.

"Yeah, Mama, I always will," Dean said.

"I know you will, bud," Mary said to her son and ruffled his hair playfully before turning her attention to the twins. Even Castiel, who was not one for the subtleties of human emotion felt another burst of deep sadness inside of himself. This young boy, barely four years old, would be saddled with responsibilities and sadnesses no human being should have to carry. This woman, the Winchester's mother, would die a terrible and painful death on the ceiling above their heads in a matter of minutes. But only Cas knew that; none of the Winchesters did. To them, it was just another night.

Mary leaned down over her babies, smiling. Alex was kicking her legs cheerfully, Sam was watching his mother with wide eyes and a curious expression. "Good night, my loves. My Sammy boy..." she brushed Sam's wispy barely-there hair back from his head, kissed his forehead, then she smiled down at Alex, who cooed and wriggled, still kicking her legs and flailing her arms excitedly. Mary chuckled softly, eyes crinkling up at the edges. "My sweet, sweet girl." She kissed Alex's head, stroked her darker hair affectionately. "Angels are watching over you," she whispered to the twins.

"Hey, Dean!" came a deep, authoritative male voice. John Winchester had just entered the room. Cas looked up and watched as the man who would soon turn into a shell of who he was now grinned widely at his boy. Castiel felt a flicker of distaste.
Dean turned, jumped off the crib, already racing across the room, delighted to see his father. "Daddy!"

"Hey, buddy!" John scooped Dean up and laughed, hugging his son, whose little arms circled his father's neck tightly. It was striking, Cas thought. How much Alex grew up to look like her father: the dark hair, wide set eyes, thick eyebrows, strong jaw. "So what do you think?" John asked his son. "You think your brother and sister are ready to toss around a football yet?"

Dean laughed. "No, Daddy. And Alex is a girl, she can't throw a football!"

John chuckled deeply. "Now, we'll just see about that, son. Girls can do things just as good as boys can."

Dean made a face, his little features scrunching into a dubious expression. "Uhh I don't know Daddy... but I do know they're just babies—they're too little to throw a football!"

John pretended to be very serious and thoughtful. "You know what, I think you're right, bud. Maybe we should wait a little longer before we try that, huh?"

"Yeah, I think so," Dean said, not realizing his father was joking with him. He lit up suddenly, thinking of something. "Dad, Dad! She was saying dada again!"

John seemed both pleased and slightly deflated. "Was she? And I missed it again?" John sighed, glanced at his wife and gave her a tired smile. "Ah, one of these days I'll be around when she says it."

"How was work?" Mary asked, coming toward her husband from the crib. There seemed to be an unspoken tension between them, or perhaps it was just that both were tired.

"Work was work," John answered. "I'm glad to be home."

"You got him?" Mary asked, referring to Dean.

John nodded an affirmative. "I got him," he gave her a smile that was worn around the edges. "You get some rest, sweetheart. I'll be in after awhile."

Mary nodded, kissed him lightly on the cheek as she passed by. "Thanks, hon."

"Night Mama!" Dean called after her.

"Goodnight, Dean," Mary answered from where Cas couldn't see. And that's when he realized how final that farewell really was.

John was looking into the room, still holding Dean up high in his arms. He smiled at the twins through the slats in the crib railing. "Sweet dreams, Sam. Sleep tight, Alex." He turned his attention to Dean. "Come on champ, let's get you to bed."

He turned and began to retreat down the hallway. Castiel could hear their fading conversation.

"Aw Da-aaad... I don't wanna go to bed yet!"

"No complaints, that's an order little man."

"O-kaaaay. Can you come home early tomorrow from work, Daddy?"

"We'll see, dude. Hey, did you brush your teeth yet?"
The sounds of their voices faded into muffled, indistinct sounds and Castiel looked down at the twins once again. The two babies were cooing and looking at each other. Sam's chubby little baby hand reached out and grabbed at his sister's cheek—an uncoordinated little movement. He giggled then sputtered wetly when she protested in frustration with a little keening sound. They seemed so defenseless and vulnerable. Premonition filled Castiel, whose instincts told him he should be protecting the Winchesters from what was about to happen. It was within his ability and power—he could kill Azazel easily. The Winchesters would never know the difference.

The children would grow up with both parents, John wouldn't lose his mind to grief and destroy his children's lives in the process.

But then there was the fact that none of the Winchesters would become hunters. All the people they saved in the future would die.

Still, Mary would live. Alex would speak. Sam wouldn't be properly prepared as the vessel of Lucifer, and Lucifer might not rise because Azazel couldn't complete the preparations. Perhaps another demon would step in and try to complete the task, but perhaps not.

Dean would never go to Hell, he wouldn't be forced to grow up too fast. He would remain Michael's vessel, but without Lucifer rising, there would be no need… Castiel thought back to the cupid who said John and Mary's union had been commanded of Heaven—and he knew it was because Sam and Dean had been meant to serve as the vessels. But just because something was meant to happen, did that mean it should?

Castiel pondered deeply, realizing something very important and troubling. If he killed Azazel tonight… he would probably never meet Alex, and if he did, she wouldn't be the same Alex that she was now. That, and would he even remember everything that he had with her during the past three years? Or would it all be erased? Would he forget and continue on as he had—alone in Heaven, watching humanity from afar, forever feeling like he was waiting for something, never realizing the thing he'd been restlessly longing for all along had been her?

Alex—his Alex—would become someone else entirely, she would blossom with the ability to speak, with a mother to guide her. She would grow up, she would fall in love with and marry someone else, live a normal life, never know what a pained, mostly wretched existence she would have led otherwise. Never know him, never know what might have been. These thoughts unsettled him to his core.

Besides all of that, of course, Castiel knew that altering this night—an already-written past—would severely damage or even destroy the fabric of time. The nursery fire had set so many important things into motion, as horrible as it was—and if Castiel changed it… there was no way to predict what else would change. A few years ago, Castiel never would have considered intervening and attempting to change fate. He would have seen it as being none of his business or concern. But now—now he wondered, he considered it, he weighed the options carefully.

His instincts told him it was too great a risk, too great an unknown, and he could potentially destroy everything by tampering with what had already transpired. But the biggest reason he didn't want to was because at his core (and he realized this now) he was selfish. He didn't want to undo it all for many reasons, but most of all, because of her. He couldn't bear the thought of losing her, or of erasing what they had found together: this precious, fragile connection, this understanding. This feeling of being held and of holding, in ways beyond physical. It hurt to think of her, it hurt not to think of her, it pained him in places he never knew pain could touch. And he knew what happened here tonight must remain as it always had.

Baby Alex cooed, low and soft and Castiel looked down at the twins. It felt wrong to love her; he
felt a bitter sense of self-hatred. Everything he'd ever done and it still wasn't enough. How long would this war last? How long would he be forced to stay away from Alex? Was she even alive? Had Nandriel harmed her? How was it she could be right here at six months old and lost to him completely at twenty-eight? Worry and fear filled him at the unknowns, the questions, the thought of her hurt and needing him, the guilt of knowing how long he'd been absent from her side. His only comfort was knowing she was with Dean and that he'd been able to get her messages. Still, they were small comforts.

He needed to see her, he couldn't bear the separation much longer, and the thought of her out there somewhere in another time or dimension with Nandriel, who was most likely driven crazy by her time in the exile of prison… it urged him to be hasty and find her, find her now.

Growing even more anxious, Castiel glanced around the darkened room. It wouldn't be long now. The twins settled down, and about five minutes passed, then Castiel could hear the faint sounds of the television downstairs in the background. Five more minutes ticked by, with no sign of angels or demons. And then, Castiel felt it. The faintest sense of a dark presence nearby. The mobile above the twins began to spin of its own accord, and the twins looked up at it, fascinated, perplexed. The clock stopped ticking. The moon-shaped nightlight flickered and Cas looked at it with great apprehension. Azazel was close. Castiel's senses became hyper-focused. Where was Nandriel?

A plain, light-haired man in a black peacoat edged into the room, and the nightlight caught his unnaturally yellow eyes for a second. If it were possible for blood to run cold, Castiel's blood did. Azazel.

The demon glided into the room without making a sound, unaware of Castiel's presence. He placed his hands on the crib railing. He was directly across from the angel, who didn't take his eyes off the enemy for a single millisecond. The demon smiled down at the twins slowly, his long fingernails tapping against the wood—the sound chilling somehow. "Hello, little ones," he greeted in a soft, dark voice. "My special children... Daddy has plans for you." He smirked proudly, ran a hand over Sam's head almost affectionately, reached for Alex to do the same and Castiel went completely rigid. A sudden, soft female voice startled the demon, halted him mid-reach.

"John?" It was Mary, and she seemed half-awake. "Are they hungry?"

Azazel's face had gone stony, he turned just slightly. "Shh."

Mary sighed tiredly and didn't see that it wasn't John standing there in the dark room with her children. "Okay." She padded away, Azazel waited a moment, then returned his attention to the twins. He smiled calmly, used his long thumbnail to cut his wrist open leisurely. In the dark, his yellow eyes flashed ominously and Sam was beginning to moan softly, anxiously, sensing that something wasn't right. Castiel was growing increasingly alarmed. Where was Nandriel? She was supposed to be here, to save Alex from receiving the demon's blood, but she wasn't.

Azazel reached his wrist out and held it over Sam, who was closer to him. "Well Sammy, you're up first, aren't ya..." the blood dripped down into Sam's mouth who was now fussing quietly, mildly upset. "Now, now, that's it," Azazel soothed, watching to make sure the blood made it into the child's mouth. Castiel looked around with increasing panic. Nandriel was nowhere to be seen. "Better than Mother's milk," Azazel said, cracking a smile and showing white, even teeth. Satisfied with what Sam had received, Azazel's yellow eyes flicked over to Alex, who was resonating with her twin and had become uncomfortable and showed the beginning signs of upset, her lower lip quivering.

"And now, my little princess..." Azazel murmured and smiled down, moving his hand forward to drip blood into her mouth too—the demon jumped in shock when his wrist was grabbed by an
unexpected grip like iron. He looked up and suddenly found himself face to face with a fierce, angry entity. Castiel held the demon tightly, refusing to let him move forward, stopping him from what he had been about to do.

"No," Castiel growled. "Step away, now."

At both the sound of Castiel's deep, furious voice and his sudden appearance out of thin air, baby Alex was startled, then quickly became upset, afraid. She began to fuss and cry in quickly rising volume, Azazel looked down at her and put a finger to his lips. "Shhhhh." And Castiel felt it—the crackle of energy and power and then the little cries from baby Alex stopped, even though her mouth was still open in what should have been a loud cry.

Castiel was shocked and dismayed when he realized what had just happened.

"And who… are you?" Azazel asked, fascinated, oblivious to Cas's stunned horror. When Cas just stared at him wordlessly, Azazel dug his fingernails into Castiel's wrist painfully. "What, cat's got your tongue?" The demon hissed. Hatred and protectiveness alike surging forth, Castiel bristled—his huge, dark wings manifested and took over the entirety of the nursery almost, dwarfing the demon who at that moment realized that he was locked into a battle of the wills with an angel. Shock and fear flashed over the yellow eyed demon's face.

At that moment, Mary raced around the corner, eyes wide, face full of panic and fear. She took in the sight of an angel and demon struggling over the crib with her babies in it and she raced forward, mindlessly, her only instinct to reach her children. "Get away from them!" she cried out, and Azazel raised a hand, and an invisible force slammed her into the wall, she began to scream as she was pushed upwards.

"If you're gonna stop me, wing boy, you better make it snappy!" Azazel barked, and Castiel let go of his wrist, watched Mary in horror, wanting to intervene, but knowing he shouldn't and couldn't. The worst part was how Mary looked at him with scared eyes, saw his wings and perhaps imagined that he was there to save her. But he wasn't, and he couldn't. And feeling like a coward, he stepped back into the corner and out of sight, shielding himself from human eyes, even as Mary was pushed up the entirety of the wall, then slid along the ceiling, right over the crib, paralyzed. Azazel cut her stomach open with a slashing gesture of the hand. The demon disappeared then, perhaps fearing that Castiel would reappear and stop him. And just like that, it seemed to be over—everything was silent—but Castiel knew it wasn't over.

He could hear John running up the stairs and calling his wife's name… but all the angel could do was look up at Mary, who was silent and frozen and staring down at her babies in pain and fear. Azazel had paralyzed her completely. Sam was whimpering, beside him Alex was crying full-force, little features twisted up like she was screaming. But no sounds came out. John burst in through the closed door, into the dark room. "Mary?" he asked, confused, and he came to the crib, his expression worried. He didn't see his wife on the ceiling.

"Hey, Sammy… you okay?" he asked softly, relief coming over his face. He patted Sam's head, then looked at Alex and his expression froze as he saw how his daughter was crying hard enough to turn red, but was making no noise at all. Worry grew on his face rapidly. "Alex? Baby what's..." blood dripped down and onto the sheet beside Sam's head. John looked at the little drop, touched it, then his expression wrinkled up further when another drop of blood landed on the back of his hand. He looked up slowly, then fell backwards in shock when he saw his wife, bloody and pinned brokenly on the ceiling, face frozen in a pained, silent cry. "No, Mary!" he shouted, his expression filled with absolute horror.

Flames burst all around Mary at that exact moment, and John screamed his wife's name in terror
even as Sam wailed. Mary would have been screaming too, had Azazel not paralyzed her vocal chords—she was burning alive, in complete agony, and trapped. And at the sight of the Winchester's mother like that, Castiel couldn't continue to stand by and do nothing—everything in him went out to Mary in that moment, this human being who was in great amounts of pain that she didn't deserve. Everything in him drove him forward and to action. He reached up, breaching the space between himself and Alex's mother, his wings carrying him up into midair and he allowed her and her alone to see him. Mary looked at him in confusion—*who are you?*—the question he could see in her eyes.

"Rest, Mary," he told her softly, his voice carrying gentle command and authority. Filled with sorrow, he touched Mary on the side of the face, taking her pain from her, channeling it into himself, bearing the brunt of agony for her—this was the least he could do, a feeble gesture, but the only thing he could offer. And when he touched the side of her face, relief flooded her features and her eyes closed as if into a peaceful sleep, even as the ends of her hair began to burn away into red-hot threads and then nothing. Flames filled the entire room now and Cas felt as if he were being burned alive even though the flames didn't even touch him. Pain filled every his atom, and he deserved to feel this, to suffer.

"Mary! Mary!" John cried desperately, somewhere close by. The flames raged, began to hurl fireballs, and John was forced to flee. And then, without fanfare, Mary was gone completely. Castiel felt her life force expire, her soul evaporate into the void, and the pain he had felt that had been meant for her was gone, leaving him stunned. And then all around him, there was a burst, an explosion of flames. He heard sirens approaching, he could hear baby Sam's screams somewhere out there even from inside the burning nursery, his feet touched the ground again, his wings faded away and he stood there, aghast, dazed, feeling blindsided.

Slowly, Castiel walked to the window, looked down into the dark yard. He saw a firetruck pulling in, he saw John huddled with his children at the corner where the yard ended and two streets met at an intersection—and Castiel went there, stood beside what was left of the Winchester family, his arms hanging uselessly by his sides. John was on his knees in the dew-wet grass, staring up at the flaming window of the nursery, expression tormented and absolutely shocked—he was holding Sam, who cried incessantly. Dean clutched Alex to himself and was looking at the house in great worry and fear. "Where's Mommy?" he asked in a trembling voice. "Is she with the firemen? Daddy, where's Mommy?"

John looked at Dean speechlessly, unable to answer. Sam began to scream all over again, John blankly rocked the baby and told him "shh, shhhhh," as he stared again at his house, as firemen began to soak the flaming second story. There was a look on John Winchester's face like no other look Castiel had ever seen. And Castiel was ashamed for reasons he couldn't name.

Dean looked down at his sister and for the first time saw how she was crying and no sounds came out. Great concern came over his young face, he said her name a couple times, then fearfulness overcame him completely. He looked up at his father with wide eyes—he began to panic, his voice rose in pitch and speed and volume. "Daddy, Alex won't make noises, Daddy, something's wrong with her, Daddy—"

John snapped, lost patience. "Dean, be quiet, *be quiet!*" John said at a near shout, then saw how his son was startled and scared by his tone. John looked down, clearly struggling not to weep, trying to hold himself together, to understand what had just happened to his wife. "Just—just be quiet buddy, *please.* I'm… just please, Dean, wait a minute, calm down. Your sister is fine, we're all *fine.*" He
held baby Sam with one arm, put his face into his hand, and Dean held his sister even tighter, his little eyes filling with tears.

Castiel walked away, too overcome to listen to anything more. They weren't fine and they never would be ever again. Neighbors came out of their homes, peering with folded arms at the commotion. Cas stood back, deeply upset.

Where had Nandriel been? Had he really been the one, all these years, who had saved Alex from the demon blood? And was he the one who was to blame for her mute state for the greater portion of her life? Is that why he had been so ready to fix her? Because somehow, he'd known he had caused it? The thought was enough to devastate him.

He was almost too afraid to go to another close call in Alex's history to try and locate Nandriel—what if he caused some other tragedy to befall her? This seemed to be his curse: always doing more harm than help to her.

He shut his eyes, miserable. Wanting to die. And then, like a ringing gong, like a chiming bell, clearer than clear, he heard Alex screaming his name at incredible volume, almost deafeningly—and when he heard that familiar voice calling him so loudly and urgently, his heart seemed to leap up to the top of his throat, life seemed to surge forth in his veins, and whatever downtrodden feelings that had been weighing him down disappeared. His eyes snapped open, overwhelming feelings of protectiveness surged over him in response to her call. *I'm coming!* His entire being seemed to proclaim without saying it held onto her voice and rocketed through time and space to where she was.

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**A Few Minutes Ago**

Whatever drug or spell that Nandriel had put over her seemed to slowly be wearing off—the time jumps had slowed down, the wooziness was dissipating, her mind felt miles and miles clearer, but Alex was still unable to speak. *Bitch.* She watched Nandriel carefully, guardedly, trying to keep herself emotionally under control. After so many months of successfully avoiding an emotional break—except that one *epic* breakdown Jamie had borne witness to a few weeks ago with the Kitsune family—Alex had remained cold, aloof, detached, in control. Silent, measured, harsh by outside appearances. So she wasn't about to lose control now. But at the thought of Raphael coming to get her for unknown reasons, Alex was inwardly despairing, getting the feeling that she was about to be used yet again as some kind of bargaining chip or something. But *why?* Cas had been gone for nearly nine full months now, he'd never told her why, he hadn't replied to her calls—she'd stopped calling completely save the now-and-then skyward glance and question of his name. She'd all but given up and avoided thinking about how she'd given up, because when she started to think of Castiel… she felt, and she felt a lot.

Alex watched as Nandriel paced in front of her. The angel was off in her own internal world. Alex wondered why Raphael would want her—to use against Castiel? That was the only logical conclusion she could come to, but it implied two things: one, that Castiel was still alive and two, that he still cared about her, and… she didn't have many reasons to believe Castiel still even thought of her. He would answer, he would send word, *something,* wouldn't he? He would. It wasn't like him to just leave her, in fact, he never would have, *ever.* Not without a damn good reason. That was the ever wavering conviction that her heart stubbornly wanted to believe.

Some days she decided he must be dead—because Castiel would never, ever leave her alone and wondering. Right? He wouldn't… she didn't think. But maybe he would. Maybe she didn't know him like she thought. She circled around and around and around mentally trying to figure out what
had happened to him, why he had disappeared. It frustrated her and grieved her to no end. Most of all she couldn't bear to think that he were alive and had stayed away on purpose. But it was a possibility, and she had to consider it, even though it was the most painful thing she could think of. That like every other person in her life... he'd left her and meant to.

She thought that maybe Castiel was upset about how she had killed him in the cemetery—maybe he had realized that she wasn't whatever he had imagined her to be, maybe he'd realized how weak and worthless she really was. Maybe his return to his angelic default had somehow changed things for him. She kept hoping that there was some explanation, some sort of reason that would make sense once she found it out. But at the same time as she desperately hoped and wished and prayed, she hated herself for wanting to believe—she hated herself for hanging onto hope in yet another hopeless situation. She was setting herself up for another miserable, painful disappointment that she couldn't bear. She felt like a cracking frozen lake, buckling underneath the weight of the many angers and fears accumulating on the icy surface.

She couldn't take the thoughts of what she'd lost and what had happened. So she tried not to think about it and had managed not to for the most part these long, empty months. The killing, the working, the self-discipline, the constant doing and throwing herself into projects and hunts... she'd poured all of herself into tasks and routine and staying busy and it had kept her sane. She hadn't let herself slow down and think, because that's when she could feel herself cracking further and further.

But now, pretty sure she was about to die or be used as an angel chew toy... she couldn't stop herself from thinking of everything. She thought of Castiel, of how much she'd given him and how much he'd given her—she thought of how she wanted nothing more than to just feel the promise of his arms around her again, to hear him say that he loved her. She wanted to wake up and find out these past eight months of hell had been nothing but a nightmare she'd imagined. But the days kept coming and the loneliness was all-consuming and Sam was dead and Cas was gone and Dean belonged to a different life now. As the longing for the way things had been and the yearning for the one her heart loved overtook her, predictably, the feelings of rejection and abandonment came, too.

She thought of the way Cas quite literally abandoned her, left her when she'd needed him the most—she'd believed in him and still did despite everything, even though some days she thought she was an idiot to still believe and tried to get herself not to. There was a great looming fear that maybe Dean had been right—Cas had used her; she'd been naive to believe that the angel loved her. As soon as she thought these kinds of things, she would internally about-face and chide herself, kick herself—how could any of that be true and how could she doubt for even a second? Castiel had loved her. She knew he had. She'd heard it, felt it; he'd breathed it into her and pressed his love into her lips with every kiss. But what had changed that?

She didn't know. But she still loved him. To the point of agony.

That's why every empty day that continued to come weighed down her shoulders with greater hollowness and meaninglessness. That's why she grew both more desperate and more apathetic all at once—two contrasting states of being that didn't make sense to feel at the same time. There was a distinct feeling of going through the motions, of existing without living. She'd lost everything that had anchored her, and all at once. Sometimes she thought it was a wonder she hadn't lost her mind completely. She'd lost damn near everything else.

She thought of Sam. No more animated "hey guys, get this!" No more chastising looks and moral compass inputs whether you wanted it or not. No more research buddy, no more partner in crime, no more random facts at strange moments or moose jokes, bear jokes. No more Sammy, who was
the best at keeping secrets and giving advice and annoying the ever-loving shit out of her at the drop of a hat. He had become a real man, he had grown up, he had become a hero—her hero—and now he was gone.

She thought of Dean, whose absence was so visceral and painful. No more replays of the same classic rock songs over and over, no more well-intentioned if domineering guidance. No more constant companionship; no more just feeling understood by someone at the most basic level with no strings attached. Gone were the days when she knew she always had someone in her corner, backing her up even if he was pissed to high hell at her. No one called her Al anymore. And no one looked at her and could cut through the crap and know something was wrong. No more Dean giving her a look, motioning for her, and insisting "get over here—we're gonna hug this bitch out."

All of it was gone, lost.

And it wasn't that Dean had left her. She'd decided to leave him before he could leave her... but she'd tried to hedge within her own mind and convince herself she did it for him, because she wanted what was best for him. It was a jumble in her heart and mind and she wasn't even sure anymore about her motivations. All she knew was now, she was trying to do what her brother had always done for her and look out for him, protect him in some small way.

Dean didn't look happy, the few times she'd spied (there was no other word for it) on him. But she'd always thought she was projecting her own misery onto him. Of course he'd be happy. He had a family, a house, a regular job, he wasn't harrowed by sleepless nights and monsters and constant peril. He was happy. Right? He had to be.

She wasn't, but that went without saying. Alex had lived the same life they always had, unsure of how to do anything else... squatting and staying in shit motels and eating gas station food. She wasn't ashamed to say she'd used her more illegal skills—card counting, pool hustling, pickpocketing—in that first month to survive, buy a car, get set up. She'd found her Mustang at a used car dealership and it had been written off as junk because the engine was rusted and useless. She'd bought it cheap and restored it herself, worked at a mechanic shop for awhile and bartered her time for parts. She remembered sometimes thinking how Dean would be so proud to see her putting the skills he'd taught her to use.

Before Jamie, before getting back into hunting, Alex worked a string of odd jobs, taking under-the-table pay and trying her hand at quote unquote normal life. She waited tables and worked at a chicken farm and then another mechanic shop and then briefly tended a bar at a strip club (until her temper had gotten the better of her and she'd beaten some asshole into the ground for harassing herself and one of the strippers). She had hated every second of all of it. All of it.

Then Jamie had shown up, Alex had gotten dragged back into the game, Glen had come along—well, he always came and went, drifted in and out of the hunts—and Alex had settled into this new normal of hunting with Jamie. It was a good balance and partnership, because Alex had a new, unspoken rule that she did not get close to anyone. Jamie seemed to be cut from the same cloth, she kept things at a relatively non-personal level and never pushed or pried, which Alex was good with. Glen... was a different story. He was the world's biggest flirt, he liked to tease her and goad her, he didn't seem to understand why Alex was quiet, closed off, and "a huge downer" like his sister. Sometimes though he'd say something really poignant or meaningful, sometimes he'd catch Alex slightly off guard and make her think there was more to him than how he acted on the surface level.

Alex realized the sounds of Nandriel's footsteps had ceased and she looked up quickly. The angel was looking at her sharply, seeming to notice how coherent Alex was becoming. In response,
Nandriel drew her gleaming angel blade from somewhere behind her back and approached Alex with intention written all over her face.

Alex squirmed backwards uselessly and Nandriel seemed impatient. "Relax, Alex, nothing you haven't been through before." The angel grabbed Alex's bare upper arm, steadying herself as she crouched and without warning, sliced her arm open—Alex gasped loudly at the startling sting of pain—Nandriel drew vast amounts of blood and dipped her fingers into it, began to fingerpaint on the floor beside Alex, a strange symbol Alex didn't recognize. What was she doing? Her breath was coming in short now, Alex felt herself panicking, feeling how alone and defenseless she was, how much she needed help—

"Rah ma ya zod—" Nandriel started. And hearing the language of angels did something to Alex—all she could think of was Castiel and it was like a dam broke, she sobbed silently without warning, all the thoughts she'd been holding inside sort of all welling up at once—and she couldn't stop herself as tears of desperation, pain, fear, confusion, sadness, heartbreak wrenched themselves out of her. Every sense she possessed was so distraught, every thought was of her angel, every voice in her head screamed his name, begging him to still be alive and to still care about her, to come to her, to help her. Castiel! Please!

"—na zod ka ra va." The sigil drawn in blood went up in a puff of smoke and the feeling of wooziness returned suddenly, like a clap of thunder. Alex's head flopped forward uselessly, she was feeling drugged all over again. She wanted to die, the feeling was sickening.

And then, she heard the voice she hadn't heard in what seemed to be a lifetime.

"Nandriel!" he thundered, and stomach flipping, Alex used all the power she possessed to look up, believing she must have finally lost her mind. She couldn't breathe—even though her eyesight was muddled—she could see that it was him. Castiel stood at the far end of the warehouse, his trench coat sweeping around him from the blast of wind he'd arrived in, and then the wind rushed over Nandriel and Alex, who blinked rapidly against the strong surge of air. His expression was fierce and Alex thought she would die of the intense shock of seeing him again.

Nandriel stood, face filled with confusion. "Castiel, how—" she began, but Cas began to bear down on her with a murderous look on his face, and Nandriel, weapon still in hand, froze him in his steps by crouched down again and holding the sharp blade to Alex's neck.

"Come closer and I kill her," Nandriel said.

Cas, who had stopped the second he saw where she was going with the blade, held his too. His shoulders heaved up and down with shallow, impassioned breaths and he glared at Nandriel then his gaze shifted to Alex—who stared at him in a daze, barely able to believe what was happening—his expression flickered, wavered, she felt like hers probably did too—then Cas looked at Nandriel, wrathful all over again. "What have you done to her? Why are you doing this?"

Nandriel said nothing for a long moment, looked at Castiel dangerously. "You found me... how?"

Castiel ignored the question. "Explain yourself, Nandriel," he said forcefully, voice trembling with anger. "What have you done!?"

Nandriel grabbed Alex roughly and pulled her to her feet, holding the blade at her neck the whole time, and Cas's vengeful look wavered as Alex cried out silently in pain, winced, gritted her teeth against blinding pain. Yes, her leg was definitely broken. She tried to stand all on one leg, lean away from the pole, but her movements were sloppy and uncoordinated, she kept accidentally putting pressure onto her broken leg and pain screamed along her entire leg. The time jumps were
Cas was holding out a staying, calming hand toward Nandriel and his stormy approach faded—he became more concerned and cautious as he saw how injured and out of sorts Alex was. "Don't hurt her," he said, voice distinctly pleading, taking on a note of desperation. Slowly he became mystified, as if he were struggling to understand. "How could you hurt her? She was your charge once, her safety was supposed to be your priority."

Nandriel looked at Castiel challengingly, and grief filled her face and voice. "I can't care about that anymore." She seemed vastly emotional as she began to speak in rising timber. "I was imprisoned for no reason Castiel. For my entire existence I was faithful, I served Heaven, I did what the archangels said, I did exactly as I was told! I decided, after millennia upon millennia, that I wanted something else and this is what they give to me? Imprisonment and exile, discrimination and despair? It's wrong. I didn't deserve that. I just want to be free." She was insistent and angry, on edge.

"And how is it that bringing her here and hurting her will accomplish your freedom?" Castiel questioned, aghast, but seeming to have a vague, horrifying clue to where this was going.

There was a long, cool silence and Nandriel raised her chin. "You made a mistake, brother," she said, by all indications she was truly sympathetic. "You weren't discreet. Everyone in Heaven and Hell, too, I imagine… knows this human's worth to you. I didn't do that—you did. And Raphael? He'll agree to leave me alone and never come looking for me if I hand-deliver Alex Winchester to him." Castiel's face went cold and dark and Nandriel raised her eyebrows warningly. "Don't misunderstand me, Castiel. I don't like this. I'm fond of the girl, too. But I can't let it affect my judgement."

Castiel was shaking his head, and it appeared that he was both terrified and angry and trying to conceal both, trying to remain veiled. "You've lost your mind, Nandriel."

"I have found my mind!" She shouted without warning, then seemed to realize how uncontrolled her outburst was and almost ashamed, she calmed herself, tried again. "Castiel, I'm like you." Her attempts to stay calm failed. "I want freedom, I want free choice, I want to make my own decisions, I want to be free!" She practically screamed that last part, and she seemed like a petulant child to Alex, who looked at Cas through swimming eyes—all she wanted was for Nandriel to go away, for Cas to come to her and just hold her; she was so, so tired and in so much pain. He was so close but so far away, and she was afraid he was going to disappear again without warning. He looked back at her with an indescribable look on his face.

Nandriel was oblivious to the silent exchange and kept talking. "I want to know that no one is coming after me. I give Raphael what he wants... he leaves me alone."

Castiel looked distinctly murderous again, his chin pivoted down, and he narrowed his eyes at the other angel dangerously. "How did you escape? No one escapes." His voice was practically a demanding growl now. "Were you let out? Give me a name." He took a single step forward, testing the waters or perhaps forgetting himself for a moment. Nandriel tightened her grip on Alex and Cas froze again.

"No one let me out... are you crazy?" Nandriel scoffed. "Your war? It's tearing Heaven apart at the seams. I found a hole, a tear in my cage… and I clawed my way out." She grew deeply baleful. "I'm never going back, and I'm making sure of it." Her voice trembled, she spoke through clenched teeth. "I'll die before I go back. I never deserved to be there, you know I didn't deserve to be there."

Castiel reacted negatively. "Then why didn't you save her the night of the nursery fire? Why were
you going to let her receive demon blood?"

Nandriel looked offended, then quickly pious. "My orders were clear, Castiel. Prevent immediate death. Not protect her from every small thing, not coddle her. I did my job, and I did it well." She paused, surprise dawning on her features. "Wait… wait. Are you the one who stopped Azazel?" Her eyebrows rose in surprise even as a caught look passed over Castiel's features. "All these years… everyone wondered who intervened. Some thought it was God himself. And all this time it was… just you." Nandriel sounded almost disillusioned. Alex looked at Cas questioningly—her dulled mind was struggling to follow the conversation taking place. Cas seemed to be losing patience.

"I'm not interested in your commentary," Castiel said gruffly. "Tell me how you found her, how you traced her location."

Nandriel was clearly offended this time. "How did I find her? Castiel. I watched her for twenty-five years. I know her better than anyone else. Including you. Finding her was easy." The female angel seemed to be losing patience, too. "Listen, I'm short on time. Raphael will be coming soon—you better make yourself scarce, I've heard you two don't play nice anymore. And isn't there some battle you're missing by being here right now?" Her sarcasm was met with a deadly glare from Castiel.

"I am going to give you one chance and one chance only," he warned. "Step away from her or perish. Now."

Nandriel only shook her head slightly, her expression calm, superior, if slightly chagrined. "No."

Castiel's jaw tightened, and ruefulness flickered across his face. "Then you leave me no choice, Nandriel."

Nandriel was decidedly sad and quiet. "There's always a choice, Castiel."

Castiel's blade glinted at his side and he looked at Alex, his expression difficult to read before he looked back to Nandriel. He, too, seemed sad—but resigned. "Then you have chosen to die," he told her. He disappeared abruptly and Alex's heart seemed to fall out of herself completely—no—and then there was a blast of wind at the side opposite of where he'd been, Nandriel frowned, looking—Cas had a hand raised and had reappeared almost right beside them, Nandriel flew backwards by about forty feet and slammed into rusty warehouse siding, fell down to the ground. Alex, without Nandriel holding her, collapsed down, still tied to the pole, but Cas caught her with both hands, helped break the fall. No sooner had their eyes met, than he was flying sideways and away from her.

Nandriel, wrathful and malevolent now, strode up the length of the warehouse, her blade clenched tightly. She wasn't as powerful as Castiel was, and that much was clear to even Alex who was still having trouble focusing—but she could see that Cas had barely been blown back ten feet and he was on all fours, already standing back up, his blade brandished, his sights set on Nandriel, whose pride and foolhardy decision to fight Castiel would be the end of her life. She raised her blade high as she got close to Cas—she sought to bring it down on him but he grabbed her wrist mid-arc, using her own attack against her. In a display of strength and warrior prowess, he deftly yanked her forward and up, flipped her over his head, slammed her down to the ground flat onto her back, whirled and stabbed his blade down through her chest without hesitation.

Shock and pain filled Nandriel's face, she screamed and writhed, bright blue light scorched out of her mouth and nose and eyes, then she was dead, and black feathers fluttered in the air around them—Cas withdrew and looked down at her for the briefest instant, appearing to be upset about what
had transpired, but then he turned to look at Alex, who was trembling from trying to stay conscious and keep her head up. He forgot Nandriel, he dropped his blade and rushed over to Alex, quickly sank to her level, caught her face gently in his hands, steadying her, helping her.

His warm hands sent relief sobbing through her, his touch made her ache and soothed her all at once. "Are you all right?" he asked urgently, voice soft with worry and concern. His brilliant blue eyes were so much more intense than she remembered. She opened her mouth to reply, remembered she had no voice, grew confused and frustrated. "Can you not speak?" Cas asked, his expression growing intensely disturbed as he realized that she was effectively mute. She shook her head shallowly; that was all she could manage.

He touched her throat with two of his fingers and met her gaze with those eyes she had dreamed of for the past eight months and she wanted to reach out to him, but her hands were still tied behind her back. And then Cas's eyes dropped slightly—he saw her scar and he was startled, stilled, and then agonized—she felt him run his thumb over it, his eyebrows knitting together deeply. It stretched from just below her left eye down across her cheek, a jagged, white, ugly scar. She'd gotten it in the first demon attack she'd experienced that year. Cas looked at it with something like pain and his voice caught. "Oh, Alex…" he breathed out seemingly unable to even word himself—her eyes were welling with tears at this point, she was so overcome, barely daring to believe he was really there and just like she remembered him. "I didn't..." he stumbled, "I don't..." his expression changed suddenly, grew cold and terrified, and he seemed to be hearing something and he looked around almost frantically—then Alex heard it, too. A high pitched ringing sound.

Castiel panicked, ripped her away from the pole almost painfully, holding her like a limp rag doll—and for just the briefest moment she was in his strong arms again, feeling his warmth him breathing and nothing mattered to her except that he was with her, finally, finally. She tried to hold on, she weakly grabbed his lapel, hung on for dear life. But she couldn't.

In rapid succession several things happened. She thought she heard him say that he was sorry, she felt a sudden burst of clarity, like she'd been brought out of the strange trance Nandriel had put her in, and then without any warning whatsoever, she was flying through nothingness, spinning and out of control and alone, then suddenly blinded by midday light as she crashed into a cold snow bank painfully then ceased to move.

Shocked, she laid there, freezing and shivering and groaning in pain—wait—groaning? She groaned louder, just checking, then put her arm up, squinting at the place where Nandriel had cut. Smooth, unscarred, undamaged skin. Wait. She used to have a scar on that arm, what the—Alex sat up, breathing heavily, hugging her arms around herself because of how bloody frigging cold it was. She moved her leg slowly, cringing in anticipation of pain… but there was none. It wasn't broken anymore, it was fine. She looked around in confusion. What happened? Where had he gone?

"Cas?" she asked, and her voice trembled. She tried again, louder. "Cas!" Her voice carried a certain note of desperation across the huge, snowy field she was inexplicably in the middle of. No reply came.
In a frozen field, god knows where, Alex sat up, surrounded by snow, and looked at her arm blankly. The place Nandriel had cut her was gone, and so was the scar that had run along the back of her arm—she craned her head to check, then she held out her hands, turned them over in unison to look first at her knuckles (smooth, unscarred) and then the palms of her hands (like nothing had ever happened). Panicking a little because of everything that had just happened, she reached a hand up and touched her cheek where yet another scar had been—the new scar she'd gotten this year—but when her fingers touched to skin, she didn't feel the familiar smooth, hard line there anymore. It seemed that every single last scar she'd ever had… was gone. What the hell…?

That wasn't really her first concern though, and she was quickly casting aside her preoccupation with checking her skin. Had Cas really just flung her somewhere and… left? She stood up then promptly let out a surprised, pained "aah!" and almost fell when she realized her ankle was twisted—it must have happened when she tumbled across the field and crashed into the snowbank. She hissed in pain and wrapped her arms around herself uselessly, teeth chattering. It was below freezing and it looked like she was in the middle of nowhere—a lone, gravel road stretched out alongside the field she'd been thoughtlessly tossed into. Alex looked at the road, then upwards, not sure what to expect or what, exactly, had just happened. Her heart was still hammering from what had been anxious relief a moment ago. Those feelings were quickly becoming terrified fear that she had been abandoned again.

"Cas!" she called again, confused and hurting and so scared he was going to stay gone again. Wind whistled harshly over the frozen ground. "Please—what the hell is happening?!" She begged. No reply again, and she stood there for a few seconds, waiting, but nothing happened and the sheer weight of heartbroken finality settled over her shoulders. In her bones, she already knew: she was alone again. She was on her own in this and she felt it, knew it deeper than deep, and grieved because of it. She had no choice but to painstakingly limp and hobble her way across the field and toward the road beside it, no choice but to try and get out of here—wherever here was.

Was he okay? Had that ringing sound she'd heard just before he threw her been the approach of Raphael? If it was so dangerous he had to shove her into the void without even looking to see where she'd land, was Cas even alive now? What war was Nandriel talking about? Alex gritted her teeth and hop-hobbled faster. Her nose was beginning to get numb from the cold, her bare arms already felt nonexistent thanks to the frigid air. Why couldn't someone just give her some damn answers? She'd been warm in Cas's arms one second and now she was alone again and she felt so dazed.

When she got to the edge of the field where a low hand-stacked wooden cross-tie fence was, rage overcame her and she picked up one of the heavy wooden ties, clumsily threw it several feet with a shout of animalistic anger—ended up twisting her ankle even further from the stupid, brainless outburst. Eyes glittering with tears, she clenched her fists and looked at the field angrily. It remained empty and she hated it. She sat down hard on the low fence (lower still in the section she'd just torn a tie off of). She put her face in her hands, breathed deeply, in and out. In and out. Just breathe. No crying. None. Stop. That shit was shit that Old Alex did.

She took her face out of her hands and breathed out heavily through pursed lips. A little puff of
vapor escaped as warm air hit cold air and she sniffed—her nose was beginning to run from the cold temperature and her lack of proper clothing and she rubbed her arms with each opposite hand, teeth clattering together as she shivered. She looked upwards again, not sure how she was supposed to react or feel, what she was supposed to do.

Everything that had just happened to her felt surreal, like it could have been imagined completely, and she was angry and frustrated, befuddled at the deepest levels. Nothing had explained why he'd disappeared nearly nine months ago, why he had never sent a message, why he'd just left her and never bothered to tell her why. She wasn't sure if she should be worried and afraid or angry and indignant. Alex stood up onto one foot, stifling a sound of painful protest. It was no use trying to figure out how to feel, she needed to focus on surviving at this point. She needed to get herself into civilization and into shelter.

Actually... she wasn't even sure if she was even near civilization. This could be some wilderness for all she knew, and actually, maybe it was—she didn't hear any sounds of traffic, saw no power lines. Well that was comforting. So was the thought that she would literally die from exposure if she was out here for too long in this cold. Getting moving, and stat, was the only action she could take at the moment. With that in mind, Alex awkwardly and clumsily clambered over the fence and onto the other side, glad that she'd gone to sleep in her shoes that night when Nandriel had taken her. She looked both ways—the road stretched straight in either direction, and neither way looked different than the other.

The road was covered in a light layer of snow, no tire tracks. It was a total gamble: left, or right? She looked down at her hands again, saw the unmarked palm of her left hand, the one that had bore the scar from Gabriel's hell world. A pang of loss echoed through her. That scar had been a reminder of Castiel, of the first time he'd hugged her, of the first time she'd really known she needed him. And now it was gone. She looked up at the road. And she went left.

About an hour later Castiel appeared in the middle of the field that Alex was now miles away from and he looked around in high anxiety, out of breath, blood running down the side of his head in a single trickle from the ambush he'd just barely survived. Short of breath and knowing Raphael was right behind him, Cas squinted through what appeared to be a quickly growing snowstorm. The angel rapidly became increasingly dismayed. Where the hell was this? He'd meant to return Alex to the motel he'd met Dean in a few hours ago, but in his rush, he'd been unable to fully calculate the trajectory—and it looked like he'd missed completely. This seemed to be some kind of wilderness. His sense of alarm doubled.

Now she wasn't here at all and it was dangerously cold; a human couldn't survive for long in these conditions—Castiel turned in a slow circle, trying hard to see footprints, trying to find some kind of clue as to which direction she'd gone. He saw no such clue. And then the tell-tale ringing began to sound and Castiel's heart sank because he knew he couldn't stay. He had no choice in the matter, of what he had to do next. He couldn't bear how cornered and forced his hand was, how he was absolutely and literally unable to stay and find Alex.

So that's why in desperation, he tore himself away from that field and began to rabbit through locations and dimensions, drawing Raphael away from that place, trying to elude the archangel completely and quickly, trying to lose him so that he could go back and find Alex. He was wrapped in helpless fear, the fundamental need to make sure she was all right harrowed his every second of existence. But Raphael was right on Cas's heels, and remained so for what was on earth days and days.

Grand Ledge, Michigan
"I'm telling you… this is a waste of time," Jamie said, re-heeling her duffel bag of supplies.

Dean, carrying two shovels in one hand and a plastic container of gasoline in the other, glanced her way as they walked side by side through a shaded, snow-dusted cemetery. Their shoes crunched on the frozen ground. "Maybe," he conceded. "But it's something to do."

She shook her head, looking like she was thinking about either laughing or rolling her eyes. "You need to reevaluate yourself if this is your idea of a good time."

Dean knew she was joking, but it got on his nerves. He shot her a look and suppressed a rude remark. He was on edge—sister missing, Cas not responding, dead ends everywhere he turned, and ever since finding out Alex was MIA what, maybe seven hours ago, he was feeling increasingly cagier and cagier. All of everything was getting on his nerves. The one-hour drive here to Grand Ledge with ear murder playing loudly in Jamie's SUV ("it's music, and it's metal, get over it.") the insane way she drove (stopping too fast and driving over the speed limit and just pissing him off in general—he hated not being the one who was driving), and the absence of food (he couldn't stomach the thought of eating right now, anyway). All of it was creating a foul mood.

"I said it was something to do, not something I liked," Dean corrected sullenly, trying his damnedest to be polite… ish. She was humoring him right now and he knew she was annoyed, too. He knew, deep down, that this little trip to the cemetery probably was a huge waste of time just like she kept saying. But he was desperate and needed to do something, even if it were something pointless. And maybe this wouldn't be pointless.

They came to a stop at two roped off headstones. Bright yellow police tape had been strung around the area, forming a clumsy rectangle crime scene. Dean used the shovels he was holding to raise up the police line do not cross tape high then looked at Jamie pointedly. "After you," he prompted a little wanly. She looked at him sort of suspiciously at the courteous gesture, like she expected there to be a catch. Then, mildly annoyed that he was doing something for her, she ducked under it and he followed, let the tape fall back down.

"Well. This is it."

"Well. This is it." Jamie said needlessly. Dean looked over the crime scene with a studious frown. Side by side, two headstones stuck out of the ground. A husband and wife—Jane and Henry Griffin. The husband's grave had been dug up, dirt was piled beside a five-foot hole, there were some charred remains of a wooden coffin at the bottom. Some crime scene numbers had been set out near evidence. The wife's grave was untouched. This was the last job Alex had worked.

Jamie said the husband—this Henry Griffin dude—was the vengeful spirit, that the wife had been unfaithful and the husband's spirit had been going around killing a bunch of ex lovers, and that there had been quite a laundry list. Dean didn't know all of the details, just the quick and dirty facts, but it was enough to make him feel slightly ill when he realized that the headstones were covered in sappy poetry about marriage and love. Dean shook his head to himself. All you need is love, he thought sarcastically. And, apparently, twenty lovers on the side.

When Dean had heard that Alex and Jamie didn't salt and burn the wife's remains too, he'd gotten the crazy idea that maybe the wife was the vengeful spirit—or a vengeful spirit—and had something to do with Alex's disappearance somehow. Yeah he'd found an angel's feather and Castiel had said some name before he disappeared and went AWHOL—Nandriel—but Cas was being a douche bag and not answering Dean, who never could sit still and do nothing. He'd called Bobby, then some other hunting acquaintances, gotten nothing, then grilled Jamie and Glen on their recent hunts, trying to find some kind of thread to follow. So when Jamie had mentioned this particular case, he'd jumped at the chance to do something. And here they were. Glen was back at
the motel, about an hour back east, in case Alex showed back up.

Crouched over her bag of supplies and pulling out the can of salt, Jamie looked up at Dean, who was spacing out like it was his job. "So, you take all the girls grave digging?" she asked, standing up now. Same teasing, friendly but somewhat guarded tone she'd been using with him all day and he recognized how she was sort of keeping the peace and trying to keep him from getting totally hung up on his worries and fears.

"Only the ones I like," he quipped, and tossed her a shovel.

She caught it easily, looking at him with a veiled smile and slight quizzical frown at the same time... like she thought the comment was funny but she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Dean stuck his shovel into the hard dirt that laid above the wife's grave, stomped his foot down onto the metal lip of the shovel, forcing it down as far as it would go, and he grunted, tossed the first shovelful of dirt over to the side of the grave. He'd forgotten how much of a pain in the ass digging up graves was, especially in the wintertime. Across from him, Jamie stabbed her shovel down into the ground and then began to thread her fingers through her long blonde hair and tie it back into a ponytail, frowning down at the ground in concentration. He caught himself looking at her while she wasn't looking at him, noticing how she had the slightest, slightest little cleft in her chin just below her full pink lips. He returned his attention to digging… mostly.

He glanced up again as she pulled her outer jacket off—it was cold as hell out here, but he guessed she was just anticipating working up a sweat. As she pulled the patent leather red number off, her dark plaid button up shirt shifted and he could see the distinct mark of some kind of intricate tattoo inked across the front of her shoulder—it looked like maybe her whole shoulder was tattooed, he couldn't tell, but he was interested and surprised.

"Cool tattoo," he commented, sort of impressed that she had one at all. He wouldn't have guessed that from knowing her before.

She had tossed her jacket down on top of her bag and pulled her shirt back so he couldn't really see what it was. "Thanks," she said, then smirked as she grabbed her shovel, glanced at him kind of devilishly. "Got it to piss off my mom."

Dean felt his eyebrows raise slightly; he was mildly amused at what she'd just said and the way she said it. "Did it work?"

Jamie tossed her first shovel-full of dirt on top of the pile Dean had started, gave him a playful little look that seemed to say *yup*. Nice. He smiled conspiratorially for a second, then began to dig again, glancing at his partner in crime a few times, wondering.

He'd only been around her for a couple weeks back in 1995, and now a few hours in present time, and he wasn't really quite sure what to make of her. Back when they'd been teenagers, she'd been distinctly snobby and prudish—the kind of girl that had annoyed him to no end. Really know-it-all and stuck up, book-smart and not afraid to let him or anyone else know how she intellectually dwarfed them. She'd had a huge vocabulary that she'd used and confused him with, she'd been dorky and gawky and unaware of how uncomfortably uncool she was. Maybe that opinion he'd held of her had also been him being a little more on the shallow side, too. But he *definitely* knew she'd been a pretty bad hunter, kind of clueless and skittish and bad about second-guessing herself. He'd gotten the feeling she was new at it back then. Her uncle, Gary Ward, had been a real stand up guy, a pro. And Dean had sort of pieced together what had happened… Jamie and Glen's dad was gone or dead, their mom was in jail for one reason or another, and their uncle had custody. He didn't know the full story at all, but he was pretty curious, admittedly.
Then, she'd been pretty easy for him to read. Now? He wasn't really sure. She was a different person by all appearances, barely recognizable, and he'd only been with her for a few hours, but the difference was pretty much night and day. She came across now as laid back and self-assured and confident, not very in your face or in your business if you went along with what she wanted. She was snarky and had what seemed like a pretty badass personality… she had chilled out on the look-at-me-I'm-really-smart thing, and she was proving, so far, easy to get along with. But there was something he couldn't quite put his finger on about her that felt slightly forced, like she was trying too hard or hiding something. And there was an unmistakable wounded aspect he sensed, some invisible scar she carried, and he had some kind of gut instinct that something terrible that had happened to her.

It kind of went without saying that something terrible had happened to her: she was a hunter. With the title came the guarantee of pain and tragedy and horror. She'd apparently spent the past fifteen years hunting, and that was why she'd changed and hardened and why she seemed somehow damaged even though nothing really pointed to that overtly: it was just a hunch. Dean knew what hunting did to people better than anyone else. You hunted, you were forced to close off and become toughened to the outside world. You were damaged, and the longer you hunted, the more damaged you got. That's why he was such a miserable wreck.

As they silently continued to shovel more and more dirt out of the grave, Dean reflected on how he probably wouldn't have gone along with this, had their roles been reversed. If Jamie had shown up and said "hey, let's go dig up a grave and burn the remains just to be on the safe side, even though you're sure you finished the job" he would have told her to screw off; he did it right the first time. He kind of got the feeling she felt that way but was putting up with it anyway. Maybe she understood where he was coming from: she was the older of herself and Glen after all. Maybe she was tolerating Dean's stupid idea because she got his desperation to do something, anything, to find his sister. Either way, he appreciated it and also felt kind of shitty about it.

He thought he heard her mumble something and glanced up. "What?" He asked, thinking she'd said something to him.

She looked at him like she didn't know what he was asking her about. "I didn't say anything."

Huh. Okay then. Dean returned to digging, his muscles sore already from the back-breaking work.

The thought that Alex was out there somewhere hurt or scared called him back so many years to when she'd been half his height and he'd always been searching the school halls for the top of her tiny brown head, worried about if bullies were picking on her and if Sam was looking out for her like he needed to. Needless to say, Dean had never fully grown out of that protective nature that had been so ingrained into him in his younger years. That's why failing to protect Sam from what had happened and living every day knowing Sam was in Hell and suffering made Dean want to die. That's why these past nine months without a single word or even knowing if Alex were still alive or not had been hard as hell on his heart. Big brother had always been the role he knew he'd been born for. Now, he questioned that.

He tossed another shovelful of dirt aside, noticed how the dirt was a little softer now and a lot easier to move, not rigid and stony. Weird… he glanced up at Jamie, who didn't seem like she'd noticed anything strange. She was just digging, her face focused and concentrated, a few long wisps of butter-colored hair falling down to frame the sides of her face. She seemed too pretty to be a hunter, he thought. In all honesty, it made him think of Jo briefly, who had been too young, too pretty, too innocent, too good for the life she'd fallen into. She'd died much, much too young. A pang of sadness struck Dean, who cleared his throat, tried to push those thoughts away. He'd always wondered and thought if she'd lived, maybe the two of them might have ended up together.
But she hadn't lived. And now he'd never know.

A few minutes of silence passed as Dean fell into troubled, worried thoughts about his sister and the things that just weren't adding up for him at this point. He glanced up at Jamie finally. "So Alex really never mentioned the name Cas or Castiel to you?" he asked abruptly, breaking the silence without warning whatsoever.

Jamie's ice blue eyes flickered up briefly, she shook her head just slightly, thinking. "No. That guy who showed up in the trench coat and scribbled all over the table, right?"

"Yeah."

She shook her head more emphatically, shrugged, and it was obvious she had no clue who Cas was—or had been—to Alex. "No. Today's the first time I heard of him." She was tossing more dirt out of the grave with her shovel and she didn't seem very interested. "They friends or something?"

"Yeah, or something," he muttered, almost to himself. Jamie glanced at him curiously at the way he said that, said nothing, returned to digging. He tried to resume digging, but he was frustrated and needed to know so bad he couldn't stand it anymore. He stuck his shovel into the ground beside him. "Look, did my sister ever mention why she won't come see me?"

Another one of those brief, careful glances from Jamie, who kept digging. It seemed like she was being careful how she answered him. "I asked her once, she said it was none of my business, I said okay."

Dean frowned slightly, trying to figure out exactly what kind of partnership Jamie and Alex had struck up. "What, you weren't curious?" he asked. "You just... gave up, let it go?"

Jamie stopped digging, stabbed her shovel down into the ground beside herself, seeming to get annoyed that he had and was questioning her. "I was curious. Still am." Jamie gave off the distinct impression that she didn't have time to explain herself, but she did anyway. "I'm curious about a lot of stuff. How she got her voice back. What happened to Sam. What happened to your dad. But it's none of my business, she wasn't saying, and I didn't push. I don't need to know all that to hunt. So I don't ask if it doesn't matter that much, and I don't pry. The end."

In response to her defensive tone and posture, Dean didn't back down. "Call me crazy but I like to know the people I hunt with. I need to be able to trust them."

Jamie's eyebrows moved closer together in faintly dubious puzzlement. "What are you getting at?"

"I'm saying did you really just let her waltz into your life without wanting to know the details? Who you were bringing on board?"

Jamie seemed to think the question was hilarious, a grin broke her face and she looked down then over, half-rolling her eyes, like he was really stupid and had insulted her with the question but she found it funny. "You're right, I should have run a multiple-point background check and gotten some personal references." Dean wasn't laughing, but she was, cynically. He just made a face and she forcefully made herself get serious. "I'm a good judge of character, okay?"

She shrugged, let her free hand go wide then hit against the side of her upper thigh. "And maybe I was a little desperate, too. Glen... doesn't exactly always follow through." A flicker of disappointment ran across her features and she hurried to hide it. "And the monsters lately they're... out of control. Never seen anything like it before and I couldn't do it by myself, you know? Not unless I had a death wish." She looked older as she talked about all this, haggard even though her
face was youthful and she wasn't looking at Dean anymore. "I ran into Alex by chance… we had a history, I knew her well enough. Beggars can't be choosers." There it was, just for a moment: that silent, invisible scar; a fleeting moment where he could see a sadness that resonated with him there resting in the corners of her eyes and the chagrinned little tilt of her mouth and the tired soft sigh she let out.

She glanced up and saw how he looked at her so closely and promptly the sadness disappeared and she looked like she wished he'd screw off. He averted his eyes, halfheartedly raked his shovel across the dirt, not digging. "So you uh, said you ran into her waiting tables, right?"

She was digging again, and glanced at him sidelong, passive aggressive, and he got the silent message: *shut up and dig*. "Yeah, some hole-in-the-wall bar a few towns over from you," she answered shortly, seeming to be distracted now.

Damn. He got a lump in his throat all over again, stared off into space, holding the handle of the shovel beside himself idly. "I wish I knew she was that close," he said quietly, thinking aloud. "I kinda figured she would get as far away as possible from me after what happened."

"Sam dying?" Jamie asked, a little less sharp than before, and he remembered that Jamie knew little, if almost nothing, about all the craziness he'd been through the past few years.

"Yeah," he answered noncommittally, and began to dig again. But he was distracted and bothered. In an effort to distract himself from his distractions, after a minute he decided to try for a conversation, after all, he was curious about a few things, and he wouldn't mind knowing just a little bit more about the chick he was working with currently. "So," he said, starting off with a conversational tone, overly friendly, trying to brush aside any weirdness from before. "What exactly is keeping you in the life, James?"

She shot him a look—maybe because of the nickname she hated, maybe because she didn't want to talk about it. She looked kind of adorable when she was pissed and he felt himself smiling without meaning to, amused by how easy it was to tick her off. She didn't reply, just rolled her eyes upward, hefted another shovelful of dirt out of the grave. "Oh come on," Dean goaded, "I know more than you think… the rich family, old money, crazy mom…" he trailed off, got another sharp, slightly surprised sidelong look from her. A little smug because he'd been right, he leaned onto the shovel like it was a staff. "I'm good at reading between the lines," he told her, a little prideful of the fact. "And I know for a fact this life is an option for you. So why are you still in it?"

Her face was a lot stormier than it had been all day, a little sardonic. "Did reading between the lines also tell you I want nothing to do with the life I came from?" She asked in an acidic voice—he'd struck a raw nerve, obviously. "Cuz I didn't then and I don't now." All the general friendliness she'd been showing him all day was gone currently in favor of defensive, offended, indignant offense, which reminded him of the teenage Jamie he'd known. "I'm not the rich kid snob you think I am. And I wasn't then, either." She stared at him and seemed to feel she'd overreacted and slightly uncomfortable, she looked away, halfway between sullen and resigned. "Anyway. This life isn't an option for me. Not anymore." She stuck the shovel into dirt again with a rigidly held jaw. "I'm stuck now."

"Stuck?" Dean asked, not sure what she meant. "Your mom still in the can?"

Jamie didn't ask how he knew that—Glen had let it slip that their mother was in jail and Dean had always thought that was interesting. Instead, Jamie refused to look at Dean, focused on the task at hand. "Killed herself in there when I was like nineteen," she told him stonily and Dean was slightly taken aback. She didn't even look at him, just dug, dug, dug.
"I'm sorry," Dean offered, and she said nothing, just made a really thoughtful face and straightened, paused and looked directly at him, avoided saying anything else about her mom.

"You know... it's kind of amazing that you got out," she said, switching subjects purposefully and by all appearances she was both a little jealous of him and sort of in awe, not sure how it could really be true. "That just doesn't happen too often."

It was Dean's turn to feel put on the spot and he tightened his jaw, looked away, fiddled with the shovel handle. "Yeah well."

Jamie looked perplexed, then a disbelieving little expression came across her face. "What? Don't tell me you miss this," she said evenly, looking at him questioningly, like she was trying to figure him out. "Longass days, ridiculous working conditions, close calls every single fucking hour of every single fucking day? Never knowing where you're gonna be sleeping the next night?"

Dean was deep in thought, reminiscent in a painful way. He shoveled another scoop of dirt halfheartedly, not really focused. "What I miss is that I always knew who I was gonna be with."

She was quiet for a minute, chastened, understanding. "But you have a family now, right?" She asked. "Some chick and her kid?"

Dean thought of Lisa and Ben, felt himself frowning a little. "Yeah."

"There you go," she said, and her voice was back to the more playful, non-consequential tone she'd been using all day. "You got nothing to pout about."

Dean glanced at her darkly. "Trust me, I got shitloads to pout about."

Jamie raised a single eyebrow at him, smiled briefly. "Don't we all. She made a face, joking and teasing again, playful. "But no one likes a whiny little bitch. So how about no more pouting, Jacket?"

He felt a little pleasantly surprised grin come across his face. "Jacket," he repeated, chuckling despite himself, glancing up at her as his face was tilted downward. "I forgot about that."

"Okay Fresh Prince, how about more digging, less yakkity yak." She tossed her shovelful of dirt at his feet and laughed at his indignant "hey!"

"I can dig and talk at the same time," he said, resenting her implication and shaking each foot in turn to get the dirt off.

"Then why aren't you?" she challenged.

He just gave up and in and sighed heavily. "All right, all right," he muttered, but in a better mood
than a minute ago. They were down about three feet into the grave and Dean stepped into the hole at this point, Jamie followed.

"Where is that ugly thing, anyway?" Jamie asked. They were back to back now. "The jacket."

Dean was quiet a minute. "Put it away in Lisa's attic somewhere." The jacket was another reminder of Sam and Alex and he'd packed it away awhile ago.

"Lisa—your girlfriend, right?" Jamie asked in her low, soft voice.

"Yup."

A few beats of silence passed. "Does she know?" About the life.

Long pause. "A little," Dean said. Lisa knew enough, and she didn't need to know more. Those dark things in his past should stay in the past where they couldn't hurt Lisa or haunt her, too. It was bad enough that Dean knew what he did, carried what he did. He'd rather no one else have to carry that impossible weight. "Honestly the less she knows, the better," he muttered. "Anyway, I'm out of the life now, so..."

He could hear the amused smile on Jamie's voice. "Says the guy digging up a grave..." he smiled a little, too. He knew one thing: he didn't miss this back-breaking work. His hands were getting chaffed. Damn, he'd gone soft in these past eight months. "So when we find your sister, what then?" Jamie asked, startling Dean. What did she mean, what then?

"Dunno," he answered honestly, stopping mid movement and looking unseeingly ahead of himself. He was so worried about Alex that he could almost cry—he'd failed, he should have looked for her harder all those months ago, he should have done more than he had. It was too late now, and maybe it was too late, for real. Maybe she was dead. His voice was barely audible. "I just... wanna see her again."

Jamie was quiet, he could hear that she'd stopped digging and turned her head toward him slightly. She sounded like she were cautioning him when she spoke. "Dean, you need to be ready for the possibility that... she might not wanna see you."

Dean's heart twitched painfully at the suggestion and he turned his head toward her slightly, not understanding. "What? Why?"

Jamie let out a thoughtful, weighty breath. "Call it a gut instinct but... shit." He heard her shovel clatter down and knew something was wrong even before he had fully turned around. "Cops," she said in a whisper—and Dean glimpsed two officers getting out of a cruiser off at the main road, within shouting distance.

"Come on, come on!" he urged, already leaping out of the grave and grabbing Jamie by the wrist, pulling her along with him and towards where the woods began to get thicker and deeper. Shit, had they been spotted? He wasn't sure. After crunching through the frozen leafy ground at a run for long enough to put some distance between themselves and law enforcement, they stopped, a little out of breath—Dean more than Jamie. Another reminder of how out of shape and practice he was. Too many beers, not enough running for his life.

"Did they see us?!" Dean wondered out loud—Jamie had seen more than he had.

She had a hand on her forehead, was a little breathless. She shrugged. "No, don't think so, or maybe a little, I don't know—they probably did, I mean—ah, who knows."
"Well okay, that's clear and concise," Dean commented snidely, he got a don't test me look from Jamie.

"Come on, we need to get outta here," Jamie said, over it and sort of sullen, no doubt pissed she'd lost some stuff, including her cool red jacket, at the gravesite.

"But we didn't—" Dean started.

She whirled, patience snapping in half, voice rising. "Dean. There's nothing there. You know there's not." She paused, softened her tone at the look on his face. "Sorry, okay? I'm not getting arrested over this and neither are you. Now are you coming with me or…?" She jerked a thumb back towards where the main road would be, started walking, let him decide if he were joining her or not.

He didn't really have much choice and feeling utterly deflated, he followed her. She heard him following, looked back at him with mild sympathy and mild annoyance both. They cut back through the woods, circling back toward where the front of the graveyard was. Jamie had parked in the designated parking lot outside of the cemetery—and when they could see it again through the trees, they both came to an abrupt halt in unison.

"I told you you should have parked somewhere else," Dean said in a heated whisper, throwing his hands up in exasperation when they saw that another cop car was pulled up into the parking lot and another set of officers were peering into Jamie's Tahoe. They were only about forty feet away—if Dean threw a rock hard enough, he could hit one.

"Well where would you have parked, genius?!" Jamie shot back in an angry whisper, and the two of them looked at each other tensely for a second. "We'll just wait for them to leave." Jamie muttered, and waved a hand in dismissal, stared with crossed arms through the trees and at her car with a glare on her face.

"They're not gonna just leave," Dean insisted, because this wasn't the first time he'd been caught digging up a dead person before. He took on a patronizing tone and looked at Jamie pointedly. "They're gonna find that stuff at the grave, see that we were digging up another one, then start looking for us, impound the car, then what?" Jamie looked at him like he'd grown antennae and her annoyance only annoyed him further. Just because he hadn't hunted in awhile didn't mean he was an idiot. "This isn't my first rodeo, princess," he told her in another furious whisper, up in arms and disgruntled.

"Oh and this is mine?" She retorted, eyebrows raised up high, indignant at his insulting tone. "They're gonna leave."

"No, they're not. See that guy? He's radioing for backup. We need to get a handle on this before—" he stopped mid-sentence, realized explaining was pointless, she looked like she'd rather stab herself with a screwdriver than listen to anything he had to say.

So, he decided to revert to his default mode of operation: take charge. "Okay look, I'm gonna make a diversion, you—hey!" he protested when she reached up and ruffled his hair violently so that it was a total mess, then angrily yanked his jacket so that it was askew on him and half off one shoulder—what the hell was she doing? He looked her in the eye, totally confused and she just looked at him like she was thinking what now, Winchester? Dean watched, frozen and caught off guard and definitely not in charge as she very quickly messed up her own hair by rubbing the palm of her hand forward over the smooth hair so that crazy fly aways stuck out all over her head—it looked like she'd been rolling around on the ground—she yanked her shirt down a little and then grabbed at her boobs, pushed them up and readjusted them really quickly, purposefully giving
herself more cleavage. The whole time she did that, she was staring off at the cops in deep thought and concentration. Dean stared at her, mystified and a little, uh, turned on. "W-what are you—" he faltered.

"Just follow my lead, Jacket," she muttered and grabbed his hand and pulled him out into full view of the officers, and suddenly began to laugh like a punch drunk teenager girl, totally mystifying Dean. She was acting like she hadn't seen the officers, then she turned around and grabbed Dean by two handfuls of his jacket as she walked backwards and pulled him with her. She kept giggling and grinning and this was not Jamie at all—Dean panicked slightly when he realized she was pulling him in for a kiss, he wasn't sure if he should go with it or pull away—Lisa—but then it turned out she'd been faking anyway, she pretended to notice the cops just before she would have touched her lips to his.

"Oh!" she exclaimed and Dean thought absently that she really should be an actress, even he believed what she was doing right now and it was kind of freaking him out. But more important, what the hell now? She had frozen, and the two officers were approaching.

"This your car, lady?" One of them asked, jerking a thumb back over his shoulder at her SUV.

"Yeah, yeah it is," she answered in a wide-eyed, innocent kind of way, still holding onto Dean by the jacket.

"You kids wanna explain what—" the other officer stopped, taking in their appearance and seeming to put two and two together. Jamie giggled throatily and bit her lip and cuddled into Dean as she grinned in a you caught me way at the officers and Dean realized what she was going. Oh my god this was the stupidest… he wanted to sigh and roll his eyes but he went with it helplessly—what else could he do? He let himself act like he'd just gotten some action, forced himself to grin kind of slyly and then he shrugged and both of the officers looked at each other sidelong, then back at the couple.

One of the officers seemed more straight-edged and disapproving, the other one nodded kind of approvingly at Dean, like he was thinking you sly dog. The more pious officer leveled them both with a stern frown. "What exactly were you two up to back there? We've had reports of grave robbers."

If Dean had looked beside himself he would have seen Jamie in deep concentration. "We were messing around," she said bluntly and Dean's eyes slid to her sidelong. This was the craziest, dumbest idea...

"They were messing around," the approving officer said to the dubious one. Dean frowned slightly.

One of the policeman's radio beeped, a voice came through over the little speaker. "Uh yeah Frank, we spotted a caucasian male, brown hair, with a caucasian female, blonde hair, they left a bunch of junk up here at the grave site, over."

Dean stiffened. Shit. Busted. He tried to decide which officer he should punch in the face, which one he could deck easiest—but beside him, Jamie spoke calmly. "That wasn't us," she said. He felt her sway slightly, suddenly grab his arm like she had a head rush or something. Instinctively, he tightened his arm around her, his free hand grabbed her wrist just in case and he held her up slightly, but didn't look at her. She was trying to act nonchalant, and he followed suit.

To Dean's shock, both officers nodded. "Right, no," said one. "We know it wasn't," said the other, and tipped his hat, stepped aside and swept his hand out, indicating that they carry on their way. "Have a nice day, kids."
Jamie—seemingly recovered from whatever little head rush she'd experienced—gave another
girlish little giggle and Dean gave her a weird look—she sounded ridiculous. But she was oblivious
to him and flirtatiously pulled a shoulder up to her cheek, all show for the cops. "Thanks officers,"
she said, and walked right through them, pulling Dean along by the hand. "Come on, honey." The
second they had walked through the officers, she let go of his hand and dropped the act, like she'd
flipped a switch—she was sullen and bitchy again, walking a little faster than necessary and
shooting him a dirty look. What did I do? He was confused, looked back at the world's dumbest
officers a couple times, couldn't believe their luck.

"That was the stupidest idea," he muttered to her as they reached the SUV, trying to figure out
how, exactly, they had just walked away from that. They parted ways at the back of the car, both
got in and shut their doors and he looked at her suspiciously, patting his crazy hair back down. "So
are you Obi-Wan Kenobi or something? Jedi mind tricking your way outta stuff?" he asked. Half
joking, half serious.

She looked at him sidelong, held up a correcting finger. "Number one: I'm Han Solo. Because he's
awesome. Number two:" She used the finger that was held out and pointed it at her face. "See
this?" She pointed to her face. "Gets me outta trouble every time," she said, and then pulled her
shirt back up, lessening the amount of cleavage that was displayed. "That and two other things, I
guess," she added with a cheeky little grin, then looked back up at him. He realized he shouldn't be
staring at her chest and she chortled softly, started the car as chagrinned, Dean looked at the
dashboard pointedly. "It's just really hard to be so good looking," she stated with an air of put-on
drama.

"Wow, and humble too," he commented. He watched the cops carefully through the car window.
Damn he couldn't believe their luck and glanced at Jamie, then saw how a bright red trickle of
blood ran out of her nose. A little surprised and slightly worried at the unexpected sight, he sat up a
little straighter, looked at her carefully. "Hey you got a nosebleed. You okay?"

She faltered, wiped underneath her nose with the back of her hand, looked at the blood with a little
frown then brushed his concern aside with a little side glance. "Yeah, fine," she said, pulling out of
the parking lot fast. Something about her reaction struck him as not fine but he said nothing. Her
phone began to ring. "Hold that thought," she said, and grabbed the old cell phone and answered it.
"Hello?"

Jamie's face suddenly registered total shock, then relief. "Alex! Oh my god! Hey!" Dean's head
whipped sideways. "Where are you, are you oka—hey, Dean!"

Dean very rudely and desperately grabbed the phone from her, not thinking straight, not caring.
"Al?!" he breathed, pulse suddenly going a hundred miles an hour in anticipation.

There was a long pause and he almost said her name again, thought maybe the connection had been
lost. Then he heard her familiar voice. "...Dean?" she asked, sounding dumbfounded.

He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and a huge smile broke his face, his heart
literally felt like it unclenched. "Oh my god, Al, are you okay?" He asked, so relieved. "What
happened? Who took you? Who found you? Was it Cas? How—"

"Slow down, slow down, I'm fine," she said. Truthfully she sounded not fine, exhausted and
drained and burdened and a little shocked that she was speaking to him but she repeated herself.
"I'm fine... but, what are you doing with Jamie?" He could hear traffic behind her, like she was
outside. Probably on a pay phone.

"She came and got me when you disappeared last night," Dean said. Not important, they could talk
about this later. First things first. "Where are you? We'll come get you."

She hesitated. "Uh, Reed City, apparently," she said. She sounded distinctly reluctant.

Dean thought quickly. "That's just a couple hours from here," he said, wondering why she was there of all places. Something was off. "Hey, where the hell is Cas?" Dean asked. "Did he find you? He said some name, Nandriel? Can he zap you over to us?"

His sister let out a very long, noisy breath of air. "Look, it's a longass story that I just don't feel like telling, Dean... I'm exhausted and it's fucking cold as balls out here and I just walked like three miles with a damn twisted ankle and I am just not in the talking mood—I got no idea where Cas went. He just... dropped me off in the middle of nowhere and left and..." she was frustrated and he could heard it.

Even though she was complaining and grumpy, she was coherent and she was *alive*, and knowing those two things, Dean was smiling through what worries still remained. The rest, to him, was details. "But you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Dean..." she paused, her voice might have caught, or maybe it was the traffic noises, he couldn't really tell. "It's... really good to hear your voice."

He swallowed, looked out his window, not realizing how badly he's needed to hear that. She *did* miss him. And now he knew. He felt the same. "Yeah," he agreed softly, trying not to sound overly emotional. Jamie was in the car, after all. He couldn't help himself from asking what he was dying to know, though. "Why haven't you come to see me?" he asked her earnestly, trying not to sound as hurt as he felt. "All these months I've been waiting. Worried as hell about you and if you were even *alive.*" He tried to laugh a little, try and sound lighter than he felt.

There was another long pause on Alex's end and she sounded guilty when she spoke again. "I know Dean. I'm uh... just not ready yet."

Her words were like a pin to a balloon, and the elation he felt suddenly evaporated as he realized this wasn't going to go like he'd envisioned it. Hurt, he could barely think of what to say. "Not... not ready yet?" He blinked rapidly, trying to think carefully and not say the wrong thing, not alienate her or upset her further. "I don't understand, did I do something?" he asked, then realized he'd done a lot of things. But... still. "I mean, outside of the obvious?" He asked, then wet his lips quickly, trying to convince her, again. "I promise, Alex, I did *not* tell Cas to leave last year, I wasn't lying to you about that."

"No, I know." she answered, and he didn't know if he really believed her and it *hurt.* "No. I just... I just can't see you," she said, and he could hear how upset she was to tell him that and he didn't understand. "Not yet, you know?" She said. "I can't. It's just too much."

Dean resorted to begging, because he couldn't not see his sister, he couldn't. "Al—come on, this is *crazy,*" he implored. "We can't just, just never *see* each other again—it's been almost nine *months."

"Trust me," she said, and her voice was heavy. "I know exactly how long it's been." There was another long pause and Dean was silent, heartbroken all over again, not sure why she was asking this of him. "Dean. I need you to respect my wishes. And don't push me. Don't." She was barely audible, he could hear how sad she was, how unsure. He just wanted to know everything would be okay someday. But maybe it wouldn't be. He said nothing, just kept listening, defeated. "I'll come see you soon," she promised. "Just not yet."

Dean didn't know what to say and struggled for a minute. "At least give me your new phone
number," he asked, trying to smile and sound accepting, like he was okay with all of this, trying so damn hard to back off and not rock the boat, maybe convince her he'd changed.

Alex paused. "Put Jamie back on."

Totally disheartened and hurt, Dean's voice cracked. "Al—really?"

"Yes," she said gently, firmly, and she sounded composed now, done with the conversation. Not really like the Alex he knew and he was taken aback. "Really."

He felt angry at that, and for a moment, he thought about trying old tactics of guilt tripping her by telling her how miserable she was making him and how bad she should feel for doing that to him, or telling her too bad, he was gonna come see her like it or not. But in a display of either great maturity or great cowardice, Dean forced himself to let it go.

"Yeah, fine," he said, and almost handed the phone off there, bitterly. But then he knew he needed to take what opportunities he could. He swallowed his pride and struggled, looked upward and shook his head, closed his eyes. "Take care of yourself, okay? I miss you. And I love you. And... I hope you come see me soon." It was like pulling teeth to say that stuff in front of Jamie and he could barely hold it together, but he didn't wait to see if his sister said something back, he shoved the phone in Jamie's general direction. "Here."

Jamie took the phone and in the space of between the time she grabbed it from him and put it to her ear, she looked at him with a very thoughtful frown, like she could tell he was upset and she was sorry about it. But Dean looked away and wished she would look away, too. She put the phone to her ear. "Hey. Yeah. Okay. Well look, I'll call Glen, see if he's—oh okay. All right. Then I'll just take your older sister Dean home and meet you guys back in Grand Rapids tonight. Yup. Mmmmm. Okay. No, no. Yeah. You too."

She hung up, let the awkward silence hang for a couple beats, glancing cautiously at Dean sidelong a few times. "Glen's gonna go get her, he's only like an hour from Reed City, so..." she trailed off, got quiet, and gave Dean some space and silence.

Dean said nothing for a long moment, caught up in all of his deep distresses. Alex wouldn't even give him her fucking number, was he really that bad of a person? Did she really hate him that much? What if she held this grudge of hers forever? Was she really okay at all? Every instinct in him said something was wrong and his only evidence was her absence and the behavior she'd displayed before splitting. And one part of him said he was just looking for an excuse to barge into her life, another part said he was being an idiot and she'd just grown up finally and subsequently outgrown her need for him. But there was this nagging feeling that something was wrong.

He looked at Jamie miserably, needing reassurance or something. "Jamie—please tell me Alex is okay. Because she seems kind of insane since she took off after almost shooting me in the face a year ago and I'm going nuts not seeing her and I can't—I just can't..." He trailed off, agonized by his feelings and how horrible this entire situation felt. Jamie was silent and seemed to confirm all of Dean's greatest fears. "She's not okay, is she?" He asked, looking at Jamie and seeing it written all over her face. His voice softened with something like dread when he saw that. "You know she's not. What aren't you telling me?"

Jamie's eyes narrowed, she had one hand on the wheel and her eyebrows were knit together in deep thought, like she were trying to decide something. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips briefly, and she didn't answer him directly. "Look. Tell you what. If in—say, three months—she still hasn't come around your place or called you..." she looked at him briefly, significantly. "Call me. I'll arrange for us to uh... accidentally run into you." Dean was genuinely surprised at the offer and
she looked at him quickly, tried to backpedal slightly. "Just… don't push your luck Jacket." She seemed annoyed with herself and began to mutter. "I can't believe I'm promising you this crap to begin with. She'd kill me hard if she knew."

Dean just nodded shallowly, grateful and touched by the offer, not sure what he'd done to deserve it, but not about to question her about it, either. "Thanks," he said, then turned and stared at the passing landscape, deep in thought.

"Guess I'm taking you home, then," Jamie said, and reached up for her aviator sunglasses which were tucked up in the little sun visor above the steering wheel.

"Yeah," Dean said quietly, distracted. "Home."

"But first, burgers," Jamie said and Dean glanced at her, smiled despite himself. Her hair was still all messed up, she was wearing oversized aviators, and she apparently didn't give a fuck about how dumb she looked. He kinda liked that.

Dean wasn't in the best place ever but Jamie's promise to make sure he saw Alex eventually was a small comfort. That, and he could really go for a burger right now. Knowing Alex was alive, his appetite was back. One step at a time, he guessed. He didn't love this, but at least Alex was hunting with someone who Dean didn't mind that much, at least he knew she was nearby. It wasn't what he wanted, but it sure as hell could be worse, couldn't it? He gave Jamie a small smile. "You're not too bad, James," he told her.

He saw the telltale annoyed muscle jump in her cheek. "It's Jamie," she corrected with all the patience of an exasperated saint.

His mouth twitched slightly and he fought a smile. "Uh huh."

She looked at him sidelong and cleared her throat, reached for the volume knob, and Dean groaned, sank down in his seat a little bit. She was going to torture him with more of her "music." Dammit.

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**Reed City, Michigan**

**Sawmill Saloon**

Alex scowled at the bartend, who was looking at her oddly. Maybe it was because of all the shots she'd ordered and downed and was still downing or the way she glared at anyone who passed her by. Maybe it was because she was wearing a fucking tank top in the dead of winter and because her tight ponytail had gotten pulled sideways and was falling down, giving her the appearance of a homeless person. Whatever. Alex didn't bother to fix it. She was in a foul, bitter mood and thought the bartend should count himself lucky as hell she wasn't trashing the place or picking a fight with someone. She hadn't gotten drunk like this in awhile and it didn't feel good at all. Anger kept building, then sadness, then the frustration of helpless feelings. She'd been here for about two hours now and Glen was taking his sweet-ass time as usual. She'd asked, and Grand Rapids, where she'd been staying with the Wards, was only an hour car ride away. *Hurry it up, asshole.*

Alex walked for three miles before she was able to hitch a ride into town. And with each step the pain increased—the pain she carried in places past the physical. Add to that the unexpected shock of hearing her brother's voice on the other end of the line and she was kind of a wreck right now.

She tapped her fingers on the booth she sat at, not sure how she should feel or how she did feel. Foreigner played on the bar radio. Dean had liked this song, and as a result, she liked it too.
I was inside looking outside, the millions of faces — but still I'm alone, waiting, hours of waiting — paying a penance, I was longing for home.

Stupid fucking song, why did it resonate with her so deeply? What was home? She didn't have a home, not anymore. Home was people, home was Dean and Sam and… and Castiel. She grew miserable as she remembered the night she and the angel had spent together at the motel, just the two of them, before the world fell to pieces and he left and stayed gone. He'd felt like home to her, he'd been forever and hers and they had belonged. She wanted that back, would give almost anything just to have things be the way they were. She wanted to drown in sadness. *Fuck my life* she thought despondently.

She worried about him again, thoughtlessly gnawed the inside of her mouth and stared blankly at the space in front of herself. Nandriel had wanted to hand her off to Raphael, who apparently was against Cas at this point. She wondered if he were all alone up there. Was he fighting all of Heaven? And if he was, the most important question was *why?* And could he win whatever kind of war he was fighting? Why couldn't he just come *explain* it to her? She had called him a few more times as she'd hobbled into town and then given up sort of angrily. No answers, as usual.

She rubbed her forehead tiredly, stared down at the dark liquid in the shot glass she kept turning and turning in circles. She focused on the sound of the glass sliding against the tabletop. She began to consider leaving Jamie and Glen. It had been a good distraction but… she was restless for something she couldn't name. Well. She could name it. But she couldn't *have* it. And if she ditched the Wards, she'd be alone again, and the thought of that was more frightening than she wanted to admit.

Hearing her oldest brother's voice today, hearing how upset he was when she told him she didn't want to see him (in so many words) had been gut-wrenching. She wanted to see him, she wanted to so *bad.* But the thing was, she knew she couldn't. Not right now, and for a bunch of reasons, but mostly because she was scared shitless of it. This past year she'd been strong because she'd *had* to be. She'd had no crutch or fallback, at least not at first. And she thought that if she saw Dean now she'd immediately revert back to the weaker role of "little sister," he'd take one look at her and leave the life he'd built with Lisa and Ben. And she didn't want that. Dean needed a healthy, stable life, and Alex wasn't a part of that and she knew it. In a way, she was trying to protect her big brother from himself, from his own co-dependent instincts.

And it wasn't that she thought Dean had run Cas off—that wasn't why she couldn't see him. She had just been lashing out at the time when she accused him of making Castiel leave. It sucked that Dean still thought that. Alex took the shot she'd been toying with, hissed against the burn as the harsh liquor went down. Eventually she would go see Dean but… she couldn't handle the idea right now. She was pretty sure that she'd lose it when she finally saw him and had to come face to face with the guilt of everything she'd done: forcing Sam's hand into saying yes to Lucifer, going nuts on Dean and leaving him and saying such horrible things to him… and there were darker things, too, that she was worried for Dean to find out about. She somberly thought of all the demon attacks she'd faced that year. Dean would literally *kill* her if he found out what she had kept hidden from everyone else so far.

She glanced up and saw Glen's familiar towering figure darken the doorway of the bar as he pushed the glass door open and came in out of the cold. *Finally.* His tousled blond hair looked windblown and he ran an errant hand over it as he approached her, spotting her right away. He wore his tan Carhartt jacket over a plaid shirt and looked like a typical woodsy, outdoorsy guy. He got a few glances, like he always did. It was the height, for one—he was probably about six-foot-five or maybe a little more, he was built proportionally and was physically commanding. He loped over to Alex, easy going as always—she didn't think she'd ever seen him in a hurry.
"Hey!" he greeted in his deepish tenor voice. He slid into the booth across from her, reaching across and tapping her on the shoulder in greeting then looking at her intently, leaning his elbows onto the table, craning his head down a little and trying to assess her condition. "Had us all worried! You okay?"

Alex could have killed him. Was she okay? Ha. "Peachy," she snapped irritably, and downed another shot. "What took you so long?" she asked sullenly and he did that thing where he smiled, shrugged, made you forget why you were mad at him.

"Hey, I'm here, aren't I?" He asked, pleasant and not perturbed by her bad attitude. He eyed her bare arms and clasped his hands, rested them on the table surface. "You want my jacket? You look cold."

"I'm fine," she muttered, in a bad mood because of… everything. Ever.

He paused, looking at her questioningly as she proceeded to ignore him disdainfully. "Jamie said your ankle was messed up or something. Do I…" he raised his hands slightly off the table, pointed to the door with both pointer fingers, "need to take you to the hospital or anything?" She shot him an ugly face that suggested he was insane for suggesting that. He chuckled, raised his hands a little, palms facing her, as if in surrender. "Just asking. Don't shoot me." His wide, crooked grin faltered, he seemed to realize something, the smile faded, he became perplexed as he stared with narrowed eyes at her left cheek. "Wait... where'd your scar go?"

Alex pursed her lips, a little miffed. "They're all gone, apparently. Cas did some kind of reset to me." She glared at the table, touched the side of her face, thinking hard, realizing there was some pain in the back of her mouth on both sides. "I think my friggin' wisdom teeth are in again."

Glen's fair eyebrows shot up high. "He can do that?"

Alex gave a dark, sardonic little chuckle. "Angels can do a lot of crap."

"Then why didn't he fix your ankle?" Glen asked innocently, clueless as to how it would trigger Alex.

"Yeah, and why didn't he stick around long enough for me to fucking talk to him?!" Alex retorted loudly, passionately, and Glen was genuinely surprised at the outburst, looked at her in a way he never had. She realized she'd never been drunk around Jamie or Glen and this was probably not the best idea she'd ever had. Still. There were a few shots left and she wasn't going to leave without downing them.

"...you sure you're okay?" Glen asked, sounding like he was beginning to worry. His steely gray eyes looked over the shot glasses and beer bottles littering the table then jumped back up to her. "You've had quite a few drinks, haven't you?" He seemed almost suspicious at this point. "What exactly happened to you out there? Where did that uh, Nandriel dude take you? What did he do to you?"

She didn't correct him or tell him who Nandriel was. She shook her head, withdrew. Glen didn't need to know any of it. "Don't worry about it."

Glen looked genuinely chagrinned. "Alex. Come on." He almost seemed impatient, which was rare for him. "When are you gonna level with me? You've been hunting with Jamie and me for what, four or five months now? You're not gonna tell me what happened? Something's bothering you, I can tell. Something happened to you." When she said nothing he scoffed mildly, heaved a sigh, looked away. "Fine, don't get it off your chest. You're just like my sister… think you can just hold
She just shot him a sullen look and remained silent, downed one of the remaining shots. Glen watched her do that then nodded his head toward the door. "So, you ready to get out of here?" he asked.

In all of her maturity Alex took hold of another shot, pissed. "Leave me alone."

"So no then," Glen supposed and then cracked a cheeky grin at her, grabbing the last one of her shots and downed it. Alex gave him a dirty glance, and he just gave her a challenging, playful look. She rolled her eyes and downed the shot she'd been holding, content to stew here a little longer, make Glen wait. But as always, he made himself at home and looked like he didn't mind it.

Glen flagged down a waitress who was passing by. "Yeah, Guinness extra stout?"

The waitress—tall, tan, brunette—looked him up and down, smiled. "Coming right up." Glen saw the flirtatious nature of her response to him, acknowledged it with a little side smirk. He loved the attention, as usual. Alex rolled her eyes. The day wasn't complete if a girl didn't come on to Glen or make come hither eyes at him. It was weird, because Glen wasn't even that good looking—he was sort of plain, really. He had a flat, prominent brow, aquiline features. His eyes were striking, she'd give him that much and his body was good, she guessed. But what attracted the girls was his attitude and demeanor. He always looked like he owned the place, like he knew exactly what he was doing, like he was relaxed and at ease and in control. He played it cool, close to his chest, and she'd always figured it was a carefully crafted persona.

But maybe it wasn't a persona. Alex had never seen him get pissed in any of the situations she'd been in with him. Jamie yelled at him sometimes when he was a dumbass and he'd get defensive and annoyed, but Alex had never heard him shout and never seen him flat out lose his temper. Usually he walked away when Jamie was trying to start a fight, removed himself from the situation instead of engaging. Dean could take a lesson from Glen, Alex reflected hazily.

The waitress came back after a minute, handed Glen a beer with a smile. "Here you go," she said and her eyes were practically undressing him. "Just lemme know if you need anything else."

Glen smiled back, not missing the way she was looking at him. "Will do." She sashayed off and Alex saw how a receipt accompanied the drink and the little scrap of paper had the waitresses's name—Stephanie—and number scrawled in loopy, girlish writing on it with an xo beside it. Alex shook her head, rolled her eyes again, but was almost laughing now. Of course. It was almost comical at this point. This was like a throwback to the Sam and Dean years. Alex remembered many a time when her brothers had been hit on by random chicks. She felt a slight pang of sadness, remembering Sam and how he'd always been sort of weirded out by that sort of thing. And Dean, of course, loved every second of that crap.

Guys had never had the guts to hit on Alex with Dean around, who was forever giving off touch her and you die vibes. Plus dudes probably wouldn't have wanted to hit on her if they knew she was disabled. But that was all in the past. And Alex was really drunk right now, ugh.

Glen cracked a crooked grin, seeming to feel pretty good about himself as he checked out the little name and number note he'd gotten. He wet his lips slowly with his tongue, then looked at Alex thoughtfully. "So what do you think, should I call her?" he asked mischievously, taking a swig of his beer.

"Idiot. "I think we both already know you will," Alex retorted, lackadaisical.
He smirked, looked down, eyes scanning the name and number. When he crumpled up the bill and tossed it down into an empty shot glass, Alex was surprised. "Nah," Glen said, holding his beer and glancing at the bar TV. "I'm not interested." He looked at Alex again, saw her dawning look of doubtfulness and leaned back in the booth, threw an arm over the back, grinned crookedly at her as he saluted her with his beer bottle. He took another swig of the dark imported beer, looked at her nonchalantly, his tone conversational. "So that dude in the trench coat… Cas—he's seriously an angel?"

Not what she wanted to talk with Glen about. "Yup."

"It's just… he didn't look like I pictured angels would look like." She said nothing, didn't engage, but Glen tried again. "You know him, right?"

"You could say that."

Glen shook his head and sighed dramatically, grinning and showing white teeth. "Geez Winchester you're killing me with the mystery hour." He looked at her straight on, and she didn't like that, when he gave her his full attention and watched her so closely. "Would it really be that bad to tell me one thing about yourself?" he asked, easy going and teasing her.

But something about the question and his concern, however casual—that and the alcohol—and she suddenly found herself saying something very true and very personal. "I've never been as disappointed as I am right now."

Glen heard her somber, introspective tone and set his beer down, leaned forward, dropped his unaffected attitude. His brows moved together a little, he seemed genuinely interested and concerned. "Why?"

Alex didn't look at him, just stared at the table, off in her head and upset as hell about everything. "Do you ever spend a long time imagining what it'll be like to see someone again?" She asked slowly, still staring at the table. "And then that moment comes and is nothing like what you thought? And it's so far removed from what you needed that it makes you question everything?"

She finally looked up at him and frowned, moved her hands slightly, shrugging them mildly. "I mean what kind of moron does what I did this year…?" She was so confused she could scream, but instead she just put her elbow on the table and covered hand of her face, forlorn and feeling a little sick. Her nose felt stuffed up after all that time in the cold. "I had it in my head that things were different. I believed in something that seems to be over but… it can't be, can it? Is it? It was never supposed to be over."

Glen was trying to understand and follow her somewhat rambling monologue, the wheels in his head were turning and he seemed to realize. "Wait a minute… wait a minute. Are you telling me you and the angel in the trench coat…?" He looked at her in surprise. "You guys were a thing?"

Alex's one eye just looked up at him and then she dropped her hand down so that the other half of her face wasn't covered. She shrugged wearily, confirming without saying anything. Glen looked speechless for a second, then like he wasn't sure what to say. Then he leaned forward a little more, unclasped his hands slightly, shrugging his shoulders and hands at the same time. "Look. I mean… if it's really over, at least you know, right?"

Hearing someone say that was shocking and felt like a huge sledgehammer to her stomach. Over? Really over? Alex shook her head blankly. She was getting emotional and fought it. "I don't want it to be."

Glen looked at her sympathetically. His voice was soft, careful. "I think you deserve someone
who's gonna stick around, Alex. Be there for you when you need him."

Her eyes darted up to him and she sat back fractionally, feeling defensive of Castiel even though she couldn't completely disagree with what Glen had said. "He's... got a lot happening right now, it's not that simple," she muttered. And that's what she hoped the case was.

Glen heard her confusion and doubt and hurt and he waited a couple seconds, being careful. "Look, I'm sure he's a great guy, but I mean, are you making excuses for him?" He asked and paused. "I've never even heard of this guy until last night—" he seemed a little confused about all of it but shrugged. "I've never said it before but... I mean, I see it. How sad you are." Alex looked at him reluctantly as he kept speaking. "And if it's him making you sad..." Glen trailed off, didn't finish what he was going to say. "I just think you deserve happiness. That's all." His tone was intense and so were his eyes and he saw how both intimidated her and he responded by cracking an unhurried smile. "You know what you need?" He was joking again. "A rebound."

Alex was mildly chagrinned and trying not to show how what he'd just said had really gotten under her skin. She knew it would come to this, because it always did, and she'd never been sure if it were a joke or if he were serious. "Let me guess," she said, not smiling but not about to cry anymore, either. "You're volunteering." He made a funny face and spread his arms a little, seeming to say well if the shoe fits, I'll wear it!

She had to admire his tenacity, if nothing else and she couldn't help herself, a tiny little annoyed smile came over her face and she looked away, equal parts amused and irritated. "Glen, I've told you a hundred times. I'm not going out with you."

He just grinned at her, raising his eyebrows, seeing her smile. "And I've told you a million times it's gonna happen," he teased. "I mean us here in this bar, having drinks which, oh look at that—" he slapped down a fistful of bills onto the table, "I just paid for. Our first date. What now, Winchester?"

It was hard not to smile back at him—he always did that too, to her, to Jamie, to anyone—charmed you even if you hated him. Alex tried even harder to be annoyed. She slapped her hands down onto the table, pushed herself up, mad that she wasn't as pissed at his antics she thought she should be. "I'm leaving."

He stood up too. "Did you forget I'm your ride?" he asked, and she hobbled a few steps forward, stopped and swayed. Walking on a messed up leg was hard enough while sober. "You act like it would be the worst thing in the world to date me," he said, following her.

"It would be," she replied, looking up at him pointedly and then pitching backwards a little—her head felt woozy and tired, comfortably numb. His hand shot out and he held her steady by the arm. She yanked away on principle, and nearly fell over from the action.

Glen shrugged off his jacket and put it on her without warning. She protested as he set it on her like a cape. "No, don't—" she practically whined, but he cut her off, held the jacket on her meaningfully.

"It's cold as hell out there, no arguments," he said in his that's final voice. Alex stared at him resentfully. The huge jacket was really warm and smelled like him. Glen was apparently amused by her dagger stare. "You could look a little more pissed off about it though," he told her.

She rolled her eyes then frowned. "This is like wearing a damn tent."

"Always complaining," Glen said, then shocked her when he bent slightly and picked her up
"Hey! I can walk! Put me down!" She protested loudly, drawing a few stares from some bar patrons.

Glen just shook his head sympathetically, already heading for the door. "Nope. I don't think so." He used his foot to push the door open, then they were outside, in the freezing cold again.

Alex's arm was loosely draped around his shoulder and she considered flicking him in the neck or giving him a wet willie. "Hate you so much," she muttered.

"Yeah, sure you do," he said, and turned, smiled at her without bothering to mask how much he liked what was happening. Their faces were close and Alex saw how he looked at her. "You need to hurt your ankle more often," he said, and she pointedly turned her head away from him, then cast a sullen side eye his way. She didn't like this—if your name wasn't Sam or Dean or Castiel, you weren't allowed this close.

"You need to get punched in the face," she told him. Her head was spinning from the shots. She was completely drunk.

He laughed again as he carried her across the parking lot and over to his Blazer—a tan SUV that had belonged to his deceased uncle. It seemed to have sentimental value to Glen, who kept the car really nice and had all these extra things added to it, like an expensive sound system and very pointless undercarriage lighting system. As he walked them over there, Alex tried not to think about how desperate she was just for closeness—how this little stunt Glen had pulled had had her feeling really, really vulnerable after everything that had happened today. Glen was warm and solid and it made her think of Cas, who she wanted so badly. Being in his strong arms for ten seconds earlier that day hadn't been enough. Why. Why?! She was beyond frustrated and harrowed by waiting and wondering. Was Glen right, was it really over? She didn't know, but she hadn't been hugged since the day Sam died and right now, Glen carrying her, was the longest physical contact she'd had with anyone in almost nine months and it was confusing her and she felt so stupid. She wished so badly for one of her brothers at that exact moment, someone to just hug her and tell her it was gonna be okay.

Her first preference, of course, would be Castiel—always—but maybe it was over, maybe he was just her guardian now and nothing more. Her mind spun with possibilities, he'd been there with her today, he'd touched her and held her and healed her and she missed him so much that it hurt. Was it possible to go insane from not knowing something with certainty?

They were at the car now. "Watch it, careful," Glen said as he began to lower her to the slushy, snowy parking lot ground so that he could unlock the car. But she grabbed onto his arms when her feet hit the ground. She balanced on her good ankle and Glen looked at her questioningly and she couldn't believe she'd been reduced to this. But she had been. She just needed to be hugged, by someone. Anyone. And he saw that. He smiled crookedly at her and hugged her readily, wrapped his big arms around her. She resisted for a couple of beats, angry. Then angrier still, Alex buried her face in his chest and wished so much he was Cas—she almost felt like this was somehow wrong of her—but it felt so good to just have someone hold her again, and she really sort of felt like Glen could be a brother... only she knew he liked her and sometimes she thought in a different life she might have liked him too, so in short, she was confused and hated herself for needing the one she couldn't have. She thought of Cas and how the arms around her weren't his.

Glen wasn't right, but he was there. He wasn't Cas, and no one else would ever be. Alex despaired at the thought of how unchanging and unmoved her love was for Castiel—would it always hurt this bad? Was she right to think about giving up, should she keep hanging on to hope? She wasn't completely.
sure, she didn't know and for the first time in months she really wasn't able to hold back her sadness. It was too much and she needed Cas and couldn't have him and her heart quite literally ached at the thought of him and how deeply she felt his absence. She hung on tighter to Glen as if somehow that would bring Cas to her even though she knew it wouldn't, and she held back tears hard. She just didn't understand why he would ignore her and leave her and something was wrong and nothing made sense and the pain was too much and how could he do this to her? She felt Glen rubbing her back gently and it made her uncomfortable because she needed the comfort but she didn't want him to think the wrong thing.

She drew back, blinked a few times to clear up her eyes and didn't look at him directly. And that's when he caught her off guard by closing the space between them with a sudden kiss. It only lasted a fraction of a second before Alex's shock at the action gave way to fury. With a quickness and force that sobered her a great deal, she pushed him away hard with both hands. "What the hell!" she exclaimed, because she had in no way asked for or wanted that.

Glen looked embarrassed and even a little aggrandizated at her response. "My bad," he said simply. "Sorry." But there was some attitude there that was very easy to dislike. But before Alex could reconsider going anywhere with him, Glen was back to his lighthearted ways. He opened the door for her, indicated she sit down. "Buckle up, booster seat. Let's get you back home."

She hesitated, considering her options, then got into the car with a face like stone, avoiding looking at him. She was embarassed and fucked up in the head completely. He shut the door once she was in and she sort of angrily tore his coat off of herself and threw it into the back seat then got silent and stony again. She'd just be cold, screw temperatures. Miserable with herself, Alex clenched her hands tightly and stared out the window of the car. She'd never felt more alone or lost than she did at that moment and she shivered a little, sniffed again... it felt like the beginnings of a sore throat and a stuffy nose for sure. That's just what happened when you walked around outside in sub zero temps for an hour in nothing but a tank top, she guessed. And you know what, she deserved misery, she deserved to fucking die. Life just didn't feel right anymore. Fuck this. All of it.

Glen got in, started the car, turned on some music and didn't goad her or try and talk to her. He seemed to sense she wanted nothing more than to be left alone. Alex stared out of the window the entire car ride back, plagued with horrible feelings and the terrible conviction that she had gone back on everything she'd ever said and promised to Cas.

She'd always thought it, but she thought it even more at that point than ever before: Cas deserved so much better than her.

A tear ran down her cheek when she thought that maybe he had finally realized that, too. Maybe that's why he had left.

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Three Days Later

Hell

Crowley threw another dart at the massive poster of Jesus he had plastered on the stone wall in front of himself. The dart landed right between the eyes and Crowley chuckled, pleased with himself. The King of Hell raised another dart and prepared to throw it—then was thrown off completely by a loud voice at the precise moment he let the dart fly.

"Hey, Bossman!" Lola snapped her gum loudly.

Chagrinned at how his dart had hit the space beside the poster, Crowley looked at his assistant silently, short on patience. He'd just started and needed his me-time, dammit. Lola was wearing a
gaudy getup as usual and little glittering butterfly clips were scattered through her nearly neon red hair. It was, in a word, abhorrent. Leaning against the doorframe of his entertainment room, she just grinned jauntily and jerked her head back toward where she'd just appeared from. "Stalin's complaining about his bunkmate."

"Ah, Dahmer being mouthy again?" Crowley chuckled, turned and threw another dart. Right in Christ's holy junk. The King of Hell practically cackled, then glanced Lola's way, remembering that she was waiting. "Tell Stalin not to lose his head," he advised, then aimed another dart, shutting one eye for accuracy.

There was a long silence then a very timid throat clearing. "Uhh..."

Crowley paused, turned smoothly, lowering the dart. Lola looked distinctly guilty. "Lola... you didn't."

She winced innocently, shrugged, tried to act nonchalant. "...I can staple it back on." She bit her lip, narrowed her eyes in thought, like maybe she wasn't so sure. "...again."

Crowley chuckled at that and gave her a look. Oh you. Suddenly, a fierce wind blew over the room and Crowley found himself being grabbed and slammed up into the poster of Jesus. "You said you were protecting her, you said she was safe!" Castiel's angry, bloodied face was in front of Crowley, who was, in all truth of the matter, quite taken aback at the sudden arrival of said angel.

"What the bloody hell?!" Crowley protested.

"The angel Nandriel took her, hurt her several days ago and you said you would tell me if she was in peril and you didn't!" Castiel shouted.

A bit flabbergasted, Crowley looked at Castiel like he was looney. "First off, why don't you kindly unhand me," he growled lowly, not appreciating the threats in his own house. "Second—and this's important..." his voice rose to an indignant shout. "It's not my fault!"

"Then whose is it?" Cas demanded angrily without taking his hands off Crowley. The angel was the most frustrated Crowley had ever seen him. He seemed, quite literally, at the end of his rope, a little insane almost. "I have been running from Raphael for days now, I don't even know how long and I don't even know if Alex is alive and it's your fault this happened, so explain and quickly if you value your life," Castiel thundered, shoving Crowley further into Jesus for emphasis—then looking up at the poster and seeing what it was of. Faint confusion overcame his features.

"Look, Cas—I understand you're upset, I do," Crowley said impatiently, trying not to fly off the handle completely. "But your little missus has been killing all the demons I keep posting on her, you see. Told you this before, you might recall. Same with the last one who, oh, I didn't find out was dead until today! Whatever you're talking about with this Nandriel character... I'm in the dark, mate." Castiel's face was a mask of angry doubtfulness. Crowley was getting really irritated with how the angel wouldn't let go of him, but he realized he knew how to get him to let go. "But you should know—she's fine. Alive and well." He paused, pretending to remember something. "Actually, seems down with the common cold but that's a small detail, isn't it."

Castiel's face worked fast and hard, his expression inscrutable and he glanced back at Lola, who had been standing there with wide eyes and her arms ramrod straight at her sides.

"I don't want your kind watching her any more," Castiel growled, turning back to Crowley. He let
go with a shove. "Is that understood?"

Crowley frowned a little. "What, you're gonna leave her out in the wind?"

Cas didn't answer, just looked at Crowley fiercely. "Tell me where she is, now."

So dramatic, this one. Crowley rolled his eyes, only tolerating Cas at this point because he was useful. "Lakeland Motel, Whitehall, Michigan. Room one-oh-one."

"You would be wise to hurry your part of the arrangement," Cas growled, then was gone with another blast of wind that ripped the poster of Christ off the wall completely.

Crowley straightened his suit sullenly and looked at useless, wide-eyed Lola. "Ya know, angels are real assholes when it comes down to it," he muttered, and kicked at the curled-up Jesus poster on the floor. He severely disliked this entire Alex Winchester drama and sometimes thought it'd be easier to kill her off completely or pull a Raphael and use her as a hostage against Castiel.

Then again, Crowley wasn't a fool. And he knew if he did that and got caught… it'd be the last thing he did. So for now, he just had to tolerate the whole thing. And hey, at least after tonight, he didn't have to send any more red shirt demons down to keep tabs on little Winchester. It was beyond annoying how she kept spotting and killing them.

If ever there came a day, he might have it in mind to exact a little revenge on her for cleaning out his demon stockpile. But for now, he left well enough alone.

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Lakeland Motel
Whitehall, Michigan

It was risky and it was not the best idea—but Castiel knew Raphael was currently in battle in Heaven and was hopefully subsequently distracted. Cas walked up the motel walkway along the rooms, invisible to the human eye, searching for room 101 anxiously.

He couldn't keep doing this, he couldn't—and he wasn't even sure what he hoped to accomplish with what he was doing right now, he just had to verify with his own eyes that Alex was alive. Cas felt so guilty for flinging her into an inhospitable environment and being unable to help her in any way. He cursed himself for entrusting her to the care of demons at all, ever. He'd known it was a bad idea from the beginning and still he'd done it. Why? He should have trusted his instincts that had so strongly warned him against it.

Castiel found room 101 and peered into the window. Relief flooded Cas at the sight of her. Alex was sitting back on a bed, leaned against the headboard with her knees drawn up near herself—she wore a long sleeved shirt and looked generally tired and ill, her nose was red. She was sick, just like Crowley had said, and Cas thought surely he could chance the quickest of encounters to heal her, to speak with her face to face, finally, tell her more details that the messages he'd sent with Balthazar and Rachel hadn't divulged. Cas was about to go into the room—every part of him anticipating the moment and straining for her—and then he saw the tall blond man he'd seen the other night with Dean. This man was walking to Alex across the room and Cas faltered. Slightly confused, he peered into the room further, saw that no one else was there. Where was Dean? Why was Alex alone with a strange man?

She seemed to know this man, who had an extra blanket and put it around her then rubbed the top of her head affectionately, sat beside her, handed her some pre-packaged food items and talked to her in a seemingly casual, free-spirited way. Alex smiled just a little—the smile was a little hooded
and sad and then Castiel saw the way this man looked at Alex: closely, thoroughly. With interest. And a feeling Cas had never experienced before bristled in him. It wasn't pleasant and he didn't know what to do, but his first thought was that he should do something to this man to hurt him. There was no logical reason for it... Cas just felt it. And then he heard his Lieutenant calling to him urgently, saying *hurry Castiel, Raphael's broken through our ranks and we need you!*

Cas didn't leave immediately, he stared at Alex and this man in confusion, unsure what he was witnessing. He must be misinterpreting this. She wouldn't take a suitor, she wouldn't, not unless... he frowned in thought, confused and feeling distinctly wounded at a deep level. Surely, in the time he'd been gone, it hadn't been *that* long. Alex had told Rachel she would wait for him and he had clung to that message. Cas thought hard—he'd been gone for something like six and a half months of earth time, if he was calculating correctly. But maybe he wasn't. Had more time than that passed? A feeling of horror and panic passed over him and he wondered if maybe it had somehow been a few years and he didn't even know it. His eyes caught the little bedside calendar, and the date was late January, 2011. It hadn't been years. It had been nearly nine months. But why was Alex with this man, who was he, why was he sitting so close to her?

Rachel was calling him again in rising panic and torn beyond belief, Castiel had to respond, even though *everything* inside of him protested leaving Alex with this man he didn't know. Logically, he knew he had to return to Heaven and finish what he'd begun, that his garrison needed him, that he was a leader and he had to lead. But tearing himself away from earth was almost impossible.

Castiel knew that *everything* was in vain if he couldn't defeat Raphael... but he felt, that day, after seeing Alex and the strange blond man, as though *he* was the one who had been defeated.
Dean fiddled on the light in Lisa's garage, deep down in his troubled thoughts. Jamie had just dropped him back off a few minutes ago, it was midday. Ben was at school—Lisa was at work—and Dean was a wreck, even though you'd never know it from just looking at him. His phone call with his sister, which had happened not even two hours ago, repeated in his mind over and over. All he wanted to know was why. Why she was refusing to see him. Was he supposed to be worried, or was he supposed to be pissed? Because he was worried. Definitely worried. And hurt. And confused, because he thought she should want to see him as bad as he wanted to see her.

He slowly entered the garage and looked at the covered Impala pensively. It had literally taken everything inside of him to back off and let his sister have the space she apparently wanted or needed so badly. Dean couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong with her at some deep level. Thinking back to the night she'd stormed off after putting a gun in his face worried him even more. He went over and over that fateful night in his mind day after day. He shouldn't have gotten drunk, he shouldn't have antagonized her or let his grief get the better of him. He'd selfishly thought no pain could top his own at losing Sam and felt angry at her for acting like hers was worse than his. It had been a stupid, immature, and probably totally wrong assumption. He'd recently come across an article about twins that was written by a girl who'd lost her twin. A quote from the piece had stuck with Dean, haunted him: *In the co-dependent claustrophobia of our sister-sister relationship, there was a strange kind of comfort. When my sister died, it seemed unusual and painful to breathe, to stand alone, to be so unconfined. She and I had an unbreakable bond... and yet, it was broken.* Funny. That's kind of how Dean felt about losing Alex. Only, she was alive. Alive and unwilling to see him.

There is nothing like losing your twin—nothing. I feel guilty for being alive. The hardest part is relearning who I am in the world without my twin. It's a long road for me.

He thought of the words he'd read on a page and been so immediately affected by, imagining Alex was the one who had written those things. As bad as Dean hurt, there was this terrible growing suspicion that she was going through something worse than he was. His heart ached and he wanted to shake his sister and yell at her *let me help you goddammit!* He was barely able to function past basic necessity, but he hid it, and he hid it well. The thought of Alex struggling similarly broke him.

Dean went to the back of his car and pulled the cloth cover off of Baby just enough so that he could access the trunk. The sight of the familiar gleaming black body made him pause, and he ran his fingers across the smooth surface sadly. *I miss you, old girl.* Dean wasn't even entirely sure why he was doing this. He kinda figured it must be sentiment. That, and patheticness. Which wasn't even a word, but should be. He opened the trunk slowly and the familiar smell of the Impala hit his nostrils—old leather, linseed oil, salt. A wave of bittersweet nostalgia hit him as he breathed it in and glanced over the contents of the trunk. Sam's old stuff—a couple duffel bags of clothes and personal effects. Dad's journal. Some hunting gear, some extra weapons. His old leather jacket—the one Jamie had nicknamed him after. Alex's backpack she'd left behind, the wallet she hadn't taken with her when she'd left so abruptly. He hadn't looked in the trunk for pretty much the entire time he'd been with Lisa. He'd shut it all away and covered it up, tried to make it all go away. But today, he wanted to look through all of it and remember. Touch the things that held pieces of the life he'd lived, the life he'd lost. He reached for Alex's wallet, where he knew he'd find fake IDs
with the stupid punny names she thought up. He remembered some of his favorites from over the years: Al Beebak, Yura Butt, Ima Weiner, Anita Lay, Gaye Hooker. God, they had all been so unburdened in years past, hadn't they? When the hell had it all gotten so hopeless?

A noise from inside the house suddenly startled him, made him jump and go tense. Just like that, he was in red alert mode. It was still too early for Ben to be home and Lisa would be at work... who was that in his house? Paranoid, with thoughts of monsters and enemies clouding his mind, Dean whipped his pistol out from where he'd stuffed it into the waistband of his pants earlier and aimed it in front of himself as he edged into the house silently, expecting bad guys to jump out from behind every corner and piece of furniture. His heart raced—he heard shuffling footsteps and he whipped around the corner where the intruder was, his pistol trained on where the sound was coming from—and he subsequently scared a very unsuspecting Lisa half to death.

She screamed and dropped the basket of laundry she'd been holding even as Dean let the gun's aim fall away from her. One of her hands flew up to cover her heart as she stared at the gun and Dean stared back, shocked. She'd sagged backwards and was half-standing against the wall, breathing hard, expression filled with frightened alarm. "Dean! What the hell!?" she exclaimed.

Having realized his mistake the second it was too late—she was supposed to be at work, why the fuck was she at home!?—Dean reacted less than calmly, barely able to breathe from the shock of having almost shot his girlfriend. "What the hell are you doing here?!" he asked and he sounded freaked, even though in reality, he was freaked.

She was equally freaked. 'I'm taking a long lunch to catch up on laundry, Jesus, Dean!' she was shaking, looking at him like he was totally insane. Dean put the weapon down with a clunk onto the hutch beside himself, held his hands out to show her he meant no harm.

"I'm sorry," he said, scrambling to explain himself. "I heard a noise and I thought—"

"Thought what?" Lisa demanded, panicky and trying to calm herself down. He tried to approach her and she held a hand up, silently telling him not to come closer. He stopped. Her other hand was still on her chest. "God, you almost gave me a heart attack," she said accusingly, voice high-pitched in agitation. "You should have called me and told me you were gonna be back!"

Dean looked down, pissed at himself, feeling stupid. Dammit, he should have, but he hadn't even thought about it. Lisa seemed to come around a little more when she saw that he was upset. She took in a deep breath and let it out shaky breath, cleared her throat, rubbed a palm over her forehead. "Sorry. You just scared me," she said, crossing her arms, and their eyes met. She was guarded and a little mad, but she pushed it aside visibly. "Is everything okay?" she questioned in a strained voice. "D-did you find your sister?"

Dean had to look down again as he worked his jaw bitterly. "Yeah. Mostly."

Lisa's eyes widened. "Mostly?"

Dean realized how that sounded distinctly like he'd found his sister dead and in pieces and he pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation then explained himself, even though, at the moment, he was so frustrated he wanted to break something. "No, yeah, sorry, we found her and she's fine. But she won't let me visit her. I didn't even see her. Just..." he gestured his hands jerkily and let them fall to his sides with a slap. He felt so empty. "Talked to her on the phone."

Lisa looked at him, thought about it a minute, nodded with a frown on her face as she looked down. She shrugged mildly, looking at him sympathetically. "Maybe that's for the best, Dean."
He looked at her sharply, a knee-jerk reaction. "How the hell would that be for the best?" he demanded loudly, maybe too loudly, and her expression faltered. She was visibly taken aback at his rough tone.

Dean hesitated after his outburst, immediately wishing he hadn't asked it so harshly and rudely, ashamed at himself but also not too happy with her. And maybe it was just because tensions were high for him right now or because he and Lisa had been arguing a little more than usual. But mostly, it was because he didn't like it when she insinuated that his family ties made him weak. He didn't like how whenever Alex or Sam came up, Lisa tried to sidestep the conversation and act like the twins were in the past and staying there. Didn't she understand how much he loved his brother and sister? How they had been his entire friggin' life for thirty-some years and losing them both at the same time had almost killed him? That he couldn't just close that chapter of his life and move on and be normal, well-adjusted, happy? No. She didn't understand, and she never would—she wasn't from the reality he'd lived in. No one but his flesh and flood knew that heavyhearted feeling, and the only family member he had left didn't even want to see him. So he had every right to be miserable and irritable, right?

Maybe he did, but Lisa's hurt expression made him feel guilty and bad. However, instead of apologizing, he just grew stone-faced and attempted to hide how ashamed he was—it was easier than trying to put forth the effort to ask for understanding and comfort. "I'm gonna get some air," he muttered and brushed past her somewhat coldly, knowing full well it was a dick move on his part. But he needed to be alone with his thoughts, he needed to go feel sorry for himself—and he knew that Lisa wouldn't let him throw himself a pity party. Not for the first time, he thought about how he didn't know why Lisa let him stay, why she put up with him and his constant bullshit. But, she did.

After going outside and standing there broodingly for a few beats, Dean did what he'd been doing with increasing frequency lately: he headed to the bar, to where he knew an old friend waited who understood all of his pain and sometimes even took big chunks of it away. Not forever, but for a few blessed hours at least. And Dean, a desperate man, would take what he could get.

He guessed that he should resign himself to this life of mowing the lawn and helping with bills and having arguments with Lisa over how to keep the pantry organized, but for some reason, he felt like this was temporary and he kept holding onto a twisted hope that this wasn't it for him.

And he was guilty when he entertained those thoughts, because he'd always imagined this little suburban life was what he wanted. Now that he had it… he wasn't so sure anymore, and it freaked him out that he felt that way. He owed too much to Lisa and Ben to walk away. He loved them, he did… but…

When Alex finally showed up and asked him to hit the road with her, he wouldn't say no.

What kind of man did that make him?

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Two Months Later

The sharp sound of her phone ringing cut through the silence and Jamie Ward glanced at the time readout in her car, frowning as she grabbed her phone, steadied the steering wheel with her other hand. Four in the morning, and whoever was calling her was from a number she didn't know. Hmm. "Hello?" Jamie answered dubiously, and immediately heard a loud, rough male voice on the other end.
"Jamie! Where are you?"

"...Dean?" Jamie asked, not entirely sure if the theory was correct, but that sure sounded like Dean Winchester's voice on the other end.

"Yeah it's me, now where are you?" he asked again, demanding and way loud and not explaining himself at all.

Jamie made a face at his coarse approach. "Driving," she answered, deadpan. She played along sarcastically. "Where are you?"

He ignored her question and she then heard the growing note of urgency and alarm in his hurried voice. "Listen, this is important: there are some djinn after my family, okay? I was poisoned by one today, almost died, they're after Alex now, it's this whole revenge deal and she's next on the hit list—I'll explain later but I need you two to get inside somewhere safe and stay inside till I get there with backup—these djinn are extremely dangerous, do you hear me? Not like the ones I've seen before—all they gotta do is touch you and you're as good as dead."

"Great," Jamie muttered falsely, thinking hard and trying to figure out how far away she was from being where Alex was and trying to remember what she knew about djinn and if she had the right tools to kill one—shit, shit, shit. It was always something, and it was always something bad. Dean sounded scared, too, and that wasn't exactly putting her at ease. "How do you know they've even tracked us down?" She asked, hoping maybe this was a false alarm.

"I don't, but it's too dangerous to act like they haven't until I get there," Dean said forcefully. "Now I need you guys to get inside and tell me where you are so we can burn rubber and meet you there."

Jamie winced slightly. "Uh... slight problem," she said, starting to get anxious, but keeping her voice neutral, smooth, calm. "I'm not exactly with her right now. I'm on my way back, though, should be there in like ten. We're staying at the Super Eight in Lansing. Room one twenty one."

Dean let out a gusty, stressed out sigh on the other end, took a couple seconds. "Okay, look. I think we're only forty minutes or so from Lansing," he said. "You get to where my sister is, lock the doors, turn the lights off. We know that there's three of these creeps, maybe more. Do not try and fight them, you hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you," Jamie said. He was talking loud enough that if she held the phone at arm's length she still could have made out his words perfectly. She paused, suddenly realizing. "Wait, who's 'we'?"

There was a brief pause. "Uh, me and some friends." He sounded almost like he was dodging the question, but he was changing the subject before Jamie had time to be skeptical. "I need you to give me Alex's number so I can give her the heads up."

"Yeah all right, hold on a sec," Jamie said. She held her phone out in front of herself and pushed the gas down further, urging her vehicle to go faster as she scrolled through her contacts list, eyes flickering between the dark road and the bright phone screen. She pursed her lips together tightly and let out a long, tired, nervous breath. This life, you never stopped running and fighting. She thought that it was always only a matter of time before the dark caught up with you and swallowed you whole.

However, today wasn't gonna be that day. Not if she had anything to do with it.

Alex gasped loudly underneath him, whimpering anxiously as he took her higher and higher... skin
to skin, body to body—she had missed this so much, she had needed this so much. His strong arms were around her securely, his mouth came to hers yet again, briefly capturing the increasingly loud moans she was emitting. Clinging to him with everything she had, needing him as close as possible, she didn't care about anything but what he was doing to her right now. He was breathless as he ravished her ardently, giving her what she had been aching for, reducing her to nothing. She felt the rising finish begin to come over her abruptly. She cried out helplessly as ecstasy began to wreck her; she groaned out his name in awe and desperation alike and as he carried her through the rolling tide of bliss; and then he too lost composure and began to crumble, no longer fully in control but now a victim to the frenzy alongside her.

He moaned in soft distress over and over again against her neck, his hands tight and hard on both her upper and lower back as he crushed her underneath himself, took all of her and filled her every sense. Waves of pleasure kept crashing over them and she was holding on for dear life, so dependent on him, so overwhelmed by the intimacy they shared, so overcome with feelings of safety and wholeness and belonging.

Spent, Alex collapsed down onto the bed, shaking and winded, looking up into his face breathlessly…and when their eyes met, she wondered why she suddenly felt so sad, so disillusioned. For a moment, he was kind and tender, smiled down at her, let his fingertips graze down across the side of her face. He loved her, and everything was okay…right? A faint sense of inexplicable disappointment and doubt grew. She reached up and hesitantly brushed some of his dark hair away from the side of his forehead, her features twisting into a confused frown.

Something was…wrong. It felt like any moment, he might slip away. The good feelings were ebbing away quickly. Somehow, she felt that he wasn't really even there, and fear began to overtake her where pleasure had been. "Cas?" she asked him softly. Her voice sounded far away, echoey, and she was beginning to feel more and more afraid, wary, because something was off, and where had he even come from?

She couldn't remember anything and felt disoriented, and then Cas visibly began to withdraw from her and became emotionally cold. Fear struck her like lightning, panic rose. "Don't go, don't leave me," she insisted and begged at the same time, panicking and trying to clamp her arms around his torso to keep him there with her.

"Let go of me," he said, flatly, and his voice wasn't right.

No—no! "You promised you wouldn't leave me—you promised!" she said, voice rising hysterically. Just as she feared, he looked down at her uncaringly, like her words meant nothing to him. He thought she was pathetic, and she could see it in the expression on her face. But—he had just looked at her like he loved her, what had she done? Why? He tried to move away but she held on tighter, increasingly alarmed, crying now, trying to figure it out, desperate to keep him there with her.

"Please Cas, tell me why, what I did—no, don't go!" He tore himself out of her arms and she felt naked and betrayed, the room seemed too big and empty, sounds echoed loudly, the floor tilted sideways, he was walking away and all she saw was tan trench coat and she couldn't get to him or grab onto him to make him stay. She tried to call him but her voice was gone, she tried to run after him, but she was held down by an invisible force. Come back—why are you leaving? You can't leave me!

A loud ringing, buzzing noise sounded beside her head. What the… Alex jolted awake without warning and was very jarred as she realized that she'd been asleep, that what had just happened with Cas had all been a dream. A very realistic... very convincing dream. She was deeply upset, out of breath, her heart was racing in fear and panic caused by the dream-turned-nightmare. There was
an immediate and strong sense of being tricked and she was angry as she listened to her phone ringing and vibrating loudly beside her head. She sat up in a jerky motion and snatched her phone up, scowled at the screen. Unknown number. Churlish—short on sleep (she never slept restfully anymore) and in a foul mood in general these days, Alex threw the phone back in the direction of the bedside table. It hit the side of the table and there was a loud crack. Whatever.

She cast glances around the dark motel room and saw that Jamie still wasn't there—she sometimes stayed gone overnight. Glen was overseas and had been for the past four weeks, there was no telling when that giant dumbass would be back.

Alone. She was alone, it was four in the morning, and she could already tell getting back to sleep wouldn't happen. Giving a frustrated, charged sigh, Alex swung her legs over the side of the bed and rested an elbow on each knee, tiredly scrubbed her face with both hands, trying not to think about her very hot and heavy dream or the part where it crashed and burned and the rejection and abandonment happened.

She dreamt of Cas often—seemingly unable to escape thoughts of him even in sleep. Some nights she dreamed that he stood very far off and she tried to get to him but he would look back at her scornfully then break her heart when he told her to stop following him: he was done with her. Yet some other nights she dreamt the opposite, that he came to her and held her, stroked her hair and was gentle, kind, reassuring her that he just had to "stay away awhile longer." Sometimes he was far away and they couldn't get to each other but she could feel that he loved her, that he longed for her like she longed for him. And other nights still she dreamt things like she had tonight… things that left her frustrated and empty and aware of how alone she was. Aware of how utterly heartbroken.

It had been two months since she'd seen Cas so briefly. Since he'd appeared and saved her from Nandriel then flung her into the middle of nowhere and disappeared again without explanation. She ached, mind, heart, spirit for understanding, for him. She hated herself for it, too, because needing someone so much made her feel weak and stupid. Still… she couldn't stop herself. She went from worrying over his wellbeing—was he alive, was Raphael after him, was Heaven really torn apart by war?—To being angry with him for leaving, to being resentful that he never bothered to find her and tell her why everything had changed, to being afraid that he was in trouble, to scoffing at herself for believing in something that was so clearly over. She sometimes felt like the world's biggest fool—she sometimes decided that she believed wholeheartedly that Cas did still love her—and yet other times she was fully convinced that he didn't care and so she tried not to either: he could do what he wanted. She told herself over and over that she was fine.

Was she fine? No. Far from it. She got further and further from fine the harder she tried. One night, recently, she'd thought of trying to kill herself just to see if he'd come, she'd glanced at her gun sitting there on the nightstand and then she'd balked at herself, wondered when she had become so pathetic and desperate, so crazy. The things she was doing lately scared her. The things she was thinking. Alex was fighting harder and harder against the realization that she needed someone to help her—that Jamie and Glen were okay but not right, they were a bandaid solution to a deep, abiding wound Alex carried around. Jamie was as closed off as Alex was past a certain point and both of the women had a silent understanding that neither wanted to bridge that gap between them. They were partners more than anything else, worked well together, and left it at that. Then there was Glen. He was difficult to pinpoint, all over the place, more concerned with having fun and pursuing whatever interested him at the time, in getting thrills and taking crazy risks for kicks… in flirting with her constantly and trying to get her to go out with him. She rebuffed him time after time, sometimes flattered by it, other times pissed off by his devil-may-care attitude and over the top propositions. Alex didn't really identify with him or understand how he could be so unaffected and freewheeling. But he was. Sometimes she wished she could be like him, because he never
seemed to be upset by anything.

These days she was always upset by everything, but repeatedly squashed it down further and further, refusing to acknowledge the reality that she was falling apart. She remembered Dean saying something like this once, and she identified with it completely: she wished she couldn't feel a damn thing. She thought of him often, how if she went to him he would probably drop everything for her and how she'd finally be with someone who understood her pain and could help her through it. But she refused. She wanted him to have that normal life he deserved and wanted; she didn't want to be the curse and burden he carried anymore.

She thought of her twin often, too. Every fucking day. Sammy's death had changed everything. Everything. The pain of losing her twin was still as fresh as it had been the day she'd woken up and subsequently realized he had taken Lucifer from her, saved her, damned himself in her place. How was she supposed to ever be okay after that, really? Knowing it was all her doing, knowing she'd been blind and stupid and nothing more than a pawn… and her error in judgement had cost her brother his life? It was the most horrible thing she could comprehend and the survivor's guilt was staggering. Sometimes she blessedly forgot everything for a little while, didn't think about reality for a few moments, then was without warning blindsided all over again at the thought that Sammy was dead and how she'd never see him again. It was the weight she carried with her every day. Alone.

She wished, so badly, for a chance to do everything over again, knowing what she did now. Wishing did no good though, did it? She sighed loudly in the silent room, frustrated with herself, depressed and not sure what she was really doing anymore. Alex got up and made some coffee, trying not to think about how miserable and pointless her existence had become. She just focused on making the coffee, even though as she did that, she thought of how she wanted something else to drink, something thicker and more ruthless, something that would make her mind spike and adrenaline surge, her body feel invincible and powerful. You just had some yesterday. Get a grip.

Gritting her teeth, Alex wondered if she had a death wish and tried not to think about what she realized was honestly a full-on addiction… unaware of how she was being watched, carefully, by enemies she'd unknowingly made five years ago. Unaware of how interesting things were about to get.

In the back of a dim van, Dean made a phone call and held his breath. The phone rang about six times and then he got a generic, robotic voicemail message prompt. Not what he'd been hoping for, and his stomach turned unpleasantly. Why couldn't she answer the phone? Was she okay? Had those sons of bitches already gotten to her?

"Please leave your name and number after the beep," said the default voicemail robot. Beeeep.

"Al, it's me, you need to call me, now. It's not safe—you're in danger. Just call me as soon as you get this, okay?" He recited his number for her and hung up, feeling a million times more anxious. Why couldn't she answer the phone? Was she okay? Had those sons of bitches already gotten to her?

"No answer?" Sam asked, and Dean looked sidelong at his brother—still unable to believe this was actually happening and that he was with Sam at all.
"No," he confirmed a little guardedly, the reality of the situation hitting him all over again. "No answer." He looked at his living, breathing, in-the-flesh brother, still not sure. He was still having major issues believing this was real life. Today had been completely baffling and shocking, to say the least.

Sam showing up out of nowhere and saving Dean's friggin' life from a djinn poison overdose.

Sam being alive.

Sam having been alive for the entire past year.

That was the punch to the gut: finding all of that out and then learning how Sam had been hunting with the Campbell family the entire time and how he hadn't even bothered to let Dean know he was above ground again. Instead, he'd defected and decided to join up with a tiny little group of some of Mom's distant relatives who they'd never even known about. One of them was Samuel Campbell... their grandfather... who was supposed to be dead, who died in the 70's after Azazel killed him. Apparently he was in the same alive-without-explanation club that Sam was in. The theory that Sam and Samuel explained to a very upset and shaken Dean was that whatever had resurrected Sam had also resurrected Samuel. The question was why? Who had resurrected the two of them, and what did they want?

The situation was fishy and crazy and had Dean all kinds of freaked out and suspicious. For the first couple minutes when he first saw Sam, he had thought he'd died and was in Heaven or Hell. But then Sam had told him no Dean, you're still breathing air and walking topside—I'm back. And it was Sam... Sam had proved it with the typical tests: silver, salt, holy water. He wasn't a demon, he wasn't a skinwalker, he wasn't a shapeshifter. He was... him. And he'd been here a whole friggin’ year, never once bothered to let Dean know it. That was the single thing Dean could not get over.

"You been back practically this whole time?!" Dean asked in disbelief, staring at the brother he'd believed to be dead and lost forever until two minutes ago. "What, did you lose the ability to send a friggin' text message?!!"

Calm and somber, Sam fixed Dean with an emphatic gaze. "You finally had what you wanted, Dean."

"I wanted my brother, alive!" Dean exclaimed in protest, hurt and disillusioned.

Sam shook his head slightly, maintained his correcting tone. "You wanted a family. You have for a long time, maybe the whole time. I know you. You only gave it up because of the way we lived. But you had something, and you were building something. Had I shown up, Dean, you would have just run off. I'm sorry. But it felt like after everything, you deserved some regular life."

Dean scoffed, trying to work through his jumbled thoughts and how he had the very clearcut instinct that what Sam was saying wasn't the whole truth. "Okay great, fine—" he said testily. "Then why didn't you look up Alex and drag her into this little thing you got going, huh? She's been hunting, too."

Sam's face gave away nothing, he shrugged mildly, not concerned. "I tried to find her once, but... I guess she didn't wanna be found."

Dean had the distinct impression that Sam was lying. But he hadn't called him on it. He'd just said something like "well that's just friggin' great, Sam."
Flabbergasted didn't even begin to explain how Dean felt right now. That, and out of his mind with anxiety. The djinn that had come after him weren't playing around—they'd dosed him up real good, made him see all kinds of insane shit, then Sam had appeared out of thin air and stabbed Dean with a needle full of some kind of antidote Samuel had. If not for his brother, Dean would have died. Apparently these djinn weren't like the other ones Dean had run into before. These new ones looked like humans, were fast and strong, and most importantly (and horribly) they were out for revenge against Dean and his family. Several years ago, the Winchesters had killed a djinn that captured and almost killed Dean—and now, apparently, that djinn's kids were out for revenge.

The second Sam and Samuel had explained the situation to him—that Sam had been hit by these djinn just a few days ago, that Dean's poisoning was not the last, that Alex was most certainly next—Dean had gone into overdrive, making arrangements for Gwen—another Campbell relative he didn't know or trust but had to for the sake of emergency—to take Lisa and Ben to Bobby's for safekeeping, in case the djinn came back around and realized Dean wasn't dead, after all.

"Hey man can you drive faster?" Dean asked loudly, feeling like the van wasn't going quickly enough, like every second they could gain might save his sister's life.

In the driver's seat of Samuel's van, Christian—some third cousin or crap like that—glanced back. "Relax," he said, not shy about letting Dean know the command got on his nerves. Dean had disliked the guy from the get go, but that feeling of distaste only grew at the snide comment.

Samuel glanced back at Dean, a little less passively aggressive hostile than Christian. He was a tall, imposing man with a shining bald head and dark eyebrows. "Take it easy, Dean," he said, speaking steadily and confidently. "As long as they did what you said, she'll be fine."

Dean didn't believe in guarantees and knew how things could and did go wrong constantly in this line of work; he didn't appreciate being told to calm down... Alex and Jamie were in danger and Glen too if he were there—he'd forgotten to ask. Dean glanced at Sam, wanting someone to back him up on this, how they needed to hurry—but Sam wasn't even looking at Dean, he was scrolling around on his phone. Dean almost did a double take because Sam didn't seem too worried. In fact, he looked almost bored. Indignant, Dean looked at his brother crazily. "What's your problem, man?" he demanded.

Sam looked up, seeming unsure as to why Dean was addressing him like what. "What do you mean?"

"Why am I the only one freaking out over this?" Dean asked, aghast and pretty sure he wasn't nuts to be concerned here.

Sam seemed to be humoring him at this point, gave a short little derisive laugh and patted Dean on the shoulder. "Dean. Relax. Don't lose your head. It's been awhile since you've hunted," he said, holding Dean's gaze almost patronizingly. "Keeping your head is the most important thing. You know this."

Dean stared, mystified and angry all at once. "Yeah but... this is our sister we're talking about," he protested.

Sam nodded, looked at the space in front of him, shrugged. "I know. And she'll be fine. Just calm down, Dean." He went back to his phone and Dean made a face. What the hell was going on with these people?

"Alex will you stop?!!" Jamie urged, blocking Alex's way out of the motel room. "Just wait, your
brother will be here soon and—"

"And if I don't go out there and take care of this, those blue-eyed djinn assholes are gonna start trying to lure me out, and you know how they're gonna do that?" Alex paused for effect, intense, determined, anxious. "Using people. **Innocent** people." She clenched her weapon tighter, wishing Jamie would just move. "We've waited long enough for him to get here and I'm not risking it—and besides that: I don't need a rescue!" She sounded bitter and angry to herself, then almost threatening when she spoke again. "Now get out of my way."

Jamie tried again as Alex made to move forward. "Alex! You can't kill these things without a silver blade dipped in lamb's blood," she protested, trying to get Alex to listen to reason.

Alex smirked despite herself. At her side she held a dark steel scimitar blade. "Pretty much everything dies when you cut its head off," she replied darkly. "Now move."

Jamie gave up but wasn't happy about it. Alex brushed past her and left the motel room.

Striding out into the middle of the mostly-empty motel parking lot, Alex looked at the djinn she'd spotted off across the street. He was young and his head was shaved, he stood there with his hands in his pockets, his arms were covered in bright unnaturally blue tattoo patterns. She wondered if he were the one who tried to kill Dean. "I'm right here, you sons of bitches!" she shouted, glancing around for the other ones now. "Come and get me!"

"Well, well," came a female voice and Alex turned sharply. "Finally decided to come out and play." A tall young woman with curly brown hair and beautiful features stepped out from where she'd been lurking on the other side of Jamie's big SUV. She wore a tank top and her bare arms had bright blue tattooed swirls and abstract lines that reached to her elbows.

Alex looked her up and down calculatingly. "You know, you could have come to the door and knocked instead of skanking around out here in the dark like a freak."

"Where would the fun be in that?" the female djinn replied, matching Alex's cynical tone. She looked at Alex coolly, but the hatred wasn't hard to miss. "Allow me to introduce myself," she said snidely. "I'm Brigitta. You and your asshole brothers killed my father…" her faux smile faded. "And I've been waiting a long time to meet you, Alex."

Alex was up for the challenge and felt herself smiling ominously. She gave a dark little chuckle. "I bet you have." She lowered her chin slightly, tensing, adrenaline surging—this was the only time she felt alive anymore, when she was about to kill something. "Are you gonna **cry** like your daddy did when I stabbed him in the back?" Fury flashed across her opponent's face and Alex slashed out abruptly, slashing at Brigitta who jumped back and dodged the blow just barely, grabbing Alex's wrist with surprising deftness before she slammed her up against the Tahoe and grabbed her neck crushingly. She held her wrist against the car, too, preventing Alex from hurting her.

"I'd heard you were the one who killed him," Brigitta spat through bared teeth. "This is for my father you bitch." The blue tattoos on her arms suddenly began to grow, expanding and curling down from her elbow to her forearm, her wrist, then her hand. Alex felt a strange burst of unpleasantness coming from from the source of the djinn's hand, seeping into her veins and bloodstream. But then the poison stagnated and fizzled out, not achieving its intended goal. Alex felt herself smiling at Brigitta who frowned in confusion, startled at the lack of reaction.

"Sorry, sweetie," Alex said in a low, cool voice. "Must be my **diet**." Even more confusion, and then fear filtered across the djinn's face, and Alex's smile was gone. In its place, cold-blooded murder. "I heard you tried to kill my brother," she said, face darkening. "That was your dad's same
mistake.” In a burst of adrenaline and vengeance, she broke the grip holding her down by violently grabbing onto Brigitta's wrist and twisting it hard enough to break. When the djinn doubled over, stumbling back as she cried out in pain, Alex raised her foot up and kicked her adversary hard in the stomach, shifting her grip on her weapon into both hands and mercilessly bore down on her enemy, destruction humming through her veins. It happened too fast for Brigitta's two nearby brothers to stop—Alex's scimitar slashed horizontally through the air and found its mark, sent Brigitta's head flying off her body with a sickening thwack sound.

The headless body fell sideways and Alex stood over it, blade in hand, then turned to look over her shoulder where a very angry young band male djinn was quickly coming at her, his hand outstretched, absolute rage filling his face. Alex turned to face him and meet the attack head on, didn't see the other brother behind her, wasn't aware of his presence until he abruptly grabbed her even as the bald one did what his sister had and shoved his hand at her neck, choking her.

This time, the djinn's poison seemed to have a mild effect on Alex, who wavered, became woozy, and began to feel sleepy. And then suddenly Jamie was standing next to her and had grabbed the djinn's bare wrist in a brazen, iron-like grip.

"Cede mihi ingenium," Jamie exclaimed, her voice crackling with power and her face filled with a startling fierceness, a brutal concentration. A sudden wind blasted across them, sending Jamie's fair blonde hair blowing away from her face—and her eyes glowed blue for a brief moment, just like a djinn's would—and confusion filled the djinn's face as she held her grip on his forearm and strange dark veins began to grow underneath the place where Jamie's hand gripped. Alex could have laughed in her quickly-increasing state of delirium. *That's right you dicks, I have a witch in my back pocket. What now?*

Her attacker's blue tattoo marks were gone and instead, they covered Jamie's arm and hand—she'd claimed his ability, however briefly. Alex began to feel clarity return even as the djinn Jamie refused to let go of began to fall to his knees underneath her relentless grip. She seemed to grow slightly taller and stared down at him then she began to shake with effort, as the veins that spread across his arms became bigger and bigger. His eyes rolled back into his head even as he overdosed on his own poison. He crumpled to the ground, dead, and Jamie, weakened at the use of magic and becoming affected by the djinn's poison stumbled, began to dry-heave, then fell onto all fours as the blue tattoos faded from her skin. She went pale and her eyes clouded over, milky white. She fell down and over onto her back, going still as blood trickled out of her nose.

Even as Jamie collapsed, Alex, woozy and feeling her blood trying to fight the poison, struggled against the last djinn who had grabbed her neck from behind and wasn't letting go. He was letting every ounce of poison he possessed seep into her. He was strong, and the poison overloaded her system—Alex felt her heart speeding up to fatal rates, colors exploded strangely at the edges of her vision, and she thought, *hmm, the poison must really be working.* She began to hallucinate, seeing Dean and Sam running towards her. She heard one or both of them yelling—there were a couple other guys she didn't recognize with them. *Interesting,* she thought sort of despondently. The world faded out and she lost consciousness completely.

Alex blinked, woozy, then realized she'd been put onto a bed and was back in what looked like the motel room.

"Hey, hey, you with me kiddo?” Came a very familiar, very urgent voice, and she felt a hand smacking the side of her face a few times, gently, repeatedly. She made a sound of protest and ducked her head away from the hand, trying to bat away her attacker, confused, looking up and squinting through normalizing doubled vision. Then her heart went still when she saw who it was.
Bent over her, a hand on either arm as he looked down at her with heartwrenching amounts of relief flooding his face... her big brother. Her wooziness disappeared instantly and her eyes went wide. "Dean!" she exclaimed softly, surprised. Her heart seemed to soar out of her and she reacted instinctually, not thinking even for a second of the year-long separation or the tension between them. Just thinking that she was happier than she'd ever been ever to see her brother. She was already starting to sit up and as she did, he readily scooped her into a solid, relieved embrace, lifting her up into a sit-hug, his familiar big arms tight around her, one hand cradling the back of her head protectively—he made a soft relieved sound, and Alex hugged him around the neck and let out a shaky breath that was almost a sob. Her eyes squeezed tight as she tried to reign in her suddenly unstable emotions, as she tightened her arms around his comforting, familiar shoulders. She couldn't stop the smile that broke her face even as the threat of tears loomed. For the first time in almost twelve months... she was completely okay. Just like when she'd been a little girl, she turned her head away from him, letting her neck nestle against his, her cheek on his shoulder. She didn't want to let go ever.

She suddenly struggled against tears and clamped her mouth in on itself and felt one of his hands tighten on her back. Why the hell had she left him? It made no sense to her now. None at all.

She drew back but not too far, keeping her hands on either side of his shoulders, hardly able to believe he was really there, needing to make sure it really was him. He looked the same as she remembered... hair style was the same, he looked fractionally older maybe, and she didn't recognize his shirt, but it was definitely Dean and she didn't realize how much she'd missed him until right now. "Hey," she said softly, voice wavering with emotions.

His eyes were shining a little, he smiled at her. "Hey," he repeated softly. He didn't let go of her.

Alex looked at him wordlessly for a long few seconds, struggled a little with how to put it. "I'm... I'm sorry," she said, encapsulating all of it—everything she needed to say to him—into two words.

His little smile grew bigger and it was soft, tender the way he looked at her, and she saw that he didn't care about any of it. "Me too," he said, and squeezed her arm reassuringly.

She opened her mouth to ask him what happened and what was going on—and then the door to the motel room opened. Alex's heart dropped out of her completely as a very familiar looking tall young man with longish brown hair walked in. Sam!? Shock flooded her nervous system, then confusion, then understanding, all within the space of two seconds. Alex's face fell and she felt utter devastation come over her when she realized this wasn't real. She looked at Dean in dawning disappointment. "I'm hallucinating," she said softly, upset now.

"No, you're not," Sam replied factually. "It's me."

But even the way he said it was wrong and Alex looked at him mistrustfully. "Al," Dean said, catching her attention. He was serious and careful in the way he spoke to her. "We don't know how yet. But that is Sam."

Alex shook her head and looked down, pulling away from Dean and into herself, scowled at the floor. "Come on guys," she said sullenly, mad she couldn't even enjoy her fantasies now. "I know how this works. Djinn poison you and as you overdose to death they show you either your worst fears or greatest desires..." she trailed off when the door opened again.

A tall, bald man who looked to be in his late fifties came in, followed by a shorter, brown-haired guy. Who the hell were they?

"Ganked that last one, cleaned up the other two bodies," said the bald one. What, the djinn? Alex
stared, confused.

"This is real," Sam said, again factual and sounding only mildly invested, drawing her attention again. "You were poisoned but Samuel's antidote saved your life. And hers." Sam motioned briefly to somewhere beside Alex and she looked, saw that Jamie was sprawled, unconscious, on the bed next to her.

Confusion overcame Alex even more strongly than before and she felt dumb, uncertain. "...what?" she asked uselessly, trying to make logical sense of what didn't make any sense at all to her. She looked at Dean for explanation.

"Long story," he said genuinely, carefully, looking at her closely, like he was trying to break the news to her gently. "But... that's Sam. And he's alive. You're not hallucinating."

She looked at Sam again, mouth hanging open dumbly. That was Sam? And Sam was alive? Alex looked at Dean in rising horror, breathless and barely able to speak. "D-did you... did you make another deal?"

"No!" Dean said immediately, seeming to be shocked at her. He seemed to think of something then looked at her with great amounts of sudden dread. "...did you?"

She was offended by his question. "Of course not!"

Dean seemed to let out a breath he'd been holding and shrugged, shook his head, looked over his shoulder at Sam with an air of brooding. "I don't know what to tell you. That's him." Her oldest brother sounded mildly trepidatious about his statement but she didn't care or pay it mind—as if in a dream she stood, not even realizing it, stared at her twin in quickly heightening emotion—that was Sam—and Sam was alive—and it was all okay somehow oh my god! He smiled sort of pleasantly and she walked the five steps separating them, in a dazed shock, then slammed into him and hugged him tightly, suddenly breathing hard and noisily, sort of like Sam did sometimes. She felt him hug her back, but it was weird, she realized, and pulled back, looked at him questioningly. Why was he so calm and unaffected, not happy to see her too? He seemed too regulated and at ease. Something felt wrong, and as quickly as she'd been overcome with relief, she was overcome with an inexplicable suspicion.

"Good to see you, Alex," he said.

Good to see me? Alex stared with a frown. "...h-how long have you been back?" she asked, confused and dubious, suddenly feeling uncomfortable.

Sam made a nonchalant face, seemed to be preparing for some fallout. "Uh, like eleven months now I guess."

Her stomach dropped. "Eleven months?" she asked, floored, eyes wide in disbelieving shock. "You've been topside for eleven months?" She turned accusingly, looked at her oldest brother in dismay. "Dean did you know this?"

"No, I found out today," he told her emphatically, letting it be known with his tone of voice that he wasn't happy, either.

Alex looked back at her twin, utterly betrayed, flustered with bewilderment. "Then where the hell have you been? Why'd you let me think you were dead this whole time? I mourned you Sam, I wanted to kill myself some nights because I thought you were..." she trailed off at his calm and disaffected expression—he had the audacity to look slightly confused at her reaction. Anger
overcame Alex, began to make her voice rise. "And you're just… fine?" Didn't he know or care about the hell she'd been through?

"Look, I should have found you," he said, not rising to her level of emotion. "I tried, okay? But you didn't wanna be found."

She stepped back from him, looked him up and down with narrowed eyes. "And Dean?" She challenged. "What's your excuse for that one?"

Sam shrugged reasonably. "He had Lisa. He didn't need me and I wasn't going to drag him back into the life. I wanted to hunt."

"You wanted to hunt," Alex repeated incredulously. No. Something wasn't right. Sam had always wanted out of this life. She looked at the two silent men who'd come in after Sam had, irritated. "And who the hell are these guys anyway?!" she asked in exasperation, jabbing a hand out at them rudely.

Dean, who'd stood up when she had, came a little closer to her, motioned to the older man, then the younger one with a dismissing wave. "Our grandfather, Samuel Campbell. And some third cousin removed something or another, Christian."

Alex looked at Dean in slow disbelief. "Samuel Campbell. The one who died like forty years ago?"

Dean pulled a face like he thought the same thing she did—that it was crazy. "That's the one."

"Nice to meet you, Alexandra," Samuel said, stepping forward to shake her hand.

She took his hand dubiously. He had a crushing grip. "It's Alex," she corrected curtly as he let go.

"You were named after my mother," he said, as if that gave him the right. "And isn't Alex a boy's name?" She looked at him like you fuckin' serious right now?

"This is the two-thousands," Dean said, playing peacemaker, trying to turn it into a joke as he walked forward to stand beside Alex, shoulder to shoulder. "We have the internet, and girls with boy names, Gramps. Listen, uh, you two wanna give me and my brother and sister a minute?"

Samuel glanced at Sam, then Christian, seemed to be sort of unhappy about the request, but complied. "Sure," he said. Christian, silent, just shot Alex a look she didn't like. The two men left.

"What the hell is going on here?" Alex asked as soon as the door shut, looking between both of her brothers, not sure what to think. She pointed at Sam, stared at Dean, harrowed. "How can he be back?"

"I asked myself the same question," Sam said, not giving Dean a chance to reply. "I woke up in that field, the place where I died and… no clues. Nothing. I called Cas, he wouldn't answer, I tried Bobby—"

"Bobby knew?" Dean asked, looking at Sam with a shocked expression. Alex, however, had momentarily gone still at the mention of Cas.

"Yeah," Sam confirmed to Dean's chagrin.

"So you and Bobby were both in on keeping me and Al in the dark?" Dean demanded, aghast.

"If you have to put it that way, then yeah," Sam said, unemotional. "I was trying to do what was
best for you, Dean. Like you've always done for me."

"And you really were fine with letting me think you were dead this whole time?" Alex interjected, catching her twin's attention. She was hurt, deeply, and felt like she didn't even recognize the young man in front of her. Flabbergasted didn't even begin to describe her mindset. "Sam—how could you?"

He took in a deep breath, looking off and over her head into far distance, like he was making a concerted effort of some kind to think. "Look, I remember killing you, okay?" He asked—and he seemed put on the spot, uncomfortable, ready to stop talking about it. "And I thought maybe you wouldn't want to see me."

Deeply offended at his sweeping assumptions, not really able to believe what he was saying, Alex crossed her arms, became somewhat defiant. "You didn't think maybe I'd blame myself for all of it? Spend day and night grieving you? You didn't think maybe you should just let me know you were still kicking; that you owed that to me after everything that happened?" He shrugged at her questions, as if he had no answers for her. Alex shook her head, getting mad at his near-apathy. "That wasn't you who killed me. That was Lucifer. You sound like you're making excuses." She paused, bothered, but tried to reel herself in and calm down. "What do you remember? About the cage?"

He shrugged his mouth downward briefly, shook his head. "Nothing, thankfully."

Nothing. She glanced at Dean. He seemed as disquieted as she felt. There was a tense silence in the room and none of them said anything for a long moment. Was Sam acting this way because he did remember and it was so horrible he had to disassociate? Was this really Sam, at all? She didn't know. "So... what now?" Sam asked, breaking the silence and looking at his siblings in mild expectancy. "We're probably gonna hit the road," he said, gesturing with a jerk of his thumb in the direction Samuel and Christian had disappeared in. "You two wanna join us, or...?"

Alex was astounded at his casual question. "Just like that? The gang's all back together?"

"Why not?" Sam asked.

"Oh, let me think," Alex said sarcastically—had he not been listening to what she said? She could literally punch him in the face and the temptation was too great for her to resist. She turned around, forcing herself to calm down. It was then that she remembered Jamie, saw her on the bed, and went over to check on her. She was breathing normally, her color was normal again and her pulse was fine, and looked like she'd start to come around soon.

"You, Dean?" Sam asked, behind where Alex was bent over Jamie. "You coming with us?"

Dean glanced at Alex, who was looking back at her brothers now over her shoulder. Her oldest brother hedged. "Uh... no. Don't think so. I gotta go get Ben and Lisa and take them home and... honestly man, I think that's where I'm supposed to be. With them."

"But you told me earlier that you were bad news for them, that—" Sam started, piquing Alex's interest.

"I know I did," Dean cut him off. "But I changed my mind. I gotta take care of my business, you know? And... they're my responsibility now."

Sam was quiet for a minute, thinking and somewhat imperious. "You're really going to endanger them again like that?" He asked. "Wasn't this some kind of wakeup call for you?"
Dean was a little insulted at Sam's very blasé question. "What, are you suggesting I leave them alone and unprotected? I made them vulnerable the moment I knocked on their door." He paused, and Alex saw how jaded and burdened he was. "I can't undo that."

Sam nodded, took it in stride, didn't seem to empathize with him or pick up on the slightly divided mindset Dean was in. "Right. Well, I understand. But if you change your mind, let me know." He paused and when Alex looked at him, Sam amended his statement. "And you too, Alex." Wow, he was a terrible actor. She could tell he didn't give a shit either way and it hurt, it confused her. This was beyond disappointing and devastating. The only thing that made it better?

At least Sam was the only one acting like he couldn't care less—Dean looked at her and shrugged his arms out briefly. "That means you're my ride," he said to her. "If that's okay with you," he added quickly. He was hopeful and looking at her with a mixture of nervousness and wavering optimism—he seemed to doubt she would go for it, but tried anyway, putting on a brave little smile. "Wanna go see Bobby?"

He wanted to spend time with her, and it warmed her heart. Despite everything, Alex felt a soft little smile on her face as she looked at him—she'd spent a year trying to avoid Dean but now that he was here, she realized she wanted nothing more than to catch up with him and be around him for awhile, too. Her throat was thick with emotion, she shrugged her shoulders up. "Sure. Road trip," she said and he smiled too, relieved. Sam looked between them and seemed to be unsurprised at their obvious bond.

"Well, guess that's my cue," he said. But it wasn't sarcastic or passive aggressive. It was unaffected, unperturbed. "You guys call me if you need anything," he said, then glanced at Alex on his way out. "Dean's got my number."

He left just like that, leaving Alex to stare after him strangely. "Yeah, bye," she said cynically after he shut the door. She looked at Dean wordlessly.

"I know," he said to her expression, then looked at the door Sam had just walked through. "Trust me, I know. Sam's… off."

"Try factory reset—" Alex looked at her brother closely, concerned. "Are you really sure that's even him?"

Dean shrugged and frowned, seeming to feel useless and just as confused as she was. "Yeah. Salt, holy water, silver… all Sam."

Alex frowned too, looked down, mind racing with theories and most of all, deepening disappointment. "I don't get it."

She looked over at Dean, saw that he was looking back at her and had a relieved, sort of happily disbelieving smile on his face; it was like how he'd looked at her when she'd first come to. "I'm really glad to see you, Al," he said, and she saw how he was trying to hide his deeper emotions, not make her uncomfortable with how much he meant it. He gave a soft little self-conscious laugh, looked down at his shoe, face working oddly. "You got no idea how much I missed you."

She nodded, unable to look at him, either, especially when he looked up at her sort of sidelong, from the corner of his eye. "Me too," she admitted, feeling oddly transparent under his studious gaze. Her avoidance seemed to inspire worry in him.

He faced her fully, craned his neck down slightly, trying to look her in the eye. He had that gentle, questioning tone to his voice. "You okay?" He asked, paused, and clarified. "I mean, really."
She managed to raise her eyes up to look at his, felt her jaw tighten and brow furrow a little as she shrugged faintly. "More or less."

A long, pained moan sounded and Jamie was stirring, drawing the attention of the two Winchesters. "What..." she mumbled, then made a sound like "un-nmgh," as she sat up stiffly and put a hand on her head. She half-glared as she clearly attempted to regain the ability to see straight—her hair was bushy on one side and her sullen expression was sort of humorous, she saw Dean, who sauntered over to the side of the bed opposite of where Alex stood.

"Ah, look who finally decided to join us," Dean quipped, earning a glare.

"What do you mean, finally?" she challenged grumpily. "You were later than you said you'd be."

Dean let her have that one, was mildly chagrinned. "Yeah, sorry. Apparently the Campbell side can't friggin' drive."

Jamie squinted a ridiculous amount, not understanding what he was referencing. "The what can't... huh?"

"Never mind," Dean said. "You got a little..." he pointed to underneath his own nose and she put two fingers to the same place on her face, withdrew her fingers and saw the blood. She fisted her hand up and dashed it away, a little uncomfortable.

"You okay? Looked bad," Alex said—not asking outright, because Jamie was a private person and didn't like anyone to know—the only reason Alex knew was because she'd been around Jamie too much to miss it. She also didn't want to ask directly because there was also the fact that Dean hated witches with a passion. Jamie caught the subtle question and looked at Alex sort of sidelong, mildly uncomfortable.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said, then her voice lowered slightly sullenly. "I don't think I did it right though."

It was Dean's turn not to understand a reference. "Didn't do what right?"

"Drop kick that djinn in the face," Jamie lied, smiling somewhat facetiously at him then glancing at Alex again. As far as magic went, Jamie was an intuitive—there weren't a lot of those kind of witches around. She didn't use hex bags and spell work as much as she used an ability she drew from within herself. However, she usually ended up hurting herself more than helping herself when she used it. Apparently she was sort of new at it and still learning, and from what Alex had seen, she was powerful, but almost clueless how to use her abilities. She wasn't totally sure about her theory but she definitely got the feeling Jamie was not proud of her abilities, struggling with the idea of being a witch. Alex was curious—because witches became witches by choice—but she didn't ask about it, didn't intrude on Jamie that way.

Dean was shaking his head, unhappy, oblivious to Alex's thoughts. He was looking at Jamie sort of lecturingly, but it wasn't without mild concern, either. "I told you not to go out there, I specifically told you," he said, looking at Jamie pointedly.

Alex cut in, taking the blame—after all, it was her fault. "I got tired of waiting and you know, when Jamie told me they tried to kill you..." she trailed off, almost smirked, a little prideful and gloating. "Well."

Dean didn't seem to share her slightly cocksure triumph. "That was reckless as hell—I don't know why you two are still alive if you're pulling risks like that." He didn't rage at her, he seemed
genuinely concerned and reasonable, and Alex was distinctly surprised and impressed. Maybe he'd changed this past year.

"Yeah, well, we must be doing something right," Jamie said lightly, covering for Alex and effectively telling Dean to leave it alone. Alex sobered a little bit when she looked at Jamie again. If not for Dean, Jamie would be dead right now. Alex hadn't asked for Jamie to come out with her, she'd been prepared to face all those djinn on her own, see what happened, cut the heads off a couple of them if she was lucky. She'd gone out there not caring if she lived or died, only wanted to even the playing field a little bit. It was kind of shameful, really, how mindless she let herself become sometimes.

Alex crossed her arms self consciously. It was a miracle she'd lived this entire year—she'd been reckless and volatile. And tonight—Jamie running out there and saving her ass and almost dying in the process—was a reminder that she needed to dial it down. A little chastised, she looked down. She heard her brother chuckle in amusement.

"Need a hand, James?" Dean asked as Jamie began to clumsily swing her legs over the edge of the bed and prepare to stand up. She gave him a supremely bitchy look at the nickname.

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**About An Hour Later**

"Yeah, I'm just having a really hard time picturing you working a real job..." Alex said, teasing her oldest brother lightly. She blew on her coffee a little.

"Been there ten months now," Dean confirmed, raising his mug as if in salute at her from across the table.

She cracked a small grin, echoing his playful demeanor. "I'm... impressed." She sat back a little in the booth opposite of him, shook her head in what seemed to be faint affection. "Look at you, Mr. Normal Life."

He shrugged modestly, took a sip of his coffee. Alex was taking him to Bobby's—it was an eleven hour car drive and they'd stopped for some breakfast, hadn't really said much so far, but he was finally getting up the nerve to ask her about what was really on his mind. He was careful, because he feared she might snap on him—however, so far, she seemed incredibly okay to him. Or maybe he wasn't good at reading her anymore—he didn't know. She looked good—a little tanner than he remembered her being, she'd gained some weight and looked healthy and more fit than she'd been the last time he saw her—she looked tired as hell, but that was a given with the life she was living. She wore her hair in a tight ponytail, which was new—but she dressed the same as she always had, jeans, boots, a plain shirt with a flannel over it, a jacket over that. She looked grown up, she looked her age. And it was bittersweet for Dean.

"Yeah—so I went all suburban and... you," he said, pausing, looking at her studiously, wishing he could know everything that had happened to her this past year. "You kept hunting."

Her eyes flickered up to his, she set her mug down, rubbed her thumb over the handle a few times, looking there instead of at him. "Not at first," she admitted slowly. "I tried real life for awhile, tried not to hunt but..." she shrugged her shoulders and mouth at the same time, "normal didn't agree with me." She smiled sort of cynically. "I mean, it was never that normal though. I got a few, you know, weird little jobs. Never got a place though... mostly lived in my car."

Dean went still and looked at her heartbrokenly. "Al."
At his reaction she was markedly uncomfortable, avoided his gaze. "I didn't like staying in motel rooms. Alone." Oh god, well if he hadn't been brokenhearted a second ago, he was now and Alex saw the expression on his face and got mildly upset, appealed to him. "Don't do that, Dean. Don't guilt trip yourself for what I decided to do." She attempted an *everything's fine* smile. "It wasn't a big deal."

He just put his face in his hand for a minute, gathered himself, rubbed his forehead with his palm. *It was* a big deal, but he withheld the urge to argue with her, tried to stay reasonable and understanding, remembering the last time they fought. "Why'd you go?" he asked her despondently, saw how she was reluctant to answer. "Really. After all this time… you owe me that at least."

She hesitated, then shrugged, looked out the window beside their booth. She was silent for so long he thought she wasn't going to answer at all. Then she did. "At first just because… everything was wrong. Cas left, Sam died…" she looked down, deeply emotional but holding it back. "I couldn't handle it, how sad I was and… I dunno. Grief makes people do weird shit." She looked back at him and chuckled lowly in her throat, seeming to be a little chagrinned with herself, trying to cover up her sorrow. "I tried summoning *Crowley* and blackmailing him into raising Sam."

Dean looked at her with wide-eyed shock. "*You what?*

"Didn't work," she said, then frowned, narrowed her eyes in thought. "I don't think." They exchanged a weirded out, contemplative glance. "Anyway," Alex said—they would have to work on that one later. "When that fell through… I was gonna come get you but… I saw you with Lisa and Ben and… I thought it was what was best for you." Dean made a slight face, unhappy with how both of his siblings had decided what was best for him without consulting him at all. Alex set him with a examining, questioning gaze. "Dean, you wouldn't have stayed with them if I was around. And… all these years it's like I was this load you had to carry and I mean, really—I'm an adult, you know? It was just time for us to separate." It must have been something about how he was looking at her, because she frowned, looked at him closely, softly. "Aren't you happy?"

What a loaded question. "Honestly?" He drew in a deep breath, eyes flickering back and forth across the table in front of him. And he said nothing else, seemed to draw a blank. Yes and no. Mostly no. He wasn't sure how to answer so he just shrugged widely. His eyes jumped up to her, he was stuck on something else she'd said. "You're not—you never were—a 'load' I carried. You're my sister. I'd do anything for you. You know that." He faltered a little. "I hope."

She nodded a little, looked at him with an unguarded gaze, reached across the table and squeezed his hand gently, briefly. "I do know." There was a sadness there in her eyes and voice he didn't understand.

"Blue plate special and the number four with extra bacon," the waitress announced, interrupting the moment. The siblings let go, sat back, and the waitress set the heavy ceramic plates down and bustled off.

Dean poked at his sausage and bacon, Alex started to cut up the chicken portion of the chicken and eggs she got. It was quiet a minute, then she cleared her throat. "So, Ben—must be like having a kid, right?" She asked, conversational, if slightly timid, and her eyes flickered up to him sort of fondly. "I bet you're good at that."

Dean smiled a little, nodded, thinking of that awesome kid who he'd basically been a dad to this past year. "He's great."

"And Lisa?" Alex continued, chewing a mouthful of chicken now. "I mean, this has to be the
longest you've ever been with anyone."

Dean contemplated a sausage he'd stabbed with his fork. "Yeah, it is and... it's... I dunno, uh, great." He paused. "She's a really great girl."

His sister gave him a dubious if amused look in the middle of running a piece of chicken through her runny fried eggs. "You're saying 'great' a lot."

Dean stuck the sausage into his mouth. "Am I?" he asked, then turned it into a joke. "That's great." His sister just rolled her eyes in good humor at his stupid little pun, put a piece of chicken in her mouth, chewed, shook her head, smiling faintly.

The smile faded and after she swallowed, she seemed reflective, somber almost. "This is so crazy," she said introspectively, staring at her plate. "Seeing you again, seeing Sam. I still can't believe..." she paused, put her fork down, leaned an elbow onto the table, thought pensively for a minute, then looked at Dean. "You're really not gonna go hunt with him?"

Dean worked his mouth in thought, tried to stick with what he knew was the right thing. "I meant what I said about Lisa and Ben. I have to take care of them. I put them in a lot of danger, you know? I'm thinking my hunting days are over." He tried a chuckle but it sounded hollow and Alex looked at him sadly, he looked down at his plate unseeingly. "I miss it sometimes, I'll admit. I miss it cuz it's something I know how to do." He paused, thought about it more. "Or I did. I'm rusty as hell."

His sister just shrugged a little. "You could jump back on the bike, if you wanted to."

He shook his head, decided to see if he could draw out what she was thinking, try and get a feel for if, maybe, she was up for a family reunion. "Yeah, I dunno. I wouldn't want to unless it was the three of us again," he said, looking at her carefully for her reaction. "And with Sam not even sending a damn postcard to say he was outta Hell... I dunno. Kinda throws me off."

She nodded faintly and he couldn't tell if she was for or against the idea of the three of them hunting together again. "Yeah." She didn't invite him along to join her, Jamie and Glen, she didn't say anything else regarding the matter, and Dean realized, anew, that this was probably it. The three of them, living separate lives. Like normal grown up siblings did. He didn't like it, though. Still, he tried.

They ate for a few minutes without saying anything, then Dean cleared his throat. He'd been thinking, for the silent portion, about what normal grown up siblings did, or were supposed to do. He felt insanely awkward suggesting this though. "So listen, you should visit sometimes," he said, trying not to think about what a weird time it'd be, how he knew it would all be some endless awkward thing. "You could come and stay, spend some time with Lisa and Ben, me?"

Alex glanced up at him, less than enthused, probably thinking the same thing that he was. "Yeah, uh, maybe."

*Nope.* He couldn't do this—he'd tried, but it wasn't right. Dean huffed and set down his silverware, leveled her with a serious gaze, deciding to just be a hundred percent honest, tell her how it was—because if he didn't, he'd never know one way or the other. And more importantly, neither would she. "Okay, look," he said intensely, full of earnestness. "I'm gonna lay it out there. You say the word, Alex... I'm there. With you. Jamie and Glen, they're nice, whatever but—they're not family. They're not me."

He saw a flicker in her eyes, saw how what he said affected her. She looked down, trying to hide it
Dean looked at her sadly. "I know there were bad times but we always had each other's backs, right?" He paused, trying to get her to look at him. "And I mean, didn't the good outweigh the bad? In the long run?" He felt like he was literally holding his heart out to her and begging her not to squash it.

So when she looked at him with eyes that were maybe a little shinier than a minute ago and nodded, he felt himself get equally emotional. "It did," she said simply.

Dean cleared his throat, stabbed another sausage, tried to get it together. After a couple more minutes, he decided to chance asking her about what Jamie'd told him two months ago. Something he'd been wondering about. "Hey, so Jamie said something to me—like you'd done some jacked up stuff to some Kitsunes or something, what was that about?"

Alex smiled softly, almost reminiscently, down at her plate, and Dean felt slightly taken aback. "I've always been a little twisted," she said vaguely, looked at him with unreadable eyes. "You know that."

They all had been, honestly. And something urged Dean not to ask about it anymore. Not yet. Instead, he backpedaled, switching subjects. "She seems like she's really chilled out. Gotten cool."

Alex looked at him briefly as she took another bite of eggs and chicken. "Who, Jamie? Yeah. She's not bad."

Dean paused, looking at Alex carefully. "And that Glen guy. What's his deal?"

There was a notable reaction to the question—immediate aggravation. "He's annoying as hell and never there when you need him to be." Something about her tone, combined with his impression of Glen from two months ago made Dean look at his sister sharply.

"He a problem?"

Alex gave him a look. "Dean."

"I'm just asking," Dean said, slightly defensive, because he wasn't being unreasonable. "Got weird vibes from him."

Alex smiled sort of sadly at her brother. "You get weird vibes from every guy who comes within ten feet of me."

Dean got quiet for a minute, decided to take his chances. "Speaking of, uh… you heard from Cas lately?"

He saw how hurt and confusion flitted across her face, how she immediately became quietly distressed. She attempted to act nonchalant, focused on her food for a second, uselessly slicing at chicken with the side of her form. "I've seen him once all year. When he got me outta that jam with Nandriel." Her jaw tightened and she looked out of the window again, stopped fiddling with her food. She looked so much older in that moment. "Other than that… he won't answer. I don't know why."

As opposed as he'd been to the angel and his sister being romantically involved, as much crap as he'd given the two of them, seeing how heartbroken she clearly was—and still, after almost a year—Dean meant it when he told her, "I'm sorry."
She tried to scoff and laugh it off but it was a miserable attempt and she got quiet then looked at him in clear brokenhearted disquiet. "You were right," she said, and her voice was soft, hurt. "I think you were right. About everything." She looked down and he saw how much pain she was in.

He didn't know what else to do. One of her hands rested beside her plate and he reached over, put his hand over hers, tried to reassure her. "It'll be okay," he said, wishing he could guarantee that, but not sure really. "Give it time."

She again tried to laugh, but her eyes glittered with the beginnings of tears. "Do I have any other choice?" she asked, and he saw how hard this was for her. He wished she wasn't so tenderhearted, wished he knew how to take away the pain. It must have been a hard year for her—thinking Sam was dead, Cas ditching out like an asshole… and going through it alone, with strangers. She'd needed someone, and he could have been that someone. It hurt—this entire horrible situation that had ripped through the Winchester family.

Alex drew her hand away from him, settled back into her booth and looked at him silently for a long minute, seeming to be thinking about telling him something. "I really shouldn't have pulled a gun on you," she said, and he heard how guilty she felt about it, how upset she still was. "Or said the things I said."

Dean decided he had drawn enough pain out of her for that day and besides, he'd forgiven her. It had been a crazy time and they had both done crazy things. "It's okay. I deserved all of that," he told her, refusing to make her feel worse. Turning the conversation back to lightness, he sat back and wiggled his eyebrows at her, cracked a grin, the kind he knew she found impossible to resist. "Personally, I think you should have shot me."

There it was. A small and hesitant, bittersweet smile. She tried to hide it. "You're not funny," she said, even though she was clearly cheered by the gesture.

"I'm hilarious," he corrected playfully, then picked up a couple slices of bacon, held them out to her. "Want some of my bacon?" He put it on her plate without an answer, chuckled. "I know you do."

She looked at him with that same hesitant smile—like she thought she shouldn't be smiling but couldn't help it. That had been his job throughout the years… keeping her and Sam smiling and okay through the shit storms they'd faced.

For the first time in eleven months, Dean knew that he was somewhere he really did belong. And maybe it wasn't for long, because he'd be with Lisa and Ben again soon, but for now, he took it all in. As they made their way to Sioux Falls, Dean would make a million excuses to stop at this place and that place, essentially he dragged his feet, prolonging the visit for as long as he could, trying to hang onto the life he'd lost as long as he could, trying to pretending that it was like it used to be: just him, his sister, and the open road.

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Three Days Later

Tired from an eleven hour drive back and weary from all the thoughts in her mind, Alex knocked on the door to room two-thirteen. "It's me, Jamie," she said, hefting her bag on her shoulder again. She heard movement within the room and stifled a yawn. She'd barely slept the past three days, had been focused on spending as much time with Dean as possible. It had taken them nearly twenty-four hours to make the twelve hour trip to Sioux Falls, because Dean had dragged his feet and then insisted they stay and eat at a motel, get a pizza and beer. It had been like old times… watching cartoons and then some old episodes of the A-Team. It had been surreal, Alex kept
catching herself getting really comfortable with it, then realizing this was temporary, she couldn't get used to it. Still. They'd made peace. It had been really hard saying goodbye, though.

He'd said to her, more than once, that all she had to do was say the word. So she refused, because she really did believe that Dean should have the normal life he'd found.

This was the way it was gonna be: Dean was with Lisa and Ben, Alex was with Jamie and Glen, Sam was… with that Campbell bunch. It was depressing as hell, the more she thought about it. Both Sam and Cas had ditched her. Purposefully. She was pretty sure about that now.

The motel room door swung open and instead of Jamie, there was Glen—cracking a crooked grin when he saw that it was her. He was wearing a black button up, sleeves rolled halfway up, dark jeans, and had a beer in hand—he looked like he'd never been gone at all. She was surprised into stillness. "You're back!"

"Just got in a few hours ago," he said, stepping aside to let her in and gesturing for her to come inside. He shut the door behind her when she was in.

"Where's your sister?" Alex asked, noticing the distinct lack of Jamie in the room.

"Went to go get some food," he said offhandedly, following her into the room. "Need some help with that?"

She ignored his offer and slung her bag down on a bed, turned around to look at him. Glen was a talker, so she went ahead and asked before he could start bragging. "How was… wherever you went?" All she knew was he'd been 'overseas.'

He smiled to himself, and he seemed to be pleasantly reminiscent. "Paris was great. Munich, loved it. Venice…” he shrugged, made a face, "sorta bored me."

Alex looked at him with reserved amusement. She wasn't sure if he were joking or serious. "Of course it did."

He shrugged with dramatic humility, then looked at her significantly. "Jamie told me about Dean and Sam. Crazy times."

Ha. That was putting it lightly. "Yeah, crazy times," she replied cynically, and turned around, began to look through her bag.

"So, I gotta know…” he said, coming up to stand beside her. He sounded pretty serious.

She glanced at him. "What?"

Never mind—he wasn't serious. He cracked a grin, his gray eyes crinkling up in anticipation. "On a scale of nine to ten, how much did you miss me?"

Alex stopped, gave him a pointed look, then walked over to the little motel dresser and stuck some of her shirts in there. He made an impressed face, watching her reaction. He chuckled. "That much huh?" he asked, not deterred, as usual. He walked over to his matching black bags, dug around, and she glanced into the mirror that was on the dresser, watched him there behind her. "Swiped you something while I was over there," he said, much to Alex's chagrin. What now?

He came back over to her, a sparkly silver and diamond something in his hand. "No big deal, saw it, thought of you," he said, and held it out in the palm of his hand. Alex balked. It was ridiculously ornate, a diamond necklace that obviously spared no expense.
"No big deal?" She repeated, then looked at him warningly. "Do I even wanna know where you stole this from?"

He seemed to like her reaction. "Mm... probably not." He smirked, self-assured and cocky, then acted playfully wounded at her bitchface. "Come on, Alex, this necklace is awesome!" he protested.

She just made a face. Why me? He did this often—brought her and Jamie alike things from his shadier hobby—stealing. He usually seemed to stick to the United States, stealing art and valuable from rich old money then reselling it, but the past month or so he'd been overseas, getting his thrills over there, she guessed. The weird thing was he didn't even need to steal, not for money anyway—Alex knew he and Jamie had both inherited some huge amount of money when their mom died, she knew they had a mansion somewhere, just not where—and while Jamie seemed to want to avoid that life completely, Glen wanted to steal from those who lived it. It seemed more like thrill-seeking than necessity, and it made Alex a little uncomfortable. Jamie didn't like it either, from what she'd gathered.

She didn't take the necklace from Glen, instead crossing her arms. "Okay, first... what on earth possessed you to get this for me?" She gestured with one hand at the thing. "I mean, does this look like something I'd wear?"

He shrugged, looking at her with eyes too intense for her liking. "You should wear it. It's the kind of thing a queen would wear." Cue another eye roll from Alex, then Glen cracking a grin as he grabbed her shoulders, turned her around to face the dresser mirror, despite her soft protest. "Here, try it on," he said, and gave her no choice, looped it over her head, let it rest across her upper chest, just below the collarbone. He was close to her, and she was uncomfortable at his closeness. He fixed the clasp, fastening it around her, then leaned down a little, looked at her in the mirror, smiled briefly. "It looks great on you," he said, his voice a little softer and deeper than usual. "Knew it would." His hands rested on either of her arms and she was trying not to overreact. He wasn't being weird or creepy, he was semi-animated and friendly now, she was just being paranoid. "I thought you needed an upgrade," he said. "From that penny necklace you wear."

At that comment, Alex huffed and turned, began to take the diamond necklace off as she walked off from him—she wore that penny around her neck because it had meaning. More meaning than all the diamonds in the world. Cas had given it to her—one of the only things he'd had in his pocket at the time, but it had been his, and he'd given it to her. He gifted her with it that day after she'd almost died in the croatoan attack. Early this year, she'd drilled a tiny hole into it and strung it onto a little chain. She wore it long, too, it usually wasn't visible, it usually rested down below her shirt. Close to her heart. She wondered, offhandedly, if she should stop wearing it. If what it meant wasn't real anymore. Had it ever been? Had he really loved her like she thought?

Glen watched Alex storm off a few steps and take the necklace off. He was amused and chagrined alike at her typical spitfire reaction to anything he did for her and he shrugged his hands out expectantly. "Really? No 'thank you Glen? You're so thoughtful, Glen'?" He teased.

She looked back at him with a wan expression. "N-ope," she said in clipped tones. "Think I'll stick with my ragamuffin penny necklace but..." she smirked cynically at him, held up the diamond necklace. She pretended to be really thoughtful and contemplative and looked at the piece of jewelry with a dramatic frown. "I wonder how much this will sell for at the local pawn shop." She flashed him a facetious smile, wiggled her eyebrows at him just once, tried to act like the gesture meant nothing to her.

Glen wasn't upset, he had honestly expected as much and through an I should have known smile, he
shook his head and put a hand over his heart, pulled a wounded face. "Aw come on Winchester, you're breaking my heart," he said, looking at her with one of those little looks that was meant to charm her socks off.

"No I'm not," she replied blandly, giving him a half eye roll. He still hadn't managed to get a smile from her and he made an almost pouty face.

"Come on, Alex—what do you want from me?" he asked, lightheartedly playing up the hurt tones in his voice.

She didn't respond in kind at all. She seemed increasingly exasperated with him. "Nothing. I keep trying to tell you, nothing."

He dropped his more playful attitude for a minute, looked at her seriously, spoke softly. "Yeah you keep saying that but... I think we both know you want more than nothing from me." Just like he thought, for a minute, her expression confirmed it—she looked caught and vulnerable. His eyes searched hers, his voice dropped a little lower, he stepped a little closer, his eyes flickered down to her lips. "I keep thinking about that kiss, don't you?"

She got pissy again and put a hand on her hip, back up away from him, fixed him with a crazy look. "No." She looked at him like he was nuts, like she thought something was wrong with him. "On a scale of nine to ten, how stoned are you right now?" She demanded, trying to deflect his question, then shoved the necklace at him. "Keep this."

Glen didn't take it, relented a little. "Come on sweetheart, you can do whatever you want with it, don't give it back to me."

"I don't want it," she reiterated emphatically, and shoved it at him again. "You need to stop trying to get me to like you," she said gruffly. "I'm getting a little tired of it."

He still didn't take the necklace back, just looked at her coyly, realizing she wouldn't be so mad if he hadn't touched a nerve, hadn't brushed against the truth. She was so easy to tease, and he couldn't resist. "Am I wearing you down, Alex?" he asked lowly, looking at her knowingly.

She flung the necklace sideways, losing her temper, voice rising an octave. "You're pissing me off!"

He looked at her—flushed cheeks, fast breathing, pinched features, glittering eyes and he grinned crookedly at her, enjoying how easy it was to goad her on. "God, you're so cute when you're mad," he said, knowing she'd flip her lid and get even more agitated when he said that to her.

Just like he thought, she gave him a bitchy expression, an exasperated eyeroll, and then silently turned to leave and walk out of the room. He watched her go, not bothering to even try and be appropriate, a smile tugging on his lips as he let her know as much. "Hate to see you leave, love to watch you go," he called after her friskily and she threw a crude insult his way before she left the room. He just laughed to himself and ran a hand through his hair, craned his neck to see her pass through the window outside on the sidewalk.

It was kind of hot actually, how one minute she acted like she couldn't stand him—then he'd catch her looking at him sidelong like she was thinking about wanting him, fighting with herself over it. Glen enjoyed a little game of cat and mouse as much as any red-blooded guy did, but... he was getting close to feeling almost impatient.

He wondered if she was a lights off or lights on kind of girl. Well, he'd find out soon enough. He
smiled to himself.

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**Heaven**

It was all violence and chaos and disorder, endless conflict, death. Castiel was wearied down to his core and ready for it all to be over—however, no end seemed to be on the horizon, and the realization that everything had changed forever burdened him, wore him down. Heaven was eroding; it was a mere echoing impression of what it had been before. Cracked and crumbling; the days in Paradise bled into each other. The battles dragged on for what seemed an eternity and just as soon as one skirmish ended, another broke out. It effectively trapped Castiel in Heaven, crushed him underneath the weight of the duties he'd chained himself to the day he declared open war. But that particular day, there finally seemed to be a lull, and Cas called his lieutenant the instant he realized he had been given an opportunity. Rachel appeared before him. She, like him, looked weared and worn. "You called me?" she asked.

"Yes," Cas said shortly. He didn't have much time and he was close to desperate. "I need to return to earth briefly."

Rachel's expression changed, she tilted her head to the side, frowning a little, becoming perplexed and dubious. "...why? I thought you said it was too dangerous to see her right now."

She raised a good point, and Castiel conceded it without question. "It is, but..." he trailed off heavily, losing his certainty as he descended into deep thought. There was an *instinct*, a gut feeling that he *had* to see Alex, and *now*. "I have no choice. I can't explain. I have a sensation of..." his frown deepened measurably, "...foreboding." Rachel only looked more confused and then mildly disagreeable. Castiel paid it no mind. "I have to go. Not for long. But in my absence, I'm leaving you in command." He turned to leave but Rachel stopped him, taking hold of his arm. He down looked at her hand oddly, then back into her face, bemused—she was going to question an order?

"Castiel... brother." She studied him carefully, let go of him, and he could see that she was upset and perplexed. "You can't leave us now. You shouldn't be leaving at all." She paused and frowned at him, first giving the appearance of concern, then of rebuke. "You've been unfocused... distracted... making mistakes." A pointed pause and look. "Since the last time you went to earth."

Her words struck guilt into Cas's conscience—he knew she was right. Rachel saw him falter, pressed him. "I can't help but draw the conclusion that this dalliance of yours is harming you and threatening the outcome of this war."

Bristling at the audacious comment and what it implied about Alex, Cas withdrew from his sister-in-arms and set her with a cold stare that was bordering on a glare. Whatever guilt he'd experienced was gone in the place of animosity. "I don't expect you to understand this, Rachel," he said churlishly, unhappy with her presumption. "I only expect you to do what I tell you." Again, he turned to go.

Again, her voice stopped him. She was louder this time, a little more urgent and assertive. "I've read the celestial commandments, Castiel. In depth. Perhaps you should, too." Her voice rose in pitch a little. "Do you even know what your actions have cost? What you've set into motion?"

Castiel turned and looked at her sharply, suspicious. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

Rachel raised her chin slightly, narrowed her eyes slightly. "I went to the throne room and read the commandments at length, something you should have done, I think, a long time ago." There was abruptly a certain note of haughty warning in her voice. "You should count yourself fortunate at
how Heaven is in disarray. Under the old regime... you would have been cast out like *Lucifer* for
what you've done with her." Castiel looked at her with mounting trepidation—he wasn't sure what
she was getting at, but again, a strange gut instinct came over him. An instinct of dread. Rachel was
lecturing him at this point: "If an angel should fall to a human and sin with them—*sexually*—" she
said that word with a clear tone of disgust—"it results in eternal damnation of the human's soul and
exile for the angel. Both are cast out of Heaven, *forever.*"

*Eternal damnation?* Castiel faltered. No—he had never heard that before—that couldn't be true...!
Shock and dread surged through him, panic rose at the blindsiding thought that maybe the one he
loved had no Heaven because of *him*—because of what he'd done with her. He could have fallen
down from the amount of sheer horror crashing over him—and all he could think was that he
would *never* have touched Alex even *once* if he'd thought she would pay the price of his
transgressions, if he had known this. Similarly horrifying, the thought that it was much too late,
that he couldn't take back what they'd done together. What could he do now? His mind seemed to
whirl around inside itself, a tornado of alarmed thoughts, of stumbling half-ideas of how to fix this,
and then after that was the question of *could* he fix this? How could he save her from what he'd
done? He didn't know, but he *had* to find a way, *had* to. Wasn't it enough that he had caused her to
spend most of her life mute? Now he found out that he was the cause of her eternal damnation? All
of that and the memory of seeing himself killing her in the year 2013 utterly destroyed him
internally. He was a curse, an obscenity, a fool—

Oblivious to his absolute dismay, Rachel fixed him with a imperious look. "Is that why you're
fighting this war?" she asked, assuming the opposite of what was true, interrupting his dread-filled
thoughts. "To save yourself from exile, Castiel?"

He bristled anew, angry at levels he didn't even know possible. "I'm fighting this *war*—" he said
loudly, then stopped short. He almost said *because I need to save her.* He caught himself, though.
"Because Raphael must be defeated and the apocalypse must not happen."

Rachel took in a deep breath, measuring herself as she looked around at the Heaven surrounding
them—a playground—and then back to him. "Yes. That's what you keep saying." She implied what
was true: that Cas was hedging, not being totally honest about his motivations.

He looked at her silently, jaw gritted, heart pounding uncomfortably fast as he struggled to
comprehend and process what she'd told him about the celestial commandments and the
punishments that were on his and Alex's shoulders. He didn't care about the fate that awaited him
—let Heaven cast him down—but knowing he had caused his Alex never-ending condemnation
was the most despicable feeling he had ever experienced. It inspired panic and a call to action.
More than ever, he needed to find Joshua and try to speak with God, more than ever he needed to
—*laugh!*—he and Rachel both winced in unison as a loud voice called to both of them specifically
—Ezekiel, a foot soldier, urging them to come quickly. *No,* Castiel thought despondently, knowing
what the call meant. That he was needed, yet again, that another battle was about to begin. Rachel
looked at him as if she were half-sympathetic, half-triumphant.

"See?" She asked softly. "You can't leave now—you can't leave until this war is won. Your place
is here—God chose you for this. You're our commander—not *me*—you have to lead us and remain
focused on our mission. You have to stop allowing this little affair of yours get in the way. You're
an *angel.* You always will be. And your loyalty is to us."

Her words touched a nerve he hadn't even known to exist. "My loyalty is mine to decide," Castiel
snapped, emotions raging. Rachel seemed surprised at his negative, impassioned reaction. "That's
what we're fighting for," he reminded her. "Freedom from the old ways." His voice was gruff with
barely-withheld hostility—because to him, in that moment, Rachel was the one holding him back
from Alex. That, and he was so angry, so filled with abhorrence for himself and his mistakes, that the only tone of voice he could summon was baleful, the only thing he could feel was fury with himself and despair at what he had learned that day.

Rachel looked at him long and hard. "As true as that may be… that we're fighting for a new order in Heaven and for freedom… some things stand forever, Castiel." She almost seemed to pity him. "Do you really think you can change what God has written into the fabric of eternity?"

Castiel's reaction was not what she had expected. "If I have to," he snapped, "I will." He met her surprised eyes with a deadly glare. "If he objects, let God try to stop me." His eyes narrowed deeply, his jaw tightened. "No one else will—and even our father himself might not succeed." He turned away brusquely, began to leave.

Rachel's face was filled with disillusion and horror. "Castiel—you're close to blasphemy… this girl you're so consumed by isn't more important than the fate of the whole world!"

Castiel looked back at her unwaveringly, his face stormy and his voice trembling with dark fury. "She is to me."

And without a further word, he disappeared from there, answering Ezekiel's call, his various angers and fears driving him to fight with more brutality than normal... the harrowing thought that he was the cause of everything that would destroy the girl he loved refusing to leave his mind even for a single second.
"Father asked us, 'What was God's noblest work?' Anna said, 'men,' but I said 'babies.' Men are often bad, but babies never are."
- Louisa May Alcott

Two Months Later

Alex remembered that fateful night very often… it had, after all, changed her life completely, setting her onto the path she was on now, setting her at the top of a downward spiral. It stuck in her mind like glue, a memory she couldn't get rid of: it remained in her mind perfectly preserved in excruciating detail. Chugging down a gallon of stolen demon's blood, sick and gagging the entire time, barely being able to keep it down, feeling its effects immediately: a dizzying rush of adrenaline and strength, a feeling of being outside of her head, a sensation of invincibility. It had all been to try and kill Lucifer. And in the end, Lucifer had instead killed her. And, Alex had thought for about a year. Sam too.

But he wasn't dead. Two months ago to the day, she'd learned Sam had been alive this whole damn time. The grief and guilt she'd shouldered the time between his supposed 'death' and the day he suddenly just walked into her motel room? All of that pain had been unnecessary, and it made her resent and hate Sam almost. How could he let her feel that way, let her think he was dead and gone, and that it was her fault? How? It bothered her on every level and she had to know: what had changed? She wasn't sure. But it had her all kinds of uneasy and worried about what happened to her twin. She hadn't heard from him since that night with the djinn attack.

However, Dean was a different story. Alex and her oldest brother called each other every few days. She was even supposed to go visit him and Lisa in a couple weeks. He had just moved himself and Lisa and Ben to a new and 'safer' neighborhood. Alex was a little trepidatious about the upcoming visit, to say the least—she wasn't sure what Lisa and Ben would think of her, or if she'd fit into the family environment. What did normal people do in their free time, anyway? She had no clue.

Things were sort of predictable on the hunting front except there had been a large number of vampires around, more than before. So that was interesting. Another interesting thing: Glen had stuck around for almost two solid months now—solid for Glen, that is. He drifted off a few times a week to 'visit friends' and 'conduct business,' but he'd been around more and had actually since the necklace incident, and had been surprisingly… not as annoying. In fact, almost likable. Almost like a different guy. Jamie was the same as always: focused on jobs, hypercritical of her younger brother, and hard to really read most days.

Alex checked her watch and paced back and forth a few steps in the motel room she was in, wondering where the Wards even were. She'd expected them an hour ago. Maybe they got delayed. She took out her phone to call one of them, flipped it open, then stopped as always. Her phone background was the same one it had been all year. The only picture she possessed of Castiel. She'd taken it with her phone the morning she'd woken up beside him, literally one day before the world went to shit, before he left. In the cell phone snapshot, he was laying in bed beside her, on his stomach, his cheek resting against his bare arms, which were folded over a pillow. He wasn't looking into the camera—he was looking slightly up, at where she was—and smiling at her in that soft, barely-there way he had. The photo was crappy, grainy, slightly blurred. But her heart twisted and clenched at the sight of him, at the sight of this picture, at the memory of that night together.
Often, she wrestled with herself over whether or not she should keep this picture, because all it did was pain her. And for that matter, she wondered if she should keep wearing the penny he gave her or holding out hope in general. Some days she really could let herself still believe he'd be back, that there was some kind of explanation, that he hadn't abandoned her...

Other days, she knew he was gone for good, just knew it, and despained. Wasn't time supposed to heal all wounds? Why was it getting worse? She wanted to delete the photo but moreso delete the pain that came with it. It was crazy how everything had been so perfect that morning in the motel —waking up beside each other, happy, content, almost shy together. He'd loved her. He'd loved her.

Emotions welling up from within and Alex looked upward at the motel ceiling. She didn't even have it in her, but she decided. One last try. Because if she never asked, then she'd never know. "Cas?" She paused, her voice was a mere, trembling whisper. "Castiel?" Saying his name aloud made her almost crumble. She took a minute to gather herself, trying to be brave. "Listen. I... I know I haven't said anything in a few months... maybe more than that. I don't wanna bother you if you're... trying to send me a hint so... this is the last time I'll call, okay?" Hearing herself say that out loud made her feel ill. Her voice rose slightly in pitch.

"I don't know what I did, or, or what happened but... I really wish you would tell me so I can know why this is... why you're gone." Silence. "If you're coming back someday, please. I need to know. Just... just give me a sign." She looked at the ceiling appealingly, getting desperate. "Am I supposed to walk away? Is it over? You said... we said..." she trailed off, remembering and wounded by the memories of his words to her. The room was silent, and she realized there was no one coming to answer her call. How sad, strange, and small she felt. He wasn't even listening. Or maybe he was dead. She swallowed, and it hurt, and she didn't understand, she hung her head and looked at the floor. This was misery, all over again. "You used to come when I called," she whispered, then saw a wet spot suddenly appear on the carpet. A teardrop. She looked upwards again, unable to dredge up the ability to be angry. All she felt was loss and disillusion and utter loneliness. This was goodbye, the goodbye she'd been trying to run away from this whole year. "I hope you're okay wherever you are," she managed. "I still love you. Even if..." she trailed off. You don't love me.

She looked at the picture on her phone again and ran her thumb over the screen where his face was, trying to touch him and realizing how pathetic she was. And fighting back tears, she went to her pictures folder, selected that picture, scrolled through the options menu. Selected delete. Her thumb hovered over the button and then she pressed it with a horrible feeling careening through her. A prompt came up: Are you sure? Left key for yes, right key for no. Her heart was hammering sickeningly fast, she was trying to make herself do this, stop holding on, let go, escape the pain. Yes or no? She stared at the picture with rising emotion, not able to bring herself to do it... but with every ounce of willpower she had, she moved her thumb over the left key. Push it. Just delete it. Erase it. Forget him. Stop clinging onto what's gone.

And abruptly, the screen winked out, lit up, and began to ring, an unrecognized number on her screen. Startled, Alex let it ring a few times, then answered, shaken up from the picture dilemma. "H-hello?"

"Hey, it's me," said the last voice she'd been expecting to hear.

She nearly did a double-take, becoming jarred for a whole new reason. "...Sam?"

"Yeah, listen, I need your help," he said, not bothering with pretense of any kind. His short, hurried tone made her pause.
"Nice to talk to you too," she said, feeling suspicious. She cleared her throat, sniffed, wiped her nose with the back of her hand, began to pace the room all over again from the anxiety she was experiencing. "With what?"

"A baby," he said.

Her eyebrows shot up high and she stopped in her tracks—had she heard right? She paused, thinking she'd misheard and was about to sound dumb. "A... baby?"

"A baby," Sam confirmed, his tone inscrutable.

"What baby?" she asked, flabbergasted. What, exactly, had her brother been up to this past year?!

"I don't know, just—a baby!" He exclaimed, sounding frustrated and short on patience. "Samuel and I are working this job where babies keep disappearing, I found one and now I don't know what to do with it."

"And I would?" Alex asked, implying with her tone of voice that he'd lost his mind.

"Better than me!" He exclaimed in growing urgency.

"Sam—I know nothing about babies," Alex told him clearly and pointedly—he knew this, or should... "Why are you calling me about this?"

She could hear her twin huff in exasperation. "Fine, whatever," he said brusquely. "I'll get Dean's help." Alex paused, frowning at the clicking sound she heard. Was that... did he just hang up on her?

"Hello?" She looked at her phone—yeah, he hung up on her. "Rude," she muttered and pocketed her phone, a little off kilter from the abrupt phone call. Temporarily she'd forgotten about the Cas picture in favor of mulling over her twin. He sounded like Sam. But... why was he so thoughtless and just off? Disturbed, Alex bit her thumbnail absently, thinking. The motel room door opened—in walked a familiar tall figure and she looked at him sidelong. Well finally.

"Sup," Glen greeted distractedly, typing something on his phone. He paused, noticing her expression, seemed curious. "Everything okay with you?" He lowered his phone, focused on her, then pocketed it, stood there and crossed his arms, looked at her closely.

"Yeah, fine," she said tersely, looked behind him—no Jamie. "Where's your sister?"

Glen sauntered in, walked past her, heading for the mini fridge. "I just talked to her a minute ago, she said she might have found a job—some people over in Jackson said their house is haunted. She already headed over. It's not too far from here." He cracked a typical grin, playfully wiggled his eyebrows once, as if he was thinking the hunt might be up his alley. At the same time, he was grabbing a dark beer out of the fridge. "Sounds like fun to me."

Not really in the mood, Alex crossed her arms, a little sullen. "Fun. Right."

"She said we need to meet her over there stat, so..." he jerked a thumb backwards over his shoulder then cracked open his beer. "I'll go check us out of the room, you down?"

Absently, Alex nodded and shrugged, off in other thoughts, gaze somewhere down and far away. "Yeah, I guess."

He looked at her and seemed to empathize with her. He came over, beer forgotten in his left hand.
"Hey," he said, seeming to appeal to her and almost scold her at once. "You're depressed." He set her with a determined look. "You know what, let's go get a drink—a real drink, somewhere cool, on me. We can meet up with my stick-in-the-mud sister later. You need to have some fun."

Getting annoyed and thinking she saw where this was going… Alex turned, grabbed her duffel bag up off the bed. "Nah."

"Alex. I get it," he said, somewhere behind her. He sounded like he genuinely cared about her, a lot, and it made her feel worse than ever. "You're trying to get over someone. Why won't you let anyone help you?"

Still facing away from him, she wiped all emotion off her face and turned around, gave him a fairly hostile expression. "I don't need help, okay?" She asked rudely. "Especially from you."

Mildly crestfallen, he looked down, a rare display of what appeared to be genuine chagrin. He sighed, looked to the side and thought hard. "Look: Alex. I may joke around and flirt a lot and I know sometimes it's too much but…" he looked at her frankly, spoke to her gently. "I care about you a lot, you're… you're special. I like you, I've liked you a long time." He smiled a little because they both knew he hadn't been shy about saying so, either. He wet his lips, kept speaking, but was almost nervous—and she'd never seen him act nervous and it somehow made her nervous, too. "I mean it's obvious there's something here. Something worth… trying out." He swallowed, looked at her openly. "I just want a chance."

Alex was both uncomfortable and flattered… and felt a little bad for her rude tone a minute previously. Relenting a little, she tried to let him down gently because she felt bad. "Glen—you're sweet." She shook her head, too chastened to look in his eyes very well. "But I'm not interested." She stepped away. "I'll meet you there, okay?"

She had her bag and slung the strap over her shoulder again, attempting to walk past him. But he set down his beer and moved to block her way, his hands held up in a 'stop' gesture. She looked up at him—he was a full head taller than her, and then a little—and he was getting a little desperate by all appearances. 'I'm—I'm not trying to push you, and I'm sorry if this is too forward, but let me finish," he pleaded, and there was a vulnerability there that she'd never seen before. Intrigued and cautious, she watched him carefully.

Then he reached out and touched her jawline softly—she almost jumped at the gentle touch, not sure of how to react—he looked at her soulfully, like he thought she was beautiful. It reminded her of how Cas always looked at her, and something in her broke a little bit. "You're a beautiful girl but… that's not the only reason I like you so damn much." He was laying it all out on the line and sounded nervous. "You're strong and cool and we get along good, never a dull moment, right?" He smiled, trying to get her to do the same, then saw her discomfort with his touch and took his hand away, seeming to beat himself for overstepping his bounds, internally. He kept going, visibly struggling to form words and put his thoughts together. "What I'm trying to say… sorry, I'm not good at this stuff but… I think we'd be great together. I'd finally have something to keep me in one place awhile, you know?"

What? Not sure what had gotten into him, more than a little blindsided by his open attitude and earnestness, she dodged everything he'd said, reverting to being a little more snide. "I think, personally, your sister should be enough motivation for you to stay in one place, don't you?"

He let out a soft, cynical little chuckle, looked down. "Yeah, well, she's not." His eyes darted up to hers. "But you are."

Was she insane, or was she really starting to believe him? And why wasn't she sure what to think of
that fact? "Do you really mean that?" she asked him, equal parts curious and reluctant—she didn't want the answer to be yes, she was scared for a reason she couldn't name and thinking of that picture of Castiel on her phone made pain blossom in her all over.

But Glen's answer was affirmative, and she believed him. "Yeah."

Taken aback by this vulnerable side of her friend, Alex was confused. Maybe he wasn't the idiot she'd always taken him for. She shook her head, looked down, feeling hollow inside, in denial that she could actually consider taking him up on any kind of romantic anything. Because… Cas. "I'm not ready for a relationship," she said softly. Then she thought of her goodbye to a silent ceiling a minute ago. "Not yet."

She felt his hand on her shoulder. Gentle, warm, and it seemed comforting to her. She wanted to yank away from the touch because it seemed wrong, she wanted to lean into the touch because she was so deprived of affection that she could scream. So she just remained frozen, feeling his thumb brush back and forth once or twice in a comforting gesture. "I'll be here when you're ready," he said, looking hopeful, then cracking a lopsided grin, tried to lighten the mood with a half-joking tone. "Just… don't make me wait too long?"

She realized she was really, really thinking about this, reconsidering him, and thinking about maybe giving him a real chance. And that freaked her out completely. How could you?! Her inner monologue berated her. She brushed past him, trying to hide everything she felt. "See you in Jackson," she said with a forced calm, and she walked out the door, not looking back.

Glen watched her go, took in a deep breath and then pulled his phone back out and finished writing the text he was about to send to… Sarah? No. Sadie. Some girl he met at a bar last night who liked bad boys and was asking him to come over now. He saw no reason not to; he never turned down an opportunity. However, the thing he liked the most was the thrill of the chase, and Sadie made it easy, too easy—he'd had a hundred girls like her before, which was why Alex… well, she was one of his favorites… she was unique. The careful persona he'd worked over on her was one of his best. To Alex he was a roguish and charming heart-of-gold hunter who had no filter and was by appearances sort of shallow and freewheeling, adrift in life, not interested in anything that would last or be of consequence… but little by little, he'd let little instances of vulnerability and uncertainty slip out at a steady tide culminating with what he'd said tonight. Just as predicted, his carefully chosen words and actions had drawn out the exact reactions he'd expected. He was wearing her down just like he knew he would, and it wouldn't be long at all now. He figured a couple more of those carefully-timed bleeding heart moments and she'd give in, let him do what he wanted. Maybe a week more, tops, and he'd blow her mind, make her forget every other guy she'd ever had. He would be able to say he was better than a fucking angel, how many guys got to say that? He smirked to himself. He was looking forward to it, no doubt… but in the mean time… he finished writing out the text to Sadie.

I'll be right there baby ;-)" he hit send.

Glen didn't see, but an angel came to the room just a few moments later, in search of the one who had called to him just minutes ago. Castiel was mildly wounded from being locked into hand-to-hand combat with Raphael, had heard her asking for him, and while her words had been garbled because of the archangels closeness, it had seemed important, so he had torn himself away from the battlefield after eluding Raphael. But she wasn't there. There was only a tall blond man on his phone.

"Yeah, Jennifer, sorry but I have a paper due in the morning, I'm heading to study group like right
now—” he chuckled. "Very funny, but I'm not too old to be in college, ever heard of a Master's? Mm-hmm. I can't come over tonight, is what I'm saying. But in a couple days, for sure. I'm there. You, me, some wine… the fireplace..." he chuckled again. "Hey, so, don't get too weirded out or anything, but… I keep thinking about it and I think I'm ready to meet your family. Is it too soon? No. I think so too. Yeah. Sweetheart, I agree completely." He laughed again, sounding carefree and affable, kind. Castiel remembered this man—Alex had been with him before, that time she'd been unwell. Cas wasn't sure why he got such negative feelings from this particular man... but he still did.

Castiel began to look around, nearby, for the one he loved. But she was nowhere to be found, and soon, the angels called his name once more. The emptiness and longing he felt inside grew even wider and deeper. The need to see her face again was so great that it was painful.

The Next Day

"Seems like one of the family members is hiding something for sure," Jamie said, packing more herbs into a hex bag she was making. "I mean vengeful spirits don't just try and get revenge for no reason. One of those people did something to Beth Sanders."

Alex nodded offhandedly, whetting the blade of her scimitar against a sharpening rod with quick, light motions. "Someone's definitely lying."

Jamie set down the completed hex bag, started on another one, raising her eyebrows. "Looks like we're gonna be doing some surveillance."

"You mean spying," Alex corrected grudgingly, immediately becoming a little deflated. She realized that's what those hex bags must be—Jamie's own little witchy phone taps, in so many words.

Jamie chuckled softly at Alex's predictable distaste for anything besides fighting. "Call it what you want," she said reasonably, stuffing a moonstone down into the hex bag. "It gets the job done."

"Spying is boring," Alex said with great amounts of pointed factuality.

"Hunting isn't all slashing and hacking," Jamie reminded with a note of playful lecturing in her voice. "You know this."

Alex waved her sharpened scimitar through the air, slashing it fast and hard enough that it made little vwoom sounds. "Slashing and hacking is my favorite part," she said, unaware of the little smile on her face as she played with her deadly weapon. When she noticed Jamie's expression, she stopped. "What?"

The blonde's ice-blue gaze faltered away, her brief look of mistrust was gone. "Nothing." Jamie began to return to her task, then stopped and sighed in resignation, seeming to have a change of heart. "Alright. Sometimes..." she held a hand out, palm up, for emphasis. "You worry me a little. You get this look in your eye... you get a little..." she scratched the side of her head, searching for the right word. She looked Alex in the eye when she found the right term. "Sadistic."

Alex felt mildly chastened, because it was true. But she didn't feel entirely guilty. "Yeah, maybe I do." She got up to pack her blade back into her weapons bag and get out from under her friend's very piercing gaze. Jamie seemed to sense Alex's discomfort and dropped the subject.

"Anyway, I finally heard from Glen while you were showering, forgot to tell you," Jamie said,
back to work on hex bags again. "He's on his way to us, supposedly. And hey, hand me my duffel while you're over there?"

Alex grabbed the bag and tossed it at Jamie, who caught it just barely with an *oof* sound. "Yeah?"
Alex asked, busying herself with sliding the blade of her scimitar into its leather holster. "Did he say where the hell he disappeared to *this* time?" She crouched down and put the weapon away. "He was supposed to be right behind me last night."

Jamie sighed, her displeasure thinly veiled. "Yeah, well, he said some buddy of his called to cash in a favor, needed some help with some project, I don't know; I don't care. He might be here later, he might not." She sounded over it. As usual. Jamie had low tolerance for Glen's ways.

Pushing herself up to stand, Alex turned around to look at Jamie again, who was digging in her bag for something. "Why do you keep him around anyway?" Alex asked, in a tone that suggesting she was joking. But there was an honest question buried there. "He was supposed to be right behind me last night." Jamie smirked down into her lap as she pulled out some iron rounds and laid them out beside herself. Was she cynical or bitter? It was hard to tell. "Yeah, he really is useless, mostly. But he's all I've got. And I'm all he's got. He's my little brother." There was a growing note of truth and confession in Jamie's voice. "Everyone else in our family is dead and gone. I can't just… abandon him." Alex almost thought Jamie would ask 'right?' after that. But she didn't, she remained quiet for a second, frowning in thought, then seeming to shake herself. She returned to her task. "At the end of the day, everyone should have someone they can rely on."

"He doesn't seem to have a problem leaving you high and dry," Alex pointed out.

Jamie didn't pause, but her classically beautiful features became a little stonier. "Yeah, well, that's just Glen, isn't it."

Alex was quiet a minute. "I can't figure him out."

"What's there to figure out?" Jamie asked, sarcastic, glancing at Alex sort of sharply. "He's a loser." It was said in what was meant to be jest, but Alex heard the grudge buried there.

"I'm serious," she said. She really wanted to know more about this guy, get a second opinion of him.

Jamie stopped what she was doing. The subject of her brother always seemed to make her like this, but usually, she avoided saying much of anything on the subject. A little irritated, Jamie shrugged, let her hands go up to her shoulders then slap back down onto her legs. "I dunno what to tell you. Glen is Glen. He... drives me crazy… never does anything right… he's never on time or consistent or worried about anything… he's spoiled and entitled and always has been… thinks he's God's gift to women… obviously I'm not the best person to ask, I mean, I love him—but… we've never really gotten along. He thinks I'm the world's biggest bitch for believing in things like responsibility and commitment and for expecting him to follow through on things." She attempted a cynical chuckle, it faltered. She sounded like she was trying to downplay herself. "I guess you could say there's some bad blood between us. My mom thought he was the 'perfect kid,' and me… I couldn't do *anything* right. So… I guess I still hold some grudges that are probably *way* past their expiration date." She seemed mad at herself almost, shoved something into the hex bag she was holding a little harder than she needed to. Not the usual calm, collected, and somewhat snarky Jamie.

"I know how that is," Alex muttered, thinking about all the grudges she held that were probably
really stupid to hold on to. She looked at the hunter she'd spent so much time with the past year, yet barely knew at all. She chanced a personal question, as this conversation was quickly becoming personal and not a lot of these happened. "So was your dad around, or…?"

Jamie shrugged like she didn't care, but Alex thought she saw that it was facetious. Jamie continued to speak in a nonemotional tone, even though it looked like she was thinking hard. "Ah, barely ever. He worked all the time, he was some big deal lawyer and when he was around, he wasn't interested in us kids. Any of us." Alex frowned, because that seemed to imply there had been more than just Jamie and Glen.

Jamie saw Alex's confusion, explained, and her voice softened, took on a note of mourning and great sadness. "We had another sister. Erin. She... she drowned when she was two. I would have been like eight at the time I guess... Glen was six. He was the one who found her." Jamie paused, eyes far away, expression rigid. "You don't forget something like that. Seeing your little sister's dead body in the water. I think maybe my brother's afraid to really love someone, after losing her, finding her the way he did. He seemed so... glazed over about it. And you know, Mom fucking going psycho and murdering Dad a few years later then committing suicide in prison however many years later... all that kinda does things to a person." She scoffed a little, maybe trying to dodge some personal pain of her own. Alex was shocked at the new information. "I think that's why he never fully commits to anything—he's scared to be invested, you know? He doesn't want to lose what he loves, so he runs away from everything." Alex thought maybe that was Jamie's dilemma, too, and Jamie seemed to realize everything she'd just said was highly revealing—she tried to backpedal, forcing a lighter, more easy going tone. "Wow, I am saying way too much."

Alex hesitated, then decided to share something personal, too, to maybe sort of stack the decks evenly. "When you found me at that bar or whatever earlier last year... the real reason I didn't wanna hunt with you at first was because I was trying to run away from my past. " Jamie looked at her curiously, sidelong almost. Alex shrugged, trying to think through it better. "Hunting reminded me of everything I lost. I thought it'd be easier not to face all that anger that I had inside." She swallowed and thought of all the crazy choices she'd made this year, all the things she'd done in the dark. "I think that's why I can get a little twisted sometimes," she said softly, almost mournful, to herself more than anyone else. "I'm angry. I'm so angry. And I'm angry that I'm angry." Alex almost laughed at herself, at how ridiculous her emotions and thoughts were, how sad and low she'd let herself get. "How does that make any damn sense? Angry that I'm angry," she muttered loudly, feeling that familiar emptiness, that constant feeling of being alone, even when people were right with her. She couldn't hold her false, self-deprecating smile anymore. "I just feel like... life isn't supposed to be the way it's turned out for me, you know?" She looked at her friend, who looked totally sympathetic, like she got it for sure.

"How's it supposed to be, then?" Jamie asked. Maybe because she wanted to know, too.

Alex let out a heavy breath, mouth pursed in thought, expression bitter. "That's the question. I thought I knew. But I don't." What was life supposed to be like? She shook her head shallowly. "Just... not like this." An uncomfortable silence spanned between them and Alex cleared her throat, attempted to make it less awkward. "Sorry. Too much information. I know. Just... thought I'd even the playing field a little."

Jamie said nothing, thankfully, just gave a little approving smile, began to put all the completed hex bags into her duffel, effectively letting the subject close as gracefully as possible. Alex paced a few steps, yawned widely, rubbed her eye a little. So damn tired.

"No yawning allowed," Jamie said puckishly, steering them into business-as-usual mode. "We have things to do."
"Sorry," Alex managed through another noisy yawn. "Do you know a spell to help keep me awake?"

Jamie chuckled, gave Alex an impish look. "Yeah, it's called coffee."

"Ha ha."

"You really need to sleep more than you do," Jamie said, stood up, and fixed Alex with a chastening look. "It's not healthy. When's the last time you got a solid eight?"

Alex pulled a flabbergasted face. "Uh—never?" She joked, then shrugged. She was tired. And she'd love to sleep solid, long, and deep for a long time, maybe a couple years, but... "I can't sleep anymore, not well anyway. And when I do sleep, I have... the worst dreams."

Jamie looked at her sympathetically, went to the coffeemaker, and started a pot. "Yeah. I know all about that," she said, and the glass carafe clinked against something. "Not enough that this life's a nightmare, but even in dreams it follows you." Alex sat on one of the ends of the beds, yawning again and stifling it. A couple beats of silence passed, then Jamie cleared her throat. "So. Who was he?"

Bemused, Alex tried to figure it out. "Uh... who was who?"

Jamie turned around as the coffee maker began to grind away. She crossed her arms, letting her head cant to the side. She seemed to know, intuitively, but was hesitant to ask. "The guy. I know there had to be a guy. And it must've ended pretty badly."

Startled by the subject and Jamie's words—it seemed very un-Jamie like to ask about all these personal things, but maybe they were becoming better friends than Alex had thought. Either way, the statement, the fact that Jamie could tell deeply triggered Alex. Sometimes it just hit her all over again that it really was over; that she was the only one who still hung onto it being real. "Yeah. There was a guy. And it didn't end badly. It... ended with a question mark," Alex said hollowly, not bothering to try and duck the subject anymore—what could be worse? Than not knowing; than being left in suspense with nothing to show but a question she'd never stop contemplating ever? She shook her head, feeling stricken. "I dunno. We were from different worlds. He went back to his, and here I am in mine." A derisive little smile spanned her features. She hated talking about this, thinking about it. "I always kinda knew it was too good to be true." She swallowed her feelings and made herself be indifferent. "And honestly, let's never talk about it again, okay?"

Jamie nodded, seeming to understand. "Sure."

There was an abrupt pounding sort of knock on the door and Alex turned, frowning—Glen never did that; he either barged in or rapped on the door smartly. That sounded like someone else. Jamie seemed to remember something. "Oh—forgot to mention. Someone else—besides my jackass brother—called while you were in the shower."

There was something about her voice that made Alex grow dubious. "Who?" She asked suspiciously.

Jamie just smiled challengingly. "Go see." At the mistrustful frown Alex gave her, the blonde just made a 'go on' motion with her hand.

Alex did—went to the door and opened it cautiously, then her face fell in surprise. Sam's huge form took up the entire doorway almost and he unceremoniously shoved a baby at her, literally into her chest. "Hold this," he said and began to let go, giving her no choice but to awkwardly clutch the
Blinking in shock, Alex held the baby, frozen, afraid to drop it or something. Dean, a huge box of diapers in his hands, smiled appealingly and raised his eyebrows—Sam had been blocking her from seeing him. "Mind some company?" he asked even as his dumbfounded sister lost her cool completely.

"What—why—how?" She asked, trying to ask several different questions all at once, panicking slightly because—baby.

"I know," Dean sympathized, and brushed past her, too. She could see he also had a couple grocery store bags with him and she dumbly followed Dean into the room, holding the squirming baby in her hands tightly, afraid to drop it.

"Surprise…?" Jamie said to her with a sort of hopeful, please-don't-shoot-me sort of look on her face. She went over and shut the still-open door for the Winchesters.

"I hate surprises, you should know that by now," Alex complained, but she was preoccupied with not killing the small human she had been forced to hold. She had a better grip on the baby and held it out at arms length, trying to get a look at it. It stared back at her with big blue eyes, seemingly innocent and a little confused by what was happening to it. She wasn't sure if she'd ever felt more freaked. "W-what am I supposed to do with this thing?" she asked, looking at her oldest brother in almost despair. "Whose kid is this?"

"Just hold him a little longer," Dean said, preoccupied with opening the box of diapers. "Sorry, Al. Needed a place to lay low for a sec—called James, she said you guys were close, too good an opportunity to pass by," Dean was rustling through a grocery store bag of baby supplies. "Sam found this baby while working a job—pretty sure the parents are both dead. Also, a shifter is after this little guy."

"What? Why?" Jamie asked. "You didn't tell me that."

"Need to know basis," he said, distracted. "It got the jump on us at the supermarket, seems pretty into the idea of kidnapping this kid. As far as why… that's what we're trying to figure out. Oh, by the way—" he turned to Sam, who was setting up some stuff—a couple binders, folders, his laptop—on the little motel table, off in his own little world. He motioned to his brother, then to Jamie. "Sam. James. Sam."

"It's Jamie," she corrected.

Sam paused his task. "Nice to see you again, it's been awhile," Sam said, then pretty shamelessly looked her up and down. "You uh, you grew up." He gave her a distinctly flirtatious eyebrow raise and smirk. "Mind if I set up here?" He already had, but Jamie, seeming to think his comment was both mildly amusing and offensive, just shrugged.

"Yeah, uh… go right ahead," she turned and glanced at Dean. "I'll call the front desk for a crib." Jamie went over to the phone and looked at Alex, who was sitting on the bed with the baby at arms length, sort of propped onto her knees. Jamie made a face, sort of perplexed at Alex's posture and expression. "You look like you've never held a baby before."

"I don't think I have," Alex said, trying to move as little as possible. What happened if you shook a baby? Didn't they die on impact or something? And weren't they supposed to puke on you a bunch? This one wasn't puking or dying… so, well, that was good, right? He was heavier than she thought a baby would be… and she noticed how he had the biggest little eyes framed by long, dark
lashes, how his face was cute and chubby, how he had a little double chin, wispy hair on his head. He stuck a couple fingers in his mouth and cooed, seeming to find her just as fascinating as she was finding him. He wasn't exploding or breaking and you know, he was actually not bad at all.

"Hey, you're kinda cute, aren't you," she said, relaxing a little, intrigued with how small he was, how his chunky little wrists connected to his beefy little hands, how his little tummy was round and fat. She'd never really seen a baby up close like this. Without warning she remembered how Cas had told her once about how she'd been pregnant in the future, in that post-apocalyptic croatoan-riddled world of 2014. Wow. This moment somehow made that once-possible future realer to her. Holding this kid right here and now was suddenly so much more affecting, stilling and saddening in a way she wasn't sure how to understand. This baby had blue eyes—she wondered what color eyes their baby would have had. She felt her head tilting to the side and she smiled a little sadly.

"Gah gah gaaaah," the baby babbled and sucked on his fingers loudly, frowning a little like he was experiencing mild discomfort.

Maybe there wasn't anything to this baby stuff, Alex thought. Just as soon as she thought that, his face changed, wrinkled up, he began to fuss. "Oh—uh... shh, it's okay, little dude," she cajoled, but he went prone, beginning to cry in rising displeasure. Alex stiffened, panicked. He began to cry harder. "Oh my god it hates me! I think it's dying!" she said, then looked at her big brother pleadingly. "Dean! Help me!"

He chuckled, opening the box of diapers, setting up shop on the other bed. "Relax, relax. Babies cry. It's kinda their thing. He just needs to be changed." He grabbed a diaper, pointed at her with it. "Also, he's a he, not an it. We're calling him Bobby John."

"How was I supposed to know that?!" she asked, nerve-wracked by the baby's fussing. And wait, Bobby John? She almost laughed, wondered how the hell they'd come up with that name.

"He's in boys clothes," Dean pointed out, a lot calmer than she was.

"So was I when I was a baby," she retorted, remembering the photos Bobby had around of her and Sam around eighteen months, both in little baby boy outfits—apparently Dad didn't see a point in getting girl clothes for her at that age. Bobby John was squalling now, turning her into a nervous wreck. "Why won't he stop crying!" She asked, getting really freaked out. His little face was turning red, was that bad? Good god he was loud! How was she supposed to get him to stop? She tried bouncing him a little, getting frantic. "Shit, kid, you—" she gasped at herself, got embarrassed because she realized that was a social code she'd just broken. "Oh fuck, you're not supposed to swear around kids—" her eyes widened again. "Dammit—I'm—ugh!" She drew her mouth into a thin line, embarrassed. Bobby John was whining miserably. Sam and Jamie were hiding smiles, Dean made an oh come on face at her. "Okay, I'll just stop talking," Alex said, subdued.

"Good idea," Dean said, and reached for the baby, apparently ready. "Hand 'im over."

She did, relieved at the deepest levels, but still somewhat petrified, watching her oldest brother with wide eyes. "Do you actually know how to change him?" she asked, horrified at the thought of doing that, not even sure about how one would even begin to do that.

Her brother gave her an oh my god please look. "Do I know how to change him," Dean repeated in joking indignance, chuckling, then began to do just that—laid the kid down on the bed, onto a baby blanket. It was like a car wreck—Alex couldn't look away, had to watch. Dean let out a sound of amazed disgust. "Damn—ugh—wow, Bobby John, good job little man. How did you even make that much?"
"You're a real hero," Jamie chuckled.

"I do what I have to," Dean said, then made an exasperated sound at the baby. "Okay, alright, you know what? I'll pay you money if you hold still." Sam laughed from his little perch at the table and Dean turned to look back at Sam. "This is like defusing an IED, with poop!" He exclaimed, maybe looking for sympathy. He didn't get any from Sam, who just chuckled again. Alex shot him a look.

Her twin hadn't even really said hello to her and he was engrossed in his research, not paying her or anyone else much mind. Dean sighed, kept on with his little task, managed to finish up. "Okay, alright, alright, you are golden, Bobby John. Time to hit the hay—where's that crib at?" he asked Jamie. He picked Bobby John up, began to hum a little tune to calm down the fussy baby.

"Should be here in a minute or two, I hope," she said, then paused. "Are you humming Smoke on the Water?"

Dean paused. He had been. "At least I'm not making him listen to death metal," he said, and resumed humming, getting an amused sideeye from Jamie.

"Dean, you're just going to make it cranky again," Sam said in a reasonable tone, glancing up and over a sheet of paper he was studying.

"Am not," Dean said. There was a knock on the door. "Ah, there it is. Hold him." He dumped Bobby John into Jamie's arms unexpectedly as he walked past her.

Although Jamie was startled by the sudden action, she didn't seem to have the same sort of paranoia that Alex had experienced. She held Bobby John easily. Alex watched her with the baby, and it was kinda funny. Jamie, tough as nails, taking a seat next to a bag of weapons, her half-sleeve tattoo showing because she was wearing a spaghetti strap top. The familiar tattoo was black and white and of a large, stylized grim reaper holding a scythe. Surrounding the shape of the reaper was a pattern of thorny rose stems and what looked like feathers—the design wrapped around the entirety of her arm, front to back, elbow to the top of her shoulder and some of her chest. Every time you looked at it closely, you could notice more details you hadn't noticed before, hidden in the design. Bobby's John's little head next to the sort of scary tattoo was a striking contrast. But even though Jamie sort of looked like bad news if you didn't know her, holding that baby she seemed sweet, suddenly incredibly motherly. She smiled down at Bobby John, rocked him as if without a thought, like it came naturally. "Hey, you, all better?" she soothed him, and he crooned softly.

At the door, a motel employee held a large, weirdly shaped… thing. "This pack and play work for ya'll?" he asked. "We're don't have any real cribs."

Dean accepted the huge object readily. "That's great," he said. "Thanks." He shut the door. "Al, start on this, I gotta hit the head."

He shoved the object at her, headed to the bathroom. "But... what is this thing?" she asked, looking at it in confusion.

"It's like a pop up crib, sort of," Jamie explained. "Take it out of the bag, it should sort of fold right out, I think."

It was heavy and clunky, and Alex fumbled with it, tried to pull the thing out of the stiff bag it had been shoved into. She looked at the strange shape of mesh and plastic rods and canvas and was mystified. "You wanna give me a hand?" She asked Sam, who was turning on his laptop and straightening some papers.
"I think you've got it," he commented mildly, earning a dirty look. It was very strange to have him there again.

Alex attempted to figure out this strange structure, but got frustrated, fast. "Fold right out my ass," she complained, trying to make sense of the stupid thing. Jamie shrugged helplessly when Alex looked at her in rising exasperation. Dean came out of the bathroom just in time to see his sister get completely frustrated, sit back, and throw her hands up. "This is like a total mindfuck!" she complained, then clapped a hand over her mouth, looked at the baby in horrified mortification. "Shit, sorry—oh my god." Her hand went to her forehead and she moaned pathetically at her automatic use of profanity.

"That kid's first words are gonna be bleeps, and it's all your fault," Dean said, teasing her as he walked over to where she was. "Seriously, Al, these are the easiest things to put together. You just pull these, snap that up, push down here—" suddenly, there was an actual structure in front of her, and it looked like a crib. "Presto. Baby cage."

"Baby cage?" Jamie asked, and she obviously thought his choice of words caught her off guard and she thought they were funny. In fact, Alex didn't know when she'd seen Jamie grin that widely before—where her eyes crinkled up and sort of sparkled.

Dean seemed pleased with himself and his joke and gave one of his little smug grinning smirks. Alex rolled her eyes. He wasn't funny, he was a dork. "Here," he said, reaching for the baby. Jamie handed him off and Dean jostled Bobby John soothingly, walked him over to the pack and play, patting him on the back and humming Smoke on the Water again. The baby blinked sleepily, almost falling asleep then and there on Dean's shoulder. "Okay, if I put you down, you gonna be a man about it?" Dean asked. He gently laid the baby down into the makeshift crib… Bobby John was quiet, calm, Dean drew back carefully. And the baby stayed quiet, like magic, drifted off to sleep.

"Huh," Sam commented.

"Wow," Alex said.

"Nice," Jamie agreed.

Dean looked at all of them suspiciously. "What?"

"You're just, uh, actually, not awful at that," Sam said.

Dean brushed off the backhanded compliment. "Dude, I'm barely keeping that thing alive."

"No, no, no, seriously," Sam insisted. "You've got a whole Dr. Huxtable vibe coming off of you. You're like... father material."

"Yeah, well I kind of had to be lately, you know," Dean said, and began to wash his hands at the kitchen sink thoroughly.

"You mean Ben," Sam commented.

Dean shook the water off his hands, and he glanced Jamie's way sort of mistrustfully—it was kind of a personal question Sam had just asked. "Yeah, I mean Ben," Dean confirmed, then cleared his throat, crossed his arms, shrugged, and smiled a little, trying to put a positive spin on his tone, which was sort of self-deprecating. "I mean, I know he's not my kid, but I don't know, I'm starting to feel like... yeah, he is."
Sam just looked at Dean without much emotional resonance, and Dean seemed to feel uncomfortable, rubbed a hand on the back of his neck.

"Coffee anyone?" Jamie asked, pointing at everyone in the room in turn as she went over to the little maker beside Dean. It had finished brewing.

"Yes, all of it," Alex said. She was feeling how tired she was, again. She couldn't help it—another yawn escaped.

"Nah, I'm good," Sam said, focused on some papers he was rifling through.

"Think I'll take some hunter's helper," Dean said, gesturing at the bottle of whiskey that was on the little kitchenette counter. He helped himself as Jamie poured two mugs of coffee then handed one to Alex.

Bobby John made a soft, sleepy sound from further back in the room and Dean looked that direction, paused with his glass of whiskey in hand, then glanced at his sister, then his brother. "You know, I think about the way we grew up, I don't know…" he shook his head. "I kind of feel like I have a chance to do something different with Ben, you know? Something better than what we had."

Sam hesitated. "You sure about that?" He asked, earning a questioning look from his sister.

"What do you mean?" Dean asked sort of dubiously.

"Look, you clearly care about the kid. But moving them around? Keeping them on lockdown? I mean, you do have them on lockdown, right?" Sam looked at Dean meaningfully, and for a minute, Alex thought maybe that was Sam, that he hadn't changed—that he was just resigned or hiding his true self, for some reason or another. Dean seemed to resent the line of questions and walked off a few steps, further into the room. "Just… how is any of that different from how we were raised?"

Sam asked, waiting for an answer.

Dean sat down on the corner of the bed closest to Sam, whiskey in hand. "So you're saying…" he started, then glanced at both Jamie and Alex in turn, who were in the kitchen, feeling the awkward vibe. Alex sipped noisily on her coffee, tried to look like she wasn't paying very close attention—which, she was. "Okay, and first of all? I don't appreciate you trying to talk to me about this with them here," Dean told Sam in no uncertain terms. He seemed defensive, put on the spot. "But I'm not shoving anybody into this life, okay? This is temporary. End of story."

Sam scoffed through a cynical little smile, never taking his eyes off Dean. "Dad always said it was temporary, Dean. He said it for twenty-two years, and Alex can back me up on this if you wanna act like that didn't happen. Look, I get it. You wanna watch out for them. That's great. I'm just asking, how do you do that and not turn into Dad?"

Dean opened his mouth to reply but was apparently speechless. He looked away, uncomfortable. "Dean would never turn into Dad," Alex said defensively, cutting into the conversation without invitation, but not caring. She'd accused Dean of being like Dad before but right now, she wasn't thinking about that, just didn't like Sam's tone or Dean's distress.

Sam turned to look at her piercingly, his arm over the back of his chair. "You sure about that? This life does things to people."

"Like what it's done to you?" She challenged, not bothering to hide her bad attitude.

He frowned a little. "What do you mean?"
Alex looked at him coolly for a few seconds, decided against confronting him. "Nothing. It doesn't matter. You go back to your research." She sipped her coffee, looked away from him and Sam scoffed mildly, seeming to get that he'd just been dissed in some way. Dean was quiet on the bed, drink forgotten. Jamie sipped at her coffee in the kitchenette, her expression seeming to suggest she was thinking about how awkward this was to witness.

The door opened at that moment, and in came Glen, who stopped short for a second at the unexpected sight of Sam and Dean. "Whoa," he said, then cracked a grin, shut the door behind himself. He carried a plastic bag and a big backpack, which he tossed down beside the door. "What'd I miss? Hunter reunion, or what?" He saw Dean, gave him a small chin raise. "Dean—" he turned to look at the other man in the room. "And... Sam, right?"

"Yeah, hey, nice to see you again," Sam said, and stuck his hand out for a handshake.

"Same," Glen said, and the two men shook hands briefly before Glen turned to Alex and held up the bag in his hand—it said China Garden. "So—picked you up some of your favorites—chicken lo mein and those deep fried donut things you love." He smiled at her hopefully and it had a very charming effect.

A little embarrassed for a reason she wasn't sure of, Alex took the bag. He'd gone out of his way to do something nice for her, and she felt sort of awkward about it. She wanted to be bitchy about it—her normal reaction to when he did stuff for her—but after their conversation last night, she thought maybe she'd misjudged him before. So she smiled tightly. "Thanks."

"What about me?" Jamie asked, jokingly challenging but also sort of serious from the look of it.

Her brother looked at her sort of uncertainly. "You don't like Chinese food," he said. His sister gave him an are you stoned look but didn't say anything. Glen shrugged a little. "My bad." He looked at the rooms occupants a little closer now. "So what's going on? You guys here to join us on this ghost hunt or whatever?"

"No, just stopping in to shoot the breeze a little," Dean said, faintly facetious. Alex noticed how he seemed decidedly hostile toward Glen and she got a little annoyed—why did he have to do that? God, if Dean was like this with her, how would be be if he ever had a teenage daughter?

"Crap. I can't believe I missed this," Sam suddenly said, staring at a piece of paper in his hand. "What?" Dean asked.

"This house on Elm. The mother was killed, baby was grabbed, but daddy wasn't living in the house at the time so he's still alive. According to this he works at some auto body shop—not far from here. What do you say we go and have a chat? See what we can dig up?"

Dean shrugged mildly, stood up. "I say let's."

"No no no—you can't both go," Alex said, setting down her bag of food and halfway moving to block the door, even though no one had moved to leave, giving away how alarmed she suddenly was. "Who the hell would watch the kid?"

"Uh—you?" Dean asked, flabbergasting his sister completely.

"What kid?" Glen asked, a little bemused, putting his hands into the pockets of his dark jeans.

"The one over there," Sam said, nodding mildly over at the pack and play in the corner.
Glen noticed it for the first time, saw the sleeping baby through the mesh siding. He got a weird, questioning look on his face. "Whose is that?" he asked.

"Yours—baby mama showed up, left her here with us." Jamie snorted at her joke.

"No, really—this something to do with a job?" Glen asked, all business, ignoring his sister's attempt completely.

Dean confirmed. "Yeah, kids are being snatched up and a shifter's after this one."

"Interesting," Glen said, pouring himself some whiskey now and taking a couple good-sized sips.

"Okay look Dean—you can't leave that kid here, okay?" Alex asked, trying to stay on track, not get off subject. The baby was cute, but she was pretty sure that she'd accidentally kill it within thirty seconds if Dean left. "Sam and Glen can go or I can, but you are not going anywhere," she insisted.

Dean looked at Alex in a mixture of slight exasperation and mild fondness. "You know, I'm not sure who the bigger baby is—you or Bobby John," he said, and relented with a sigh. "I'll stay."

Sam looked at Glen, standing up. "You wanna tag along, man?" He was offering to be polite, it seemed like, and was faintly surprised when Glen agreed to it.

"Sure, why not." Glen downed more of the alcohol—all of it, actually—then pointed a finger-gun at Alex playfully, like he was saying 'catchya later.' Sam made a slight face, like okay, fine at the prospect of having the guy riding shotgun.

"You two be careful out there," Dean said as Sam led the way out, and he watched the two of them leave, his expression somehow reluctant or suspicious, Alex wasn't sure which or who that suspicion was aimed at. She was just relieved he wasn't leaving her and Jamie alone with the baby. The door shut behind the two tall ones, and the room was back to four occupants—a man, two women, and a sleeping baby.

Jamie returned to sorting through bullets on one of the beds, Dean looked a little cagey and paced with his whiskey, glancing at the baby a few times. Alex dug out her little carton of lo mein, fished for the chopsticks that were lost in the bottom of the bag. Dean glanced at her as he turned, began to pace up back toward her again. "Want some?" Alex offered, indicating the carton in her hand.

Her oldest brother seemed distracted, he looked at the bag Glen had given her almost in unease. "I'm good."

Two guys who could almost be called giants—both almost six-and-a-half feet tall, loped out to Sam's black Charger—a new model car with a sleek body and an eye catching design. "I think the shop is like ten minutes from here," Sam told Glen as they settled into the seats.

"Not bad," Glen commented, distracted. He was texting on his phone.

Sam started the engine and got them on the road. He remembered Glen from when they were kids—he'd been tall then, too, but a lot smaller, physically. The guy was huge now, imposing and commanding. In fact, if Glen was good at hunting, Sam thought maybe he'd be a good addition to the Campbell team. "So, still hunting," he commented, deciding to feel the guy out about that possibility.

"Here and there," Glen said, still focused on his phone. "I got other things I do, too."
"Like what?"

Glen smirked slightly, looked up ahead of himself. "Whatever I feel like," he said, and he was proud of it, it sounded like. He glanced at Sam meaningfully. "Most of the things I like are on the less than legal side, if you know what I mean."

No, Sam didn't know what he meant, but he liked the confident sort of bragging tone Glen used. It made him think of the Campbells—Christian in particular. It was quiet for another couple minutes, and Sam decided to test another theory he'd developed back there in the motel room. "You seem into my sister."

Glen glanced at Sam sidelong, pausing. "And if I am?"

Sam shrugged. "Fine, I guess." He thought about it. "I don't really care, to be honest. But I will tell you this… the guy she was with before? You're up against some pretty steep competition."

Glen seemed to think that was funny, and Sam didn't understand why. "Nothing I can't handle." The blond hunter seeming to be feeling superior and smug. "I saw him once. Really dweeby looking guy." He was full-on pompous and conceited, chuckled lowly, obviously pretty sure he had nothing to worry about. "I think I got this in the bag."

Sam just chuckled, too, taking the social cue. Whatever, it didn't matter, and the subject was suddenly boring him anyway. Relationships, people, conversations... he couldn't find it within himself to really care. He could act like he cared (and he'd figured out fast that people didn't trust him if he showed his utter apathy). In a way, it brought him satisfaction to act one way and see people react to what they thought were his genuine feelings and thoughts. Sam felt like he had the higher hand, like he was the smarter one, that he was in control. He liked that. He liked being the one who was pulling the strings, manipulating the situation.

Ever since coming back from the dead, it was all base motivation for Sam: food, sex, violence. Not sleep—he didn't sleep, at all, ever. More time to train, to hunt, to excel. He didn't have all those little annoying gray emotions and feelings anymore; everything was black and white, and he either cared or didn't care. And truthfully... he didn't really care about anything anymore. It was freeing, actually, it felt better to exist this way. He was all logic and calculation. It was a colder existence than he remembered leading before, but he felt superior, machine-like, untouchable and not weak.

Being around Dean was sort of annoying to him, because his brother seemed to expect him to be someone else entirely and it was exhausting keeping up the charade. Still, he did, because he needed Dean's help—also, he had this strange thought that he owed the guy. Suddenly there was a distinct, stark flicker of doubt. Sam frowned. Strange.

Dean sat down across from Jamie, looking at her tattoo plainly as she double checked some shotgun rounds. "That's not what reapers really look like, you know," he said, took another little sip of whiskey.

"That's up for debate," she said, matching his playful tone, and she looked at him briefly, sort of smirking a challenge. "I like him. I call him Mort. Get it?"

Dean squinted slightly. "Uh... no."

"Mort...ality?"

Dean did get it then and it wasn't clear if he were laughing at her or at the bad pun. "Dork." She just shrugged lightheartedly, accepting the label graciously.
"So. I thought you were out, Dean," Alex said. She was standing, still eating some of her Chinese takeout straight out of the carton. Glen and Sam had been gone awhile now and she'd reheated the food, had eaten almost all of it now.

Dean looked at her briefly, and she saw how guilty he felt, just wasn't sure about what. "I am out. This is just me helping Sam out cuz Samuel's upstate somewhere and Sam, apparently, is just as good with babies as you are." He looked at her teasingly as he stood up. "And you're basically the worst."

"No arguments there," Alex said, and set her finished carton of food down on top of the TV, looked down at Bobby John, fast asleep on his back in the pack and play. His hands were in loose little fists and he had his arms up on either side of his head. "You know, he's cute when he's not screaming at me," she said, and Dean came to stand beside her.

"I don't think it was personal," he teased. "He was just upset that his diaper was a friggin' war zone." He shivered as if from a bad memory.

"It's weird we were all that size once," Alex commented, not really able to understand it at the moment, how every person she'd ever met had been that tiny once.

Dean got quiet, reflective. "I remember when you and Sammy were that small," he said softly, not looking at her, just looking at Bobby John. Alex looked at her brother thoughtfully.

Jamie's phone rang loudly, cutting through the moment. "Hello? Hey Irv. No, sorry. I'm not in the area. What are you—oh. Yeah I still have those files. I think they're in my car. Can you hold on a sec?" She pushed herself off the bed. "I'll be back in a few," she told the Winchesters and then she left the room, and it was just Dean, Alex, and baby Bobby John.

Dean smiled at his sister tightly, walked off a few steps, she turned to watch him and seized the opportunity for a private conversation. "You really have them on lockdown, Dean? Lisa and Ben?"

He looked down at the glass in his hand, his jaw tensed. "Yeah. Yeah I do." He looked up at her and shrugged helplessly. "What else am I supposed to do? I put them in danger by just being part of their lives. And now I gotta keep them safe from the things in my past. I mean, those djinn a couple months ago... if they found out that dose they jacked me up on didn't work—they would have come back, made sure they finished the job. If Lisa and Ben were there... if they got hurt in any way..." he sighed, looked down again, burdened.

"We've made a lot of enemies over the years," he said. "And any more of them catch wind of where I am, who's important to me..." he paused. "Lisa and Ben, they're not like you and Sam. They wouldn't stand a chance." He got quiet. "Sometimes I do think it'd be safer for them if I just high-tailed it outta there but... where the hell would I go?" He was ranting at this point almost. "With Sam?" He seemed opposed to the idea, and upset that he was opposed to it. "I dunno." He cleared his throat, became hesitant, and looked at her in reluctant hope. "You, uh, you thought anymore about you and me? Hitting the road again?"

Alex sighed softly, feeling pressured. "Dean, I told you. I don't wanna be the swing vote here. You have to decide if you're staying with Lisa and Ben before I think about it. I mean, you've always wanted this, right? And now you have it. And maybe, who knows, no other skeletons will come creeping out of the closet to get you. Maybe those djinn were the last."

"Your optimism is real respectable," he wisecracked, "but come on, this is us we're talking about. Do the demons and monsters ever stop coming? Fair point. Alex conceded with a slight shrug of her eyebrows. Dean sat down at the table, set down his drink with a clunk, rubbed his face tiredly.
with his hand, thought a little while. "I keep thinking about that crazy dreamworld those blue-eyed assholes' dad put me in," he said. "Sometimes I really do wanna go back there."

A little caught off guard by the sudden subject change, Alex tried to follow. "Wait, what—you mean that djinn who dosed you up back like five years ago?"

"No, the other one," Dean quipped sort of sullenly.

"Okay, okay, sorry," Alex chuckled, raising her hands in mock-defense. She sat down opposite her brother, glanced at all the papers Sam had left there briefly. "You never did tell us the whole story, you know. Of what stuff you saw in your little dreamworld."

"Ah, I told you enough," he said, waving a hand in dismissal.

Alex looked at him in exasperation. "No you didn't," she said, remembering how it had gone down that night maybe five years ago or so...

Dean paged through a magazine, morose, sitting on the edge of a motel bed. Alex was sitting with her back to Dean, leaning against him as she sat cross-legged, cleaning out a pistol, the parts scattered in front of her on the bedspread. Just a couple hours ago she and Sam had saved their brother from overdosing on djinn was being really quiet about the whole thing. Something was obviously wrong, bothering him. Alex thought it was probably because whatever fantasy that the djinn had sent him tripping balls on had been so great that reality was a depressing in comparison. It was depressing anyway. She blew some carbon dust out of the gun slide she was cleaning.

"You all right?" Sam asked, sitting down beside Dean, whose general demeanor was upset, distracted, and sad.

Dean cleared his throat lightly. "Yeah. I'm all right." He didn't sound all right, and he wouldn't look at Sam. Alex stopped what she was doing, just listened, sensing that something important was about to be said. Dean took a few beats, thinking deeply. "Should have seen it, guys. Our lives," he said, then a soft, bittersweet smile came onto his face. So he had dreamed about them. She should have known. "You were both total wussies."

Sam chuckled, grinned, understanding, Alex smirked down into her lap. "So we didn't get along then, huh?" Sam asked.

"No," Dean confirmed, not smiling anymore. "It was us, it was our lives but we… just didn't really mesh. We were civil, but we weren't, I dunno. Friends."

Alex frowned to herself, then Sam said exactly what she'd been thinking: "I thought it was supposed to, to be this perfect fantasy," he ventured, frowning a little, confused.

"Yeah, well, it wasn't," Dean said, and he was deeply upset—it was easy to tell. He set the magazine he'd been halfheartedly looking through down. "It was just a wish. I wished for Mom to live. Mom never died, we never went hunting and so the three of us... we just kinda drifted apart, lived boring, normal lives. But we weren't really family. Not like we are now."

"Yeah," Sam said softly, compassionately. Behind Dean, Alex had turned a little, was listening hard, concerned, her gun forgotten. Sam was gentle with his big brother. "Well, I'm glad we are," he said, and Dean turned to fully look at him. "And I'm glad you dug yourself out, Dean. Most people wouldn't have the strength, would have just stayed."

"Yeah... lucky me," Dean replied in soft cynicism. "I gotta tell you though, man." He stood up, careful not to set Alex off balance when he did. "You know, you had Jess. Mom was gonna have
grandkids. And uh… Alex. She could talk." She turned to look at him in wide-eyed surprise and curiosity, her stomach flipping, her heart melting a little. He got a little smile on his face, like he was remembering and was sad about it, because it wasn't real. "And you were friggin' hilarious, kiddo." He put his hands in his pockets, looked down sadly as he leaned against the TV set.

"Dean... it wasn't real," Sam reminded gently, trying to encourage Dean. Alex turned around completely, she now sat where Dean had a minute ago, legs off the edge of the bed.

The oldest Winchester just got quiet, more upset. His voice was soft and broken when he finally spoke. "I know. But I wanted it to be. And I wanted to stay." He almost looked like he could cry, like confessing it broke his heart. "I wanted to stay so bad. I mean, ever since Dad... all I can think about is how much this job's cost us." He paused, even as his sister got up, came to his side, touched his arm gently. He tried not to look at her. "We've lost so much," he managed, eyebrows furrowing together in an attempt to hold himself together. "W-we've... sacrificed so much."

"But people are alive because of you," Sam said, to which Dean scoffed, looked down, blinked away tears. "It's worth it, Dean. It is. It's not fair, and... you know, it hurts like hell, but... it's worth it."

Dean met his brother's gaze. "You sure about that Sammy?" he asked brokenly. He shook his head again, buried his face in a hand. Alex went onto tiptoes, circled her arms around her big brother, hugged him tightly. It was all she could do. Silently tell him it's okay.

That's all Dean had really ever said about it—Alex had tried, later, to ask him about it with her notebook—she remembered scrawling wanna talk about it? But he'd just smiled sadly, ruffled her hair, and shaken his head, patted her on the shoulder, told her not to worry about it. She'd always wanted to know more, but figured if Dean didn't wanna say, she wouldn't force him. But now, she was dying to know what kind of life she'd lived in that fantasy world Dean had created. So, she pressed, gently, since he'd already sort of started the conversation.

"I had my voice, right? I remember you said that." He looked at her out of the side of his eye quietly and Alex prompted him again. "So, what kinda job did I work?"

He chuckled, looking down at his whiskey with a fond little smile. "You were a boring-as-hell-secretary at a law firm."

"You made me a secretary?" Alex asked, balking playfully. "Come on, you could have made me something a little cooler—you know I wanted to be a space gymnast growing up."

Dean grinned, chuckled, shook his head. "Yeah I'm still pretty sure that's not a real thing."

"I was gonna be the pioneer," Alex said, and grabbed the glass from him, took a sip, wiggled her eyebrows at him. "I mean, backflips with no gravity. And you were gonna be my astronaut assistant, remember?" She frowned a little, trying to figure out what that job title she'd thought up as a kid even meant.

Dean looked at her with a soft smile. "Yeah, maybe someday we can still do that." They shared a we're so stupid smile and laugh.

Dean looked off to the side, seeming to consider something. He grew a little somber, deeply introspective, his eyes somewhere far away. "You were safe. Maybe your life was boring, but… in that world, you were okay." He smiled to himself a little bit, bittersweet. "Mom was alive, you had your voice and were married to some accountant guy, Sam and Jess were together, just got engaged… everyone was happy. But everyone was, was scattered. You lived a few cities away—
Sam freakin' lived on the other side of the country. We weren't close in the dream, I mean you and I got along but... just like with me and Sammy, there was like some kinda bad blood there. We weren't family like we are now." He seemed a little unsettled at that point, frowned deeply. "And you weren't really you anymore. You dressed like, I dunno, an uptight church lady. And you didn't even know what a camshaft or a fan belt was." At her frown that asked and why did that come up, Dean explained. "Mom's car was busted and I suggested you take a look at it. And then you ladies both laughed your asses off at me. You and I apparently only saw each other on holidays. If that."

Alex considered everything he'd just told her, half amused at it, and also sort of disturbed. "That sounds kind of more like a nightmare," she said, then realized Dean hadn't mentioned someone. "And Dad? What did he do?"

Dean cleared his throat, and he looked unsettled. "Oh, uh... he was dead."

Her eyebrows rose up high. "Dad was dead in your fantasy world?"

Dean avoided her gaze guiltily. "Why do you think I never wanted to talk about what I dreamed? What did it say about me, you know? I don't... I still don't know."

Alex swallowed painfully, heart suddenly beating fast. If she was ever going to talk about this... now was the time. And she felt like Dean needed to hear this, too—he looked like he needed reassurance and understanding. "You know, it's okay. I didn't know how to feel when Dad died, Dean. In fact... I sort of felt... relieved." Her brother looked at her with both hurt and empathy, all at once and Alex tried to make him understand. "It freaks me out that I felt like that—what kind of person or daughter does that make me, you know? I loved him but I also wanted him gone and... I still don't know how to feel about him. Not really." Dean seemed to resonate with that, and was disturbed. "You know, it wasn't our fault that he was the way he was," Alex said to him. "And I don't think we should have ever felt like we had any responsibility for the things he decided to do." Dean's gaze flickered up to hers briefly. "I think he was a good man, I do," Alex said emphatically. "But along the way he just... got lost."

Dean was quiet. "Yeah," he replied softly, then took his whiskey back from her, drank some more, brooding.

In the back of the room, Bobby John stirred, began to fuss softly. Alex looked toward the kid, getting a little nervous, then at Dean, who would know what to do. "What's wrong with him? What do we do?"

Dean gestured toward the kid by using his whiskey glass. He was a little distracted, still. "Pick him up, hold him awhile."

"What? Uh-uh, you do it," Alex said, shaking her head no.

Dean looked at her, obviously thinking you are ridiculous. "Alex. I've seen you face down demons, wraiths, vamps. Pick up the baby and stop being one."

Alex stood up and huffed, mad that he was making her. She edged toward the little makeshift crib. How did you even pick up a baby? And what if she made him cry harder? Bobby John was whimpering sadly and Alex felt a little of her own hesitation fade as she saw him. Poor guy. Okay. She leaned down and carefully scooped him up, hefting him up into her arms. His little face was just above her shoulder and she held on tight, afraid to drop him. Dean smiled crookedly, tiredly, summoning some amusement at his sister's am I doing this right expression. "Pat him on the back a little," he suggested, and Alex did, then imitated what Dean had done earlier with the gentle rocking-jostling motion. It seemed to work. Bobby John calmed a little, began to soothe. His head
rested on Alex's shoulder now, he hiccuped a little as he settled. "There, see?" Dean asked. "It's not rocket science."

It was kind of sweet, this little trusting human laying his little head on her, using her as a pillow. She actually kind of liked it, began to relax and walk back and forth like Dean had. Alex decided to try humming—*Pour Some Sugar On Me*—the first thing she thought of. She only realized how inappropriate that was a few bars into the song, and by then, she just kind of went with it. Dean chuckled when he recognized the melody and Alex shot him a look—kept humming. *Just be glad I'm not singing, jerkface—you know I can't carry a tune for crap.*

Bobby John seemed to relax more, too, and after a minute he let out the cutest little tired stuttering sigh she'd ever heard. Poor little guy… he seemed okay again, and Alex carefully, gingerly laid him down into the pack and play again, drawing away carefully, like she was afraid to shatter something. He settled down, blinking sleepily, looked like he'd go back to sleep now. Maybe he'd had a little bad dream, and that's why he'd cried a minute ago. Did babies dream bad things, too? Alex wondered.

Jamie came back in at that moment, no longer on her phone. Dean acknowledged her with a glance, downing the rest of his whiskey, Alex stood back and watched Bobby John for a minute, then decided she could go for the same thing—a nap. The coffee she'd attempted to drink earlier hadn't really helped. She went over to the bed that didn't have Jamie's things strewn all over it and flopped down onto her stomach. Not even five seconds later, the bed suddenly bounced as Dean flopped down beside her, on his back.

"Hey!" Alex protested, then laughed and pushed him away—or tried. "Get off!"

"Make me, shortstop," he said, and began to mess with the Magic Fingers controls beside the bed.

"Dean, you know I hate Magic Fingers," she complained, but he ignored her, chuckling low in his throat, goading her. Same old Dean. She elbowed him in the side and he made a sound of protest, more because it tickled than anything else. She sighed when the bed relaxation system her brother was so obsessed with came on. Really, she felt like a grain of rice being jolted around on top of a spinning washing machine. But Dean sighed happily and relaxed, his head propped up with his hands behind his head. "You're such a loser," she muttered, but she wasn't exactly unhappy. She always realized how much she missed him when she was around him or talking to him on the phone. He was so familiar, so steadfast. She thought about it, saying yes to hunting with him again. Really, what was holding her back, anyway?

On the other bed, working on loading a shotgun, Jamie smiled sort of fleetingly when she glanced at the Winchesters. She and her brother had never been on terms like that—ever.

Alex was drifting off to sleep when there was a strange splatting sound and Bobby John started to cry, loudly—different than before, and it was clear that something was wrong. Dean had already sat up ramrod straight, Alex was a millisecond behind him, twisting up into a sitting position. Jamie, who'd been the closest, got there first and stood over the crying baby and she sounded freaked. "Uh… guys?" she said, and bent down, picked the baby up, then turned around, her expression strange—Dean and Alex were standing up, and had frozen when they saw. Bobby John was no longer caucasian and blue-eyed. He was now African-American.

… and suddenly, it made sense, and Dean said what they were all thinking. "Oh my god, the shifter is his *dad,*" he breathed.

"What should we do?" Jamie asked, looking slightly panicked: Bobby John had bits of skin and blood all over him, and he was crying hard, loud, obviously scared by what had just happened. But
even though he was basically gooey and disgusting after shedding skin, Jamie didn't seem to care, she held the baby close, getting all the mess all over her. *Shh, shhhhh,* she encouraged, trying to calm the inconsolable baby down.

"Sink—bath—now," Dean said, and pointed the way to the kitchenette.

"What does this even mean?" Alex asked, blindsided, hanging back as Dean and Jamie worked as a team. "I thought you said Bobby John's parents were dead—was one of them a *shifter*?"

"I don't *know,*" Dean said, a little busy at the moment. "Rinse this part off," he told Jamie, moving poor, confused, hysterical Bobby John around in the sink as they basically hosed the poor kid off.

"He's being too loud, make him be quiet," Alex said, getting anxious.

"I *can't,*" Dean said, increasingly frustrated.

"Almost done, Bobby John, it's okay, sorry—" Jamie used a dishrag to wipe his face off and he hated it, screamed even louder. "Eesh," she commented at the rising hysterics.

"Blanket," Dean commanded, and Alex grabbed one from his pile of baby stuff and tossed it to him.

A sudden pounding sounded at the door, startling them all. "Manager!" a voice announced. "Everything okay in there?"

Dean glanced at the door, irritated, handing the blanket to Jamie. "Yeah, no, we're fine," he said loudly. "Thank you, good night."

"There's been complaints," the male voice on the other side of the door said. "Mind opening the door, sir?"

Dean shook his head at Alex, who had made to move forward. "It's not a good time," Dean said loudly, and handed the baby off to Jamie, helping her to wrap the loud baby up snuggly. "Just got out of the shower."

The doorknob rattled and in unison, all three hunters reacted, realized that was *not* the manager out there—Alex backed up fast and dropped to a knee, began to go through her weapon bag, scrambling for a silver knife even as Jamie shrank back into the kitchen corner holding the baby protectively. Dean held a hand out to her, telling her silently to be still. He edged toward the door, ready to attack. The door unlocked and burst open even as Alex got a grip on her silver blade and stood, her hair swinging around her at the force with which she whirled. A police officer stood there, only, Alex was pretty sure he *wasn't* a police officer. Dean, standing right inside the door and to the side, hadn't been seen yet by the shifter. Alex baited him, knowing exactly what Dean was planning.

"Come and get me, slimy," she taunted, and he barged in, heading for her, drew his gun just in time to get attacked—Dean lunged, pushing him sideways into the wall by the wrists so hard that the shifter lost his grip on his gun. The shifter was barely affected, he used brute force and shoved Dean back toward Alex. The shifter spotted Jamie—it was hard not to, as the baby was still making a racket, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Give me the child and maybe I won't harm you," the shifter said, stepping toward her once.

"I don't think so, *officer,*" she spat, even as Dean lunged at the shifter again, knocked him sideways, and slashed him across the face with a silver knife. Surprisingly strong, the shifter
grabbed Dean and threw him at Alex, who had been one step away, knife raised. She flew backwards and she and Dean crashed into the TV set painfully.

"The baby, now," the shifter demanded, and advanced on Jamie, fast, hard, deadly intent in his eyes. Genuine fear flashed across Jamie's face—she had no weapon and Dean and Alex were on the ground—she seemed to lose her cool.

"Get back!" she cried out the second before the shifter was about to touch her, and her voice rang loudly, seemed almost to be intertwined with a high pitched sound that could shatter glass—and, apparently, did. All the glass objects in the room broke in unison and a powerful wind billowed over the room—it blew the shifter backwards and it was as if her voice itself had ripped through him—he exploded in a huge splat of blood and guts and Jamie fell down onto her knees as if she'd been kicked in the gut, barely managing to keep a hold of Bobby John.

Alex pushed the TV set off of herself even as Dean stood up, out of breath, looking at Jamie in the beginnings of confusion and horror. "What the—" Dean looked at the bloody remains, then Jamie, who was breathing hard. He swooped down, took the crying baby from her and backed up, looking around at the wreckage in aghast realization—on the bed, in the blast of wind, her duffel had fallen over and hex bags littered the floor and bed. Dean's head snapped sharply back to Jamie. "You're a witch?" he asked, then turned to look at Alex in rising amounts of indignant anger. "You've been hunting this whole time with a god damn witch?! And not just a witch but a freaking intuitive?"

Dean demanded in complete disbelief. He clutched the baby hard, and he looked betrayed, a little scared.

"Dean, not all witches are—" Alex started, pushing herself up to stand. The leg of her jeans was torn open thanks to the broken TV.

Dean cut her off. "Yes they are!" He shouted. "Do you remember how witches become witches, Alex? They make deals with demons! And the more powerful the witch, the more under a demon's thumb she is!" He looked at Jamie mistrustfully, who was still on the floor, on her knees, looking winded and wounded, a hand against the cabinets beside her for support. "So whose hellbitch are you, huh?" He asked cruelly. "Crowley? Meg? Who?"

Jamie's face went cold, her jaw tightened, she looked at him without flinching. "I'm no one's bitch," she said lowly.

"Well someone's yanking your leash to give you power like that!" Dean thundered.

"Dean—" Alex protested, recognizing that he was freaked out. "Take it easy would you?"

"Take it easy?" he asked incredulously, looking at her like she'd never suggested anything crazier in his whole life.

Jamie attempted to stand, pushing herself up on her knees, and she was angry. "Look, think whatever you want of me but I just saved—oh." Her legs gave out, she stumbled back and sideways, her eyes glazed, and her shoulder hit against a lower kitchenette cabinet door painfully. She let out a sound of pain and she coughed weakly, blood splattered out of her mouth, she looked like she was going to pass out. Dean faltered, looking unsure about his anger for a second. Alex hurried to Jamie and crouched beside her, helping her stay sitting. Jamie looked like she might fall down any second but she stared up at Dean, who was looking at her with renewed, stubborn revulsion. It almost looked like she were going to cry, something seemed to snap in her at the way he was looking down at her. "Maybe I didn't ask for this!" she cried out in a surprisingly emotional outburst.
And Dean looked, for a moment, affected. Then he shook his head, set his features like stone. "All witches ask to be witches," he replied tightly, full of piety and scorn. "Don't try and act like you didn't."

Just as quickly as she'd been emotional, Jamie withdrew and became stone-faced, looking up at Dean from the corner of her eye resentfully. Her voice was low, quiet, soft. "Take the baby and get out of here, Dean."

"Yeah, no, you don't have to tell me twice," Dean muttered. They heard commotion at the still-open doorway, and both Sam and Glen came in, both of them seeming to be confused at what they were seeing—the room a wreck, guts everywhere, Jamie collapsed, Dean holding the baby angrily.

"Something going on?" Sam asked, looking from Jamie to Alex to Dean in turn. Dean gave his brother a no shit, Sherlock evil eye, already grabbing up some of his stuff, one handed, in preparation to leave.

"What's the problem?" Glen followed up, reading the mood of the room. "Who exploded all over the floor? And the wall?"

"We found out the baby's dad is a shifter," Sam said, then looked at the blood everywhere, the silver knife Alex still held. "So… I'm guessing you guys just saw him."

"Yeah, we did," Dean snapped, and, bag of stuff in hand, glared around at everyone indiscriminately. "We're leaving. Sam, get your crap. You coming, Alex?"

Still down on the floor with Jamie, Alex looked at her brother angrily, surprised he would even ask her that. "No."

Dean lost his cool. "Why the hell not?" He demanded roughly. Alex just shook her head and looked away, she was ashamed at his behavior and also not terribly surprised, which made her even more crestfallen. She said nothing, further angering—and scaring her brother. "It's dangerous, Alex, you shouldn't stay with them!" he said loudly, not bothering to hide his true feelings on the matter.

Alex stood up, crossed her arms, set her brother with a disappointed look, and from her body language, it was clear that in that moment, she was choosing sides. "These people are my friends, Dean!" Sadness flickered over her face and she set her jaw, seeming reluctant, but resigned. Bitter. "Why don't you head out, huh?" She was sarcastic purposefully. "I'll call you later."

He wasn't happy about it and let her know with his general demeanor, but he nodded tersely. "Yeah, great," he muttered. "Don't listen to me. As usual." He shook his head and left, Sam followed, gave Alex a glance and some weird kind of forced smile as he left.

Alex shut the door behind her brothers, a hand on her forehead as she gritted her teeth together because why did it always have to go this way?! She'd forgotten about how Dean's overreactions tended to go. It's dangerous, he said. Please. He was so overly dramatic and shortsighted sometimes. Rolling her eyes in exasperation, she shut the door behind her brother and went to apologize to Jamie and help her up, as Glen stood in a corner of the room, arms crossed, watchful.

Alex didn't know that Dean was one hundred percent right about it being dangerous for her there.
A Few Days Later

Glen Ward was many things, but he wasn't evil. People liked him, thought he was funny and charming, cool, down to chill. He was capable and strong, a little self-obsessed, but hey—if that was his only flaw, not bad. He wasn't evil. Yeah, he did things that were questionable but that was just part of living life to the fullest and taking in every experience possible. He stole, he cheated, he lied, he manipulated people and situations, he didn't care about anyone other than himself… but, he wasn't evil.

That was Glen's mantra, the only thing he cared about, pretty much: I'm not evil.

He had started repeating this to himself on July 4th, 1988. Everyone else had been around the front of the house, watching fireworks in the night sky, and some of those bright bursting lights had reflected in the dark water of the family pool. Glen had stood there at the edge of the shimmering water and wondered am I evil? Below the surface of the water, his two-year-old little sister Erin was struggling after falling in by accident. Glen just watched and did nothing, curious and fascinated as her tiny body sank to the bottom of the pool and drowned, eventually went still, and began to drift. Am I evil? He thought maybe a big brother should have jumped in to save her or called for help, but he didn't do either. It seemed marvelous to him that life was so fragile and easy to snuff out, and he'd been struck by the chance to watch it happen. And who was Erin, anyway? Just another human being taking up space on the planet. Him letting her die like that was just a kid being curious. He wasn't evil. He was different.

He remembered how Jamie found him there, staring into the pool—and small, eight-years-old, she'd screamed in shock, panicked, told Glen to go get someone, and then she'd jumped in to try and save their already-dead sister. Jamie didn't really know how to swim at the time but had somehow found it within herself to overcome her fear of water and pull her sister out. Glen had watched her sobbing over Erin, who had been blue in the face, dead for several minutes already. Adults clustered around his sisters and Glen stood off, staring and mildly frustrated. Why didn't he feel the panic and horror everyone else did? At first he thought it was because he was evil, but he didn't like the thought that he was evil. Then he decided it wasn't because he was evil. It was because he was smarter than everyone else, and higher above stupid things like emotions and sadness. He was better than everyone else.

Ever since that night, he'd felt this smug sense of power. Because he knew he could have changed what happened, and had chosen not to. He was like a god or something, he could say whether another person lived or died by what he chose to do or not do. That thrilled him, to be so powerful, so in control. And as he grew up, he learned how to keep people believing things other than what was actually true, how to play on their doubts, fears, weaknesses, desires, wishes. He became an expert at playing roles and manipulating any situation he was in, always to his own benefit and
To his sister, he was forgetful and half-ass and flighty—he kept her in the dark by letting her think she was the smarter one—to Alex he was a rogue with a heart of gold who was opening up slowly to the idea of a real, lasting relationship and true intimacy. To Jennifer, he was a business major who was down on his luck and looking for a love to heal wounds from his past. To Sadie, he had been a bad-boy one night stand with quite a bit of S&M thrown in there. There were other women and even a few guys too, and there would always be more. It wasn't even entirely about the sex for Glen, although it never hurt to get laid. It was about pushing the boundaries to see if he'd get caught, because he got off on danger and lies and the pleasure-rush those gave him. He got off on controlling people's thoughts, puppeting them into exactly the situation he wanted them in. And no one ever guessed his secret, because he was smarter than all of them. They fell for what he said, believed him, every time. He'd never get over how much he loved looking people in the eye then saying one thing and watching them believe it as, the whole time, he was smirking internally at their stupidity, at how easy it was to prey on their trust and vulnerability.

He was an opportunist, and the world was his grand experiment. It was all an inside joke, and he always got the last laugh. No, he wasn't evil. He was good. The best. And Alex was about to find that out. Right at that moment, she was inside a motel room and he was outside getting a first aid kid. She'd just gotten cut up sort of bad in a scuffle as they put yet another vengeful spirit down earlier that day. And seizing the opportunity, recognizing what a perfect scenario it was, Glen had sent Jamie off on a fool's errand by telling her he'd just gotten a call from an old hunting buddy and they needed to move on that as soon as possible. He'd said he needed to patch Alex up, first, that they would catch up. He'd basically sent his sister on a wild goose chase and later would tell her he accidentally told her the wrong address to go to. She'd get annoyed with his 'forgetfulness' and bitch him out. He'd act like he cared what she said about him, and around and around it would go… this little game he played with the world and everyone in it.

Glen loped back up the sidewalk and into the motel room, opening the door and he paused there and smiled crookedly at Alex, who was sitting on the edge of a bed and had rolled her shirt up to look at the angry red slash across her torso. The day he'd found out she'd been with an angel, that had been the first act, the time when he became truly intrigued with the thought of seducing her—intrigued with the idea if seeing if he could best a celestial being. And today? Today was the grand finale.

Alex hissed a little as she peeled her shirt up a little and looked at the stinging line that had been slashed there just below where her ribcage began. Thanks, barbed wire. You're so great. She sighed in discomfort, waiting for Glen to hurry his ass up with that first aid kit. Ever since she'd been a kid, she'd had that placebo effect of a bandaid or bandage making her feel better immediately. She put a hand to her head, feeling a headache coming on. She glanced at her stuff piled at the top of the bed pensively. Her flask was empty... she needed more.

The sound of the door made her look up—Glen paused there, kit in hand, and smiled at her a little. Alex gave the biggest flirt she knew a friendly but warning look—she wasn't a prude but sitting there with her entire midriff on display to him was bound to get some comments and she wasn't in the mood to hear it. He smiled a little more at her don't say a damn thing, idiot glance. "You think you'll live?" he asked teasingly and came over to her.

She rolled her eyes. It was just a scratch. But it did sting pretty bad. "I'm fine."

He surprised her when he knelt one-kneed in front of her, set the kit down beside her on the bed, and began to look through it slowly, oblivious to the way he'd caught her off guard. "Sure you are,"
he commented vaguely, implying something and glancing up at her fleetingly a couple times, his eyes intense and full of meaning. She looked away, uncomfortable with how close he was, and she tried to think of something rude to say. But honestly, he had her off her game, knelt down in front of her like that. All the things he’d been doing and saying lately had her second guessing him and herself, too. It made her uneasy. Was Glen her type? She didn’t know. Did she even have a type? In high school and stuff, she’d always been attracted to the outcasts, the really artsy guys, the theatre majors, the dorky but nice math nerds, the ones everyone made fun of. In later years on the road, she hadn’t even really met any guys who made her look twice, because they were all shallow bar-hopping idiots who were bad at pool. Her type… was the tall, dark-haired, awkward, heartfelt type. That wore a trench coat. At the thought of Cas, she became even more uncomfortable at Glen's proximity.

"Okay, you need to get just a little closer so I can actually do this," he said, trying to joke with her —she was sitting as far back as possible from him. He had a little disinfecting wipe in hand, but hadn’t taken it out of its little individual wrap. He took hold of her briefly—a hand curved around either of her hips, just where her jeans started—and pulled her forward to him. Her pulse picked up at the abrupt touch of his strong hands—her knees went apart when they bumped up against his chest, he scooted closer too—either side of his torso hitting against either of her inner thighs.

What… what was he doing? He let go of her and she was stiff as a board, frozen, not breathing, trying not to flip out. He wasn't being a jackass, he was studying her cut closely, not seeming to acknowledge how close and intimate of a position he’d pulled her in to. You’re just misjudging. Calm down. He opened the little alcohol pad he’d gotten out of the kit, oblivious to her nerve-wracked reaction. Glen was nice, really… funny, strong, witty, smart, laid back. And he definitely wasn't bad to look at. All these facts made her even more flustered when she realized she’d noticed him a lot more than she realized.

"All right, this might sting," he said and steadied her with a hand against her side—warm palm to her bare skin—and the gentle touch made her swallow, breathe a little faster, get flustered automatically. It had been forever since she’d been touched in a way that felt sensual and she hated her body for responding the way it did—with longing for more. She tried to ignore herself and then was actually glad when the alcohol pad touched to her wound and sent searing pain shooting through her torso.

"Agh…" she winced and grimaced. Son of a bitch.

He smiled a little, his eyes flickered up to hers, one of his fair eyebrows raised slightly. "Come on, that didn't hurt."

"Like hell it didn't, hurry up," she complained. He shook his head and smiled to himself fondly, gently brushed the pad across the length of the cut several times, enough to clean and disinfect it both. She held back protesting sounds of discomfort the whole time. Silently, he reached for the antibiotic ointment, looked at her briefly, with an open expression, then began to lightly smear the medicine across her cut. Alex frowned a little. His hand was still on her side, and his thumb moved back and forth, like he was trying to soothe her. She tried not to look at him, at his fair eyelashes or regal features, the little ghost smile tugging at one end of his mouth, his strong broad shoulders and tousled blond hair, the three day scruff he always sported. She tried, and failed. He set the ointment away when he was done and then looked up at her with this intense, emotionally vulnerable look in his eyes, startling her. Suddenly he put his other hand on her other side so that he held her bare waist in both hands—he pulled her forward a little more and kissed her softly on the stomach just below the cut, shocking Alex and scaring her all at once because the only one who had ever kissed her there before was Castiel and oh god. She reacted to the touch by drawing in a soft, surprised breath and going rigid all over again, not sure what to do—and he kissed again, slightly to the right now, and Alex realized she didn't want to pull away. And when she realized that, she did, because
she got upset with herself. She grabbed his hands and shoved him away defensively. "Knock it off, Glen," she said angrily, and grabbed at an oversized bandaid in the kit. "I'll do this myself." She began to shakily tear open the packet in front of herself.

"Stop," he appealed softly, and caught her fumbling hands in his, making her cease and look at him. She was breathless and embarrassed and ready to rip her hands out of his... but something about the way he was looking at her changed her mind, made her stay put. He really did look apologetic and a little scared that he'd done something wrong, and seeing that made her reconsider. "Sorry," he said, "I'm sorry... I-I didn't mean to push you. I... just acted without thinking. You, you make me... do things I don't understand, sometimes." He seemed to get embarrassed, looking away. "Ah, forget it." He took the bandaid from her, and unhappy with himself, he began to apply it, this time keeping a respectful distance, looking up at her repeatedly with flickering, chastened eyes.

Alex let him, not because she needed help—she could do it herself—but she was literally so starved for a gentle, caring touch that she couldn't deny herself the fleeting comfort and closeness. His fingers kept brushing against her stomach while he bandaged her. And as guilty and torn as she felt about deriving any small semblance of pleasure from his touch... still, she did. She stared blankly over the top of his head and blinked against watery eyes, not sure if it was because of the stinging cut or something else. This was betrayal to herself and to Castiel and what they had been, it felt like unfaithfulness to think of another man at all in the way she was beginning to allow herself to think about Glen. And it wasn't just betrayal, it was finality... it was the sound of the door closing, it was the end of the hour, it was the last page of a book. It was her really realizing that it was over—which she had known deep down... and she couldn't bear it, still... she had to.

Glen finished gently applying the bandage and he looked up at her with slow, cautious eyes that seemed soulful and earnest. "Do you really think I'd ever do anything to hurt you?" he asked softly, she guessed because she'd yanked away earlier. And he sounded as if thinking that broke his heart. He put his hands on her sides again, hesitant and careful, because maybe he could see through her, how she'd wanted that touch, how she still wanted it, even though the second his warm big hands settled onto her skin, so did the guilt. He searched her faltering eyes pleadingly. "Do you really think I'm such a bad guy?"

Underneath his gentle touch, Alex was struggling to both breathe normally and think straight; her heart was aching with sadness and confusion. "No, I just—I told you I'm not ready," she said, not even knowing if that's how she felt or not, just trying to explain it. "There's—there's someone else."

"There was someone else," he corrected, and he seemed to be brokenhearted right along with her, he saw how she reacted to hearing that—she tried to look away, he caught her jaw in his hand, made her look at him. "Look at what he's done to you, Alex. Broken your heart completely. I know he did. I see how sad you are. How lonely." He moved one hand up, tucked some of her hair behind her ear. He softened, empathized with her, begged her to give him a chance: "You don't have to be." Words that threatened to make her break down. Because god, she didn't want to be alone anymore, she was so tired of being empty and abandoned; she needed someone. But she still wanted that someone to be her angel, not anyone else. Castiel wasn't there though, was he? Glen was.

She looked at him with eyes filling with telling tears—she was torn down the middle, not wanting to go along with this on one hand, but on the other hand, thinking she should give in and use Glen to forget her pain. "You're so goddamn beautiful," he murmured and he gently touched the side of her neck and he looked from her eyes to her lips, he seemed almost desperate. "I just... really wanna kiss you right now," he almost whispered, and his hand brushed against the side of her face, his lips parted a little, he looked so earnest and heartfelt and Alex was at war inside of herself—her
heart was racing and she felt dizzy, and it wasn't entirely unpleasant, either.

He was craning his neck up slowly, watching her carefully, and she knew he was going to kiss her, felt his other hand touch the other side of her face so that he was cradling it tenderly in both hands and she still didn't move, her face becoming agonizing in expression the closer he got, and she didn't know if she was going to accept the kiss or not—and just before his lips would have touched hers, she turned her head away, unable to bring herself to it, and upset with herself for every reason. "I can't," she insisted, a broken little whisper, and her hands pressed gently into his upper chest, to stop him. His hands stayed where they were, he sat up a little higher on his knee, leaned his head and kissed the curve of her neck gently, appealingly, his hands gliding down to her shoulders. Alex shut her eyes, eyebrows slamming together and fingers curling into his shirt, body tensing as treacherous heat flushed her. Having someone touch her so gently and longingly after a year of holding out for Castiel was impossible, too much—and even though everything in her screamed yes, she was hyper-aware that it wasn't Cas who was touching her like that and she resisted, holding herself stiffly, almost jumping away from Glen and threatening his life if he ever touched her again... but she also was unbearably lonely and alone and Glen was warm, breathing against her neck and then kissing her again softly, moving some of her hair back, stroking sensitive skin of her shoulder and neck with his fingers, eliciting a soft little expulsion of breath out of Alex's slightly agape mouth. He was strong and solid and close to her, and she wanted him to kiss her neck again like that. And when he did she wanted to cry for shame at herself and simultaneously, to wrap her arms around his strong shoulders and let him keep going. He kissed again, less innocently—more sensually—and something snapped.

She thought of Cas—her other half, the one she belonged to, the one who she couldn't betray like this—and she got panicked and pushed Glen back, got up off the bed quickly, anything to get away from the temptation he was presenting her with. She shakily rolled her bunched up, torn shirt back down, her back to Glen now—and she went to the window, distancing herself from him. She was playing with fire, being here alone with him in her emotionally deteriorated state. And she'd had demon blood a couple days ago, it made her even more sexually frustrated than normal. She had fallen apart, and she knew it. She hated herself for it even more than before. For letting loneliness and depression have control. She was supposed to be stronger than this.

"Alex—" Glen appealed, standing up slowly. She lifted up a couple of the closed blinds that laid across the window, looking outside tersely, trying not to think about how good it had felt, what he had just done, those simple little touches. "I'm sorry, do you really not want..." he trailed off and he sounded so sad that Alex felt guilty all over again at how he sounded. Had she somehow led the guy on all these months? She'd thought he was nothing more than a gigantic flirt, a rakish frat boy at best. She hadn't seen the substance he apparently hid away deep down. The thoughtfulness and heart he hid from everyone else.

She turned her head slightly, heard him approaching with soft footfalls. "I told you, I can't," she said, then shook her head, let the blinds snap closed again. This was so, so hard. "I won't."

She felt him come up behind her and her breath caught a little at his proximity and the question of what was he doing to do? "Sweetie," he murmured sympathetically, and she felt his hands gently touch either of her arms from behind. She weakened at that, at the feeling of being held, however gingerly. "He's not coming back. I'm here." He's not coming back. She looked upward, blinking rapidly, trying to be okay with the thought that he's not coming back. Trying to believe it, because she was killing herself slowly by hanging onto hope. "And I'm not going anywhere," he told her comfortingly—words that were exactly what Alex wanted to hear, just not from him—but what if Glen was as good as it was gonna get for her? His mouth was right beside her ear, his voice was low and deep, his warm breath made her body tingle without permission. His firm chest touched her back gostingly, and his warmth seeped into her and she shut her eyes, conflicted at an
excruciating level. "It's okay," he told her. Soft, a whisper, a seduction. "You want to forget, right?" Yes, she did—no, she didn't. She didn't know. He ran his hands up and down her arms gently, sending a feeling like sparks across her skin. "I can help with that." He kissed the side of her neck again, straining her defenses. "If that's all you want me for... all right."

He was saying, use me. Alex gritted her teeth together as he kissed her neck again, softer, his lips warm and soft. "No—I can't..." she almost whimpered but it was a stuttering and weakening excuse, a fallacy, an automatic thing she said. She could. Nothing was stopping her, not physically. But... she wanted so desperately for the one touching her and haltingly enticing her to be Castiel. She turned her head to the side, trying to look at Glen, wishing she would see a handsome weary face with dark eyebrows and brilliant crystal eyes and wide lips and age lines scattered across tan skin—a gaze that conveyed love and tenderness beyond compare.

But it wasn't Cas. It was Glen, and the steely gray eyes that caught hers were not Cas's, the aquiline features were not Cas's, the tenor voice was not Cas's, the dark and faintly hungry gaze was not Cas's. The one there with her was not the one she loved and wanted and pined for and she couldn't say anything, because it was not okay but somehow she still wanted this because it was better than nothing. She despised herself for that thought.

"Stop thinking, just let me help you," Glen murmured behind her, circling his arms around her and nuzzling her neck with his nose, then mouthing it softly, half kissing, half sucking. Her throat closed up a little bit and she didn't know herself anymore, her hand shot out and grasped the wood border of the window she was facing and she held onto it for dear life as she fought herself, not sure what to do. He sucked inwards, hard, and she gasped softly in pleasure and pain alike, felt him lacing a hand through her hair and pulling her head to the side, tilting her head to expose more of her neck and he repeated his actions, leaving marks on her neck and eliciting soft gasps from her, his hand on the front of her neck now, soft. Dangerous desire was pooling deep down and the allure of what Glen was doing softened her, melting her.

Faintly, below the chaos of rising titillation, Alex was struggling against a rising panic. Was this really happening? Was she really letting him do this? She was, and she couldn't believe herself. It was because she was desperate to be loved how she had been before, to feel alive and to feel adored, the things Castiel had made her feel. But was that a good enough reason, a valid excuse? It didn't seem to matter. Being as emotionally and physically impoverished as she was, she didn't do what her instincts kept telling her to do, she didn't run away. Instead, she stayed there and let Glen touch her in an exploring, slow, curious way but she felt wrong about it, so wrong. He's not Cas, she reminded herself over and over again—both a horror and a tragedy to think about. And Glen continued to kiss and love-bite her neck, ghosting his fingers across the front of her neck even then down over the swell of her chest... she sucked in a breath sharply and his hand dropped lower to over her belly button and he pulled her closer to himself, flush to his hips—and she struggled internally against the desire to be warm and feel something, the desire to just give in to him completely... and the panic that was setting in more strongly because this was not right and she knew it so why wasn't she telling him to stop?

Because maybe in her heart of hearts she was afraid that there were no other options for her. That Castiel had decided he didn't want her and Glen had for whatever reason. Alex had this crazy thought that if she told Glen 'no' she'd be alone, truly alone, forever. And if she wasn't with the one she loved most, should she be with someone who she loved as a friend? Wasn't that better than nothing? She tried to force herself into this, because maybe this was the only way to get over Castiel. She tried to just let go, to not be anything but into it as Glen's hands slowly trailed up, coaxing her shirt upwards over her middle. She let out an almost pained sound when he nipped and sucked the skin just below her jaw into his mouth and through the space between his teeth. Her other hand slammed straight into the blinds to press there flat-palmed.
She forced herself to shut her eyes as misery and guilt piled onto her with horrible, consuming vastness. There was a lump in the bottom of her throat that she couldn't swallow away, there was a vaguely sick feeling in the pit of her stomach even though her body was enraptured at the feeling of being kissed and touched. This was cheating. She was cheating on Castiel, she was being unfaithful to him. Sure, he hadn't shown his face in a year, he'd vanished abruptly, appeared for all of ten minutes to save her from Nandriel and then thrown her into a random place without thought… he had basically said, nonverbally, that it was over for him, but it wasn't over for her. She still loved him and that's why this was wrong—because even though she'd said goodbye to him a few days ago she still hadn't let go of him. And maybe never would. Glen was gently touching and squeezing her chest now over her shirt and she was letting him and it felt good and she craved it and yet it was so detestable, the guilt was unbelievable and she felt her throat thickening as emotion choked her. She suddenly let out a quaking soft sob of grief.

Why the hell would Cas do this to her, leave her like he had and refuse to come to her constant calls?! Say he loved her and possess her heart itself and say he'd be with her the rest of his days then leave without a single fucking word of explanation? What if the rest of her life was like this? Lonely and alone because no one else would ever compare to him? Would she always be conflicted and guilt-ridden because she couldn't get over him? A mess, a wreck, a disaster? Would she really never know why he'd left?

Glen's hands moved down to caress the fronts of her thighs and she shuddered without meaning to, freaked out as hell and simultaneously aroused and so filled with horror at herself—she wasn't sure if she could go through with this after all, the more he touched her, the warmer he made her, the greater her trepidation. He knew exactly how to touch her, his hands were experienced and confident and she had no doubt that he was probably an amazing lover but… beyond her physical desire for sex, she craved intimacy and love and to her, those two words were tied to Castiel exclusively. How could she do this to him, to them? This was a mistake. Even if Cas never ever came back, even if Glen was the last man to ever show interest in her… was it really worth it? Knowing she'd gone back on her word? Glen's hands curved inward to the insides of her thighs, moved upward and hit up against her, between her legs. Her eyes shot open, her breath caught, she clearly saw Castiel's face in her mind's eye. No. I can't do this.

"Stop, stop—" she said, voice rising a little in panic, and she pushed at his hands—and was met with surprising resistance.

"Come on, baby, just relax," he soothed into her ear, not letting go, not taking his hands away, in fact, touching her purposefully, rubbing a hand across the crotch of her jeans despite her telling him to stop. "I know you want this; just quit fighting it."

His words scared her, his calm and low unbothered voice alerted her to the fact that she needed to start feeling alarmed. "I said no!" she insisted, conveying herself clearly, leaving no room for doubt that she wanted him to stop, now—and she tried to yank away, but he didn't let her and stark panic overtook her, confusion. "What the hell are you doing?!" she demanded in a quickly rising voice.

"What you want, what I know you want," he said, and his tone had become sharper, like he was annoyed with her.

"No, get off of me!" she insisted, and began to fight his hold, trying to push him away. His arms closed over her like a vice and total fear choked her at the abrupt shift that had taken place, the realization that he had her in a completely vulnerable position and that everything he'd said to her wasn't true, couldn't be, because why was he doing this?

"Are you fucking kidding me?" he asked, tone distinctly angry, harsh, and full of righteous
indignation—and it was like a different man was suddenly there behind her—he was hurting her, and he sounded merciless and she was struggling and he abruptly sounded like he hated her. "You're gonna string me along all this time and act like you're gonna give it to me then stop me now? What, you trying to trick me or something Winchester? Me?"

"Glen, stop, please!" she begged, getting hysterical and trying to fight him away, but her movements were made incredibly useless by her panic. "What are you doing—what are you doing!?" she protested, struggling valiantly, but he had her in basically a bear hug and he shoved her against the window roughly, holding her in place with his sheer size and weight—blinds smashed into the side of her face stingingly. This wasn't Glen! She knew him! Was he possessed?! No, not possible, he had an anti-possession tattoo. And that was the most terrifying, gut-punching thought of all: that she had trusted him and he wasn't who she thought.

"No," he growled, "Hell no, you're not gonna make me look like the bad guy, you wanted this you little bitch, you begged for it, don't try and act like you didn't, no one plays games with me—no one! I decide, do you hear me? I do!"

And she realized far too late that she was in the most dangerous place she'd ever been, that Glen wasn't who she'd been led to believe, and that he was, quite possibly, out of his literal mind. "Get off me, get away!" she cried uselessly, voice rising in panic as he refused to let go of her, his arms crushing her painfully, one of his hands roughly trying to undo the button of her jeans as he went on a tirade about how he wasn't evil, how dare she make him resort to this, and he used some of the ugliest words in the English language to refer to her—then put a hand on the back of her head and shoved the side of her face into the window more. And something about that seemed to flip a switch in her brain, help her focus and push her panic aside. She felt the familiar adrenaline-rushed feeling she got in the middle of fights and she decided no. You don't get to do this to me, you lying psychopathic asshole.

And gathering her wits, tuning out his words and letting herself become tunnel-vision focused, she went back to what she knew. Fighting dirty. She went slack in his arms, pretended to give up, even though her every sense was furious and ready to take the advantage when he gave it—and he did immediately, shoving a hand down into her jeans—and when he did that, one of her arms got free and she bent it so that the elbow was a sharp point. With every ounce of strength she had, she pushed away with all of her weight from the window and used the freedom of motion to ram her elbow back into his stomach. She turned with the motion and managed a valiant blow to his face with her fist, hard enough to break the skin of her knuckles and crack his nose—he stumbled back a step, catching himself on the nightstand—and he angrily ripped the clock radio off its cord and too fast for her to counter, he struck her in the side of the head with it so hard that her ears rang and her vision doubled, went grayish. She stumbled sideways, stunned, falling down to her knees—and realized she should have run while she had still been able. Oh my god what is he going to do to me? A strange, dull question she thought as the room spun around her maddeningly.

Glen grabbed her easily like a rag doll and threw her down onto the bed, stomach-first.

Dean and Sam walked out of the Lincoln Avenue Police Department in Easter, Pennsylvania, both dressed in their FBI getup—suits, ties, the works. Dean was back in, and the two of them were hunting together again as of about one hour ago when Dean had rolled into town.

After the shifter baby debacle a few days ago—which, incidentally, had ended badly with another shifter getting the kid after all—Dean had returned home and, after some discussion, Lisa had basically told him she couldn't stand to see him wallowing around in restlessness, that she couldn't take his mopey, cagey attitude. That he needed to go hunt, because it was clear to her that he didn't
want to be there now that he knew Sam was alive and now that he'd seen Alex again. Come home when you can, Lisa'd told him, basically giving him her blessing and telling him to go hunt, do what would make him happy. Well, maybe not happy, but less miserable. He was still torn about the decision, and so far, Sam seemed questionable and a little off. But it had only been an hour so... he didn't wanna misjudge anything.

He could definitely feel how different things were though, and it wasn't just because Sam was acting weird, it was because Alex was missing from the dynamic. It felt weird to Dean, it felt like he was trying too hard to reclaim the golden years—a.k.a. the time before Stull Cemetery and the subsequent collapse of his family as he knew it. And he couldn't believe he was calling the hell they'd lived the golden years, but at least they'd been together. Maybe they still could together again, maybe they could find it again: the way they used to be. He hoped so.

He needed to call their sister soon and try and apologize for... what, for the fact that he was worried for her? The fact that he knew it was dangerous to hang around witches, especially intuitives? The fact that Glen gave him the creeps? Maybe he'd gone about it the wrong way, but he'd been totally blindsided by the revelation that Jamie was a witch... and not just a witch, but an intuitive. They were the most dangerous and rare kind of witch because they used the power of their own spirit—it was sort of like chi by comparison, he wasn't too sure—to cast spells and work magic. The lore on intuitive witches wasn't too in-depth, which is why he found them the most dangerous of all: he didn't know shit about them. Somehow, he had to figure out a way to get his sister out of the volatile partnership she'd struck up with the two Wards. He just had a bad feeling about it, period.

It was ironic his thoughts were on witches, because the two paranormal deaths they were investigating here in Pennsylvania? They both seemed pretty damn witchy: two dead police officers, one completely liquified, the other one covered inside and out in huge, disgusting boils—that particular corpse was basically one of the more disgusting things Dean had ever laid eyes on.

"So, what do you think?" Sam asked, in stride beside Dean as they walked down the sidewalk. "Next move? Go see Officer Bumpy's partner, see if we can get any leads there?"

"Huh? Oh, uh... yeah that sounds—" Dean's phone rang, he dug in his pocket for it, held up a finger with his other hand. "Hold that thought." He pulled out his mobile and frowned a little when he saw who it was. It was Alex. She hadn't called him since the the whole Jamie-is-a-witch thing and was probably still pissed at him. He almost thought about not answering because if she was gonna chew his ear off... no thank you. But he decided to take the chance as Sam glanced at him sidelong impatiently, clearly ready to get a move on. Dean ignored him and answered, put the phone to his ear and used his most charming, lighthearted tone. "Hey, kiddo, not still mad at me, are you?"

"Dean," she burst out, and her voice immediately alerted him to the fact that something was wrong—he stopped walking abruptly, startled and aware something was wrong. "W-where are you?" she asked in a breathy, panicked kind of voice.

"I'm—I—I need you Dean, come get me, please—" she sobbed and he thought he heard her say 'oh god' as if in pain and he went from being worried to terrified for her in a millisecond. "I just killed someone, I just killed someone—" she wept.

Holy shit.

"What, like, like... a person?" he asked, aghast because she killed things all the time, but she had
said she killed someone.

"Yes, a person." She made a horrible gaspy breathing sound.

Wide-eyed and needing to know a million things all at the same time, Dean freaked out, a hand on his head, fingers jamming through his hair shakily, he turned around, paced a couple steps back the way he’d come, then turned again, and headed for the Impala again, disorienting himself. "Where are you? Do you have a weapon? What happened? Are you injured? Did anyone see?" He could hear, faintly, the sound of traffic whooshing past Alex, like she was driving with a window down or standing beside a highway.

"I'm—I, I was driving but I can't see right and—my head—the—I'm in Adrian and I just passed mile marker ten on Highway 23," she said, and she sounded sort of sluggish and confused—scaring Dean all over again—he stood there with a hand on his head, listening hard, getting more and more terrified the more she said. "My—I have weapons but I think I'm about to pass out—" she groaned loudly and he could see her pained face in his mind's eye. "Dean—how far away are you?"

She needed him and he knew it and was already scrambling in his brain to figure out the fastest route to get there—he'd started walking again, fast; he was a man on a mission and that voice on the other end was the most important thing in the universe to him right then. He didn't let her know how scared he was: he kept his voice calm and assertive, confident. "I'm a few hours from where you are but I'm gonna break every speed limit to get to you, you hear me baby girl?" he told her in no uncertain terms, trying to pour every ounce of brotherly reassurance he possessed into his tone and words. "You just sit tight, you hear me? I'm coming to get you. Can you get somewhere and lay low?"

"Dean, hurry," she said, and he could hear that she was crying, hard—she didn't answer his question. "I see spots, my head hurts, Dean it hurts—"

Her reaction to the pain was freaking him out the most. She never cried about pain—complained and bitched yes, but never cried like a little kid about it. Dean was panicking by association. "Is your stomach upset? Have you thrown up? Do you have a fever?" he asked rapid-fire, trying to diagnose her on the fly, because head injuries weren't something to kid around with—but he heard no answer. She seemed to have hung up. Son of a bitch. What the fuck was happening! He called her back and it went straight to voicemail. Shit—shit! She must have passed out like she'd said. With shaking hands Dean started to put in Bobby's number as he got to the Impala, multitasking, trying to get his keys out with one hand and put the number into the phone with the other, then remembering his silent brother who had followed him and was looking at him questioningly, waiting for an explanation, seemingly not too worried.

"What's up with her?" Sam asked, like he hadn't heard Dean's frightened tone or seen how the call had freaked him out completely.

"Alex is in trouble, we gotta go," Dean said, shoving the key into the door to his car and unlocking it.

"Now?" Sam asked, as if her crisis was inconvenient for him. "How bad of trouble?"

Indignant, Dean turned his head to look at his brother sharply. "What do you mean 'how bad'?!"

"Dean, these leads are gonna cold if we don't—" Sam started, collected and reasonable in the face of Dean's shaken nerves.

"Fuck the leads!" Dean shouted, cutting off his brother and turning to look at him straight on. "Do
it yourself if it's so goddamn important; our sister is passed out on the side of a road somewhere four hours from here and you're worried about some case?!!” Sam had lost his mind; he had literally lost his freaking mind.

Sam huffed, looked like he was trying to collect himself, like he was getting ready to make an excuse. "Look, I didn't mean—"

"I don't wanna hear it Sam!" Dean thundered angrily, short on time and patience alike, "now are you coming or not!?"

"We don't both need to go," Sam said, the picture of removed and cool-headed and it infuriated Dean. "You get her, I'll go see the dead officer's partner."

"Yeah, great, you do that," Dean snapped and got into the Impala without another word to his brother. He squealed tires out of there and kept his police scanner on, because the speed with which he planned on driving was illegal… and he didn't have time for a pullover or pursuit.

Just over three hours later when he strode into Bixby Hospital in Adrian, Michigan, still in his FBI getup, Dean knew what he was walking into and was as prepared as he could be, given the circumstances. He had used the time on the road to both get Alex safe and then gather as much information as possible using phone call after phone call. He was even more anxious to lay eyes on his sister after what he'd found out.

He'd worked with Bobby over the phone to first find out what county Adrian was in, and what the direct line to the 911 dispatch there was. Using that information, he'd reported his sister's general location and condition, made sure an ambulance got sent to her—called back ten minutes later and verified they did have her and she was alive, found out what hospital she was being taken to. He'd called Bobby back, tried to let him know what was going on, then called the local police department where Alex was and gave the officers a false name and badge number, said he needed to know about any disturbances or homicides reported that day. There had been one. A shooting of some kind at a local motel—or, gunfire and a lot of blood left behind. But no body. Maybe Alex had gotten rid of whoever she killed; Dean didn't know. But apparently when she'd been taken into the hospital, the police had responded to the scene of her collapse and found her car full of weapons, including the gun that matched the bullet casings found at the crime scene. So as if it weren't bad enough she was in the hospital, in addition she was gonna be held on suspicion of connection to a shooting. Dean had called back an hour later after that call for an update and found out they'd run Alex's prints and realized who she was and that she was wanted in several states for various crimes. So basically, by getting her sent to the hospital, he'd opened a pretty big can of worms. The real FBI would probably be there within twenty-four hours for her, as she was on their watch/wanted list.

Dean's priority was get her out of there, if she wasn't too badly injured, before the shit could really hit the fan. If he couldn't pull off an escape for them both… he didn't know what the hell to do because it would spiral out of control fast if she left the hospital in police or federal custody. So this had to work. Anxious and nerve-wracked, he struggled to play the part of steely, lackadasical and burnt-out FBI agent. He flashed his badge at the first hospital personnel member he saw, no time to waste, nervous he'd look over his shoulder any second and see the real feds. "Agent Bonham, FBI," he announced to the mousy, frazzled looking nurse he'd all but shoved his badge at. "I need you to take me to the patient in custody, now." She complied and led him through the hospital and to his sister without question.

Dean first saw Alex as he passed a long glass window that separated the room she was in from the hallway he walked down—and he was shocked. She was laying in a hospital bed, propped up
halfway, hands loosely laying in her lap—one of them cuffed to the little side railing on the bed. She wore jeans, boots, and a shirt that was torn in the midsection, where he saw a bandage had been applied—it looked like she'd been in the fight of her life. She had strange red blistering marks that looked almost like hickeys across her neck, a huge black and blue bruise on the side of her head, a cut down the middle of it, a split lip, a puffy shiner just below her right eye. Dean automatically bristled at the thought of someone knocking her around and putting those injuries on her—and he hoped whoever she killed was the one who did that to her—but then he took in the look on her face and his fury faded. She stared at her hands vapidly and he could see how deeply upset she was, how lost in thought, how scared she was—and she looked years younger to him somehow, like the little pre-teen Alex who had constantly been picked on in school and tried to hide her sadness by withdrawing. No sooner had he thought that than she looked up, saw him, got a look of relief and desperation on her face—he saw how bad she wanted him to be in there with her and he could barely stand to do what he did next—he gave the subtlest shaking no of the head as he followed the nurse to the door to the room. He glanced at the officer stationed beside her and the nurse, too meaningfully and Alex understood, looked away, distressed.

"Right in there, sir," the nurse said, and Dean nodded his thanks as she left. This was risky and he had to play it just right, he had to really bust out some acting chops for this one if he wanted to get his sister out of this. Please, please let this work. He opened the door to the room and went in, swaggering a little like he owned the place, fully committing to the role, because Alex's fate pretty much depended on it.

The nurse who was attending Alex turned, frowned at him. She was short, middle-aged, and overweight, had pleasant features and ruddy cheeks. "Excuse me, sir, you can't be in here—" she started.

"Oh, I think I can," Dean said sarcastically, giving off the air of boredom and annoyance, of vague disinterest in everything. "I'm with the bureau, your superiors should both have told you to expect me." He glanced at Alex and pretended to be unimpressed with her—all show for the watchful nurse and officer. Alex was utterly quiet and her shoulders were caved forward, she looked at him with an unreadable expression. He turned his attention back to the officer and room nurse, not letting himself give away the ploy. He flashed his ID badge and an acrimonious smile at them then closed it with a snap, pocketed it. "Agent Bonham. I have orders for you to release her to me—" he looked at the officer beside Alex and scoffed, put his hands in his pockets and smiled facetiously, cynically. "Let me guess, you small-town crackpots didn't already know that, either."

The nurse and police officer looked at each other uncertainly and Dean kept up the act, played on their doubts, paced the room a little, took a hand out and gestured lazily, like he was used to this. "Right. No. Great. Well contingent on her condition, we want her back at headquarters for questioning concerning other matters I'm not at liberty to discuss." He stopped, turned, looked at the RN again, put his hand back in his pocket. Was careful to sound appropriately blasé and routine about all of this, even though he wanted nothing more than to just knock them both out and take his sister and run. But unfortunately, the room was bordered with three clear glass window panes and doctors, nurses, and patients were all around and would see if he did something like that. So, Dean had to do this the pain-in-the-ass way. "Mind telling me her condition?" he asked the nurse. "She stable enough to transport?" She looked okay, he'd seen her worse off.

"Well, uh..." the nurse faltered, looked at Alex hesitantly, then at Dean. "Can we speak outside?"

Dean narrowed his eyes slightly, not appreciating the grab for power in the exchange. "In here's fine, ma'am."

The nurse suddenly got slightly cantankerous, a little bossy, sort of sassy. "Outside the room,
Agent," she said, dropping the nice act. And she turned, led the way, surprising Dean. Not having to feign annoyance, he followed sullenly, casting a glance at his sister before doing so—she was trying not to look at him too much. He saw she was worried that he wasn't going to actually get her out of this—she picked at her hospital bracelet, and the metal cuffs clinked against the railing of her bed.

Dean and the nurse stood outside the room, beside the window, and Dean crossed his arms unhappily, briefly glanced sidelong where he could see Alex in the bed. "All right, what's the big secret, Nurse… Peggy?" he asked, reading her name tag.

The nurse folded her arms too, fixing him with a serious look. "I didn't think it would be prudent to discuss this in front of her," she said churlishly, apparently not liking his attitude. "Yes, I think you can transport her," she continued in clipped tones, as if she held a personal grudge against Dean. She glanced Alex's way and Dean thought he saw mild worry in the nurse's eyes. "Her condition's stable and we've done about all we can do for her—she's got your basic run of the mill assault wounds… some mild head trauma, a pretty good concussion, mild contusions. But there's possible sexual assault and she's refused the rape kit."

It was like all the air disappeared completely, as if he'd been punched in the gut—Dean's entire body was struck with the most horrifying sick feeling. "Rape kit?" He repeated dazedly, his voice suddenly gone weak. No, surely he'd misheard—no, no—

"Right, yes," the nurse said, still looking into the room and currently oblivious to Dean's fallen, horrified face, his look of utter growing terror. "She told someone on the ambulance she'd been assaulted and she seemed to indicate it was of a sexual nature, but once she was here, she clammed up, refused the rape kit examination point blank." She paused, looked at Dean directly, who was shellshocked, finding it nearly impossible to disguise his reaction of horror and no and how could that be true? "You… okay, Agent?" she asked, taking in his look of alarm, seeming thrown off by it.

Dean remembered himself, that he had to get himself and Alex out of this and he scrambled to find a reasonable excuse. "Uh, yeah, yeah, she… I got a sister about her age… and I just… wow." He looked into the room and struggled to control himself and his expression. He was about to give himself away if he didn't get it together.

Except, his show of genuine emotion seemed to work in his favor. Peggy softened toward him a little, seemed to reevaluate him because of his clear compassion and concern. "Oh, oh, I see," she said, nodding her understanding, seeming touched by his response. "Well. It's not uncommon for victims to refuse the exam, but…" she trailed off, looked at Dean candidly. "Can you promise me, Agent—that you'll be careful with her? See if you can get her to do the exam again once you're wherever you're going? It really should be within ninety-six hours of the assault for best results." She faltered. "I know I'm not a police officer or an agent and it may not be my place... I know she's wanted for some kind of shooting or something but... in my book, she still deserves to be treated like a human being, with kindness and compassion, just like everyone else."

Dean stared at her, wordless for a minute and touched by her statement—she didn't even know how much she'd sort of renewed his faith in the human race with that single sentence. Overcome by emotions for every reason possible, he struggled to save face and respond to what she'd said. He looked into the room, at his sister on the bed. "Yeah, I'll, uh, I'll take good care of her, don't worry," he said, dazed, not even entirely sure what he'd just said. "She'll be safe with me."

Nurse Peggy sighed, reluctant, obviously conflicted. But she nodded. "Okay. I'll draw up the release papers in cooperation with the bureau. She'll just need to rest when possible, though, Agent
Bonham. Maybe wait a few days before questioning her too intensely, if you can swing it?” Dean gave her a tight will do smile and Peggy looked into the room at Alex, Dean followed her gaze. "I just really can't believe a sweet little thing like her's wanted by the FBI…” she said softly, then looked at Dean hopefully. "Mind if I ask what for?"

Dean feigned a smug smirk, like he had an inside joke, trying to get back to the indifferent FBI persona. It was hard. "That's classified, ma'am. Now if you'd get me those release papers. I need to get a move on." His expression felt plastic and fake, but he held it.

She nodded. "Of course." And just like that, she headed to the nurse's station.

One down, one to go. Dean let out a heavy, long breath—this was, without a doubt, the worst day of his entire life. He glanced into the room at the officer and thought to himself here goes everything. He reentered the hospital room, looked at his sister, who was scared and it showed. Looking at her and those bruises and marks he almost lost it completely but somehow managed to hold it together. But he knew his front wasn't as seamless as it had been before, his demeanor was affected and he was thrown off by what the nurse had just told him. Still, he had to do this and get his sister out of there. Digging deep, he summoned a facetious little smile and glanced at the cuffs that were tethering his sister to the bed. He looked pointedly at the officer who was standing beside her, hands clasped in front of himself. Dean indicated her cuffs and feigned lazy indifference, even though his heart was pounding painfully fast. This was the moment he couldn't screw up. "If you would, officer?"

The police officer hesitated. Dean knew the type: middle aged, lazy and uninspired, sort of complacent, bored all the time in a small town that didn't see a lot of action. By the book and scared to do something wrong, thrilled by the idea of being a hero in whatever small way, even if being heroic just meant being anal retentive. "I'm sorry, Agent," the officer said, "but none of my superiors said to expect you…" he said, trailing off in the face of Dean's increasingly stormy expression.

Dean's gaze was dagger-sharp and filled with the clear message that you just pissed off the wrong fed. "Lemme guess, Sparky," he said, addressing the older man with no respect and a growing note of carefully placed anger. "You wanna be a good little small-town cop and waste federal time because your cute little department is slow on the uptake and bad at communicating with each other—" Dean scoffed through a cynical smile, acting like he got that shit all the time, then he let himself get mad for real. It wasn't hard. "Well listen, I don't got time to fuck around, okay?" He pointed a finger at his sister. "This kid is wanted in eleven goddamn states and has been on the wanted list for years and as of when I walked in here a minute ago, she's my jurisdiction, not yours!" Dean thundered, letting the officer wither a little under his glare. Then came time for the threats, the physical intimidation, and Dean laid them both on thickly, maybe a little over the top because of how urgent his need was to get his sister safe, away from the cops and feds. "Buddy, you do not wanna piss me off—I'll slap you with obstruction and official misconduct so fast it'll make your head fly off—Jesus you little city cops are all the same, my god," he muttered, making sure the officer thought this kind of thing happened all the time and that there was nothing else that angered him further. "Are we done with the bullshit? Get those damn cuffs off her and I'll take it from here."

The officer still looked uncertain and berated. As usual, the threats worked—the policeman looked scared of getting in trouble, of being the idiot at the end of the day. And so he complied. "Uh, right, okay," the officer said, and fumbled for his keys, hurried to undo Alex's cuffs. Dean and Alex's gazes met tensely and she seemed so ashamed to him. His heart clenched painfully. He refused to think some man could have done that to her… what Nurse Peggy had implied. "All yours, Agent Bonham," the officer said and Dean made a 'get up' motion to Alex with his fingers. She got up
slowly, like she was sore and having trouble moving.

"Can you stand okay, kid?" he asked gruffly, trying to disguise his inner turmoil.

She was looking at the floor as she stood. "Yeah."

Dean put a hand on her shoulder as if to guide her, but honestly, he just needed to comfort her any small way possible—he struggled not to look at her like he wanted to. The officer was still watching mistrustfully and Dean realized he had to keep up the act just a little longer. "Miss Winchester, try anything and I'll shoot you. Got it?" he asked, then manhandled her toward the door, nodded a sharp goodbye at the officer.

Silently, brother and sister walked down the hallway, keeping up the ruse, not looking at each other—brother struggling to keep his composure, sister obviously in complete emotional distress.

"Just keep looking down, walk fast," Dean said just loud enough for only them to hear, his hand still on her shoulder. He cast furtive glances around—hurrying a little bit for fear of the FBI showing. But as they neared the North Exit, near where he'd parked, he saw a janitorial closet and on a whim, after looking around really fast, he opened the door and pushed her in, followed, then shut the door behind himself, took her by both arms, really looked at her—in stark florescent light, he could see her injuries with terrifying clarity and those marks on her neck made him hurt. "Jesus Christ, Alex, what happened?" He asked her, barely able to speak. He looked her in the eye. "Are you… are you okay?" he asked, silently begging her to tell him yes because he couldn't handle it if she said no.

She looked down and away, held herself stiffly, and the look on her face was the worst thing he'd ever seen. Her voice barely worked, it was thick with pain and maybe the onset of tears. And the word he had dreaded to hear left her lips with heartbreaking softness: "No."

His heart shattered at that single word, broke completely, and he couldn't take what he thought it meant. She hung her head and covered her mouth with her hand, visibly trying not to cry. And maybe she was able to hold back right then, but Dean wasn't. Gritting his teeth against the helpless grief that was breaking him in two, he crumpled. He should have been with her, he should never have left her, or let her leave, or any of it. Somehow he thought this was his fault and he cursed himself and despaired on her behalf—she didn't deserve this!

He touched her tangled hair gently there on the side of her head, trying to reassure her. His hand trembled, he heard himself taking in a horrible sobbing breath as he shook his head no over and over and reality set in on him all over again. "Alex, no… baby girl, no," he protested pathetically, wishing mere words could undo tragedy. He didn't know what else to say or do. It hurt too much, and she was in pain and he didn't want it for her. But he couldn't do a damn thing to make it better. He hugged her gently, almost afraid to do so because what if she didn't want to be touched—but she hugged him back, tightly, almost painfully, her face in his shoulder and her smaller frame quaked against his as she tried not to make any noise, tried to be brave. Dean shook his head as his composure cracked. Wretched tears rolled down his cheeks thickly, he squeezed his eyes shut and didn't understand how this could have happened. He shook from effort he was using to keep his grief at bay.

And then, as he held her close like that, he realized he could pick up the distinct masculine smell of aftershave or cologne clinging onto her skin and hair—and rage boiled in his veins, he went cold all over, murder suddenly on the brain. He drew back, shaking for new reasons, his grief turning into anger and fast. He tried to remain calm for her sake, but his voice trembled, his face gave it away. His hands were on either of her arms and he looked at her intensely. "Who did this to you, Alex? Who?" Dean would kill him, tear him fucking apart with his bare hands—
Alex was looking at him with an expression that seemed almost ashamed, which didn't make sense when she said what she did next: "It doesn't matter. H-he's dead now. I... shot him and ran away." Her voice was weak and soft, raspy, hoarse.

Dean hesitated, confused—because she'd told him twice now that she'd killed someone, but if that crime scene at the motel with bullet casings and blood and no body was her work... did that mean the guy she thought she'd killed was still out there somewhere? He studied her closely, scared. "And you're, you're sure you finished the job?" he asked softly, hating that he had to ask it, because obviously she was upset to have killed a human. But she nodded blankly, more shame and conflict crossing her features. "Who was it, Alex?" He asked, because he had a horrible suspicion that he knew exactly who had done this. There was an ugly feeling in the pit of his stomach, a dawning suspicion that he'd looked the man who hurt his sister in the eye and shaken his hand. When she said nothing, his voice dropped to utter softness and he asked what he was most afraid of. "W-was it Glen?"

Her eyes raised to his slowly, full of ashamed confirmation and she didn't say no and Dean wanted to simultaneously punch the wall and sink to a crouch, cover his face with his hands—that's how heavy the truth was. And then, faintly, brokenly, she nodded, eyes dropping away from his. And Dean was ruined. God, how could this have happened to her? Son of a bitch—she was too innocent for this, too tenderhearted, too burdened by other shit to have this on her shoulders now, too. And the worst part was how violating it was, how horrible a feeling it had to be, and Dean couldn't do one single damn thing to take that pain from her—that asshole, that motherfucking prick—Dean should have trusted his initial instincts about the guy, that something was off, that he wasn't trustworthy. But as weirded out as Glen had made Dean... he never would have guessed the guy would have done this.

Dean attempted to reign himself in, but another silent tear slipped out onto his cheek as he looked at his sister. All he could see was the bruise under her eye, the burst blood vessels on her temple, the split lip, the horrible red welts on her neck. Evidence that she really had been assaulted in the worst way. And he had to know, had to ask, because if he didn't, he'd tear himself up inside wondering. He tried to ask the most unthinkable question he'd ever had to ask her. His throat was dry, the words stuck on the way up. He could barely speak. "Was it..." full on rape? He couldn't say that, couldn't make his mouth form the words and he worked his jaw painfully, not able to look at her very well. "Did, did he... make you..." have sex with him?

Alex's hazel eyes, the same shade as Sam's, met his briefly, fire coming back into them, she surprised him with the loud and almost defiant way she answered. "No—hell no, you think I'd let some worthless son of a bitch do that to me?!!" Her voice trembled with rage, she looked at him angrily. "That asshole tried, Dean." Even though she looked mad enough to kill, her eyes were shining with tears. "And then I put a fucking bullet in his chest." The closet went silent and Alex breathed heavily in and out of her nose. Her wrath faded and inexplicable uncertainty crossed her face, like she wasn't sure about what she'd done—she became stony and put her arms around herself and looked away from him, her voice became low and flat. "He didn't get what he wanted, okay?" Short pause and a flicker of vulnerability. Her voice was soft again. "I don't wanna talk about it anymore."

Dean thought maybe he should feel relieved, just a little—because he'd had this horrible thought that my god if she was still a virgin—and he had no clue if she were or not—but if she were and her very first sexual encounter had been forced and violent and brutal and not wanted... he would die. But Dean wasn't relieved in the slightest. He was utterly horrified at the thought of some huge six- and-a-half foot tall guy trying to take advantage of his sister, leaving those angry red hickeys all over her neck, knocking her around and trying to force her to... to... Dean lost composure again and nodded his understanding, put his face in his hand, struggling with all of this. "You don't have
to say anything else. I'm just glad you're…' he trailed off. 'Okay'? She wasn't though. He couldn't find a word, just felt renewed guilty tumbling over him. "I should never have let you leave," he said softly. "I should have done so many things differently."

Her mask faltered and she seemed to resonate with him. "Me too," she said after a pause, her face working oddly as she tried to hold herself back. And something about the entire exchange made Dean wonder: Did she think this was her fault, somehow? He didn't know. He just needed to make sure she knew he was there for her. He carefully pulled her into a hug again with a soft "c'mere", ignoring the sickening smell of Glen that still lingered on her. If that asshole was still out there somewhere, Dean was going to find him and put a fucking bullet in his brain. But for now, he focused on taking care of his sister, making sure she knew that she was safe, and that he was gonna take care of her.

"You're okay now, I'm here," he soothed, still torn up emotionally himself but being strong for her sake. "I'm not going anywhere." He gently, carefully held the back of her head, promised himself he would never let anything like this ever happen to her again. "I got you, sweetheart."

Several Hours Later
Easter, Pennsylvania

"Wow," Sam said, and sat back, seeming to be blown back by everything Dean had just told him in hushed tones across the motel table.

They were a few stories up at least and the sound of traffic came up through the open window. Sam had research spread out all over the table but it was currently being ignored. The shower was going in the bathroom and the brothers were silent as Sam let it all sink in. Dean, changed into street clothes now, had his hands clasped on the table and was staring at nothing, shaking his head, expression foul and tense. "I knew he was bad news, Sam, I knew—why didn't I listen to my instincts?" He stood up, antsy as hell, rubbing his hand down over his mouth anxiously.

"And you said they didn't find a body," Sam said, eyes narrowed in thought.

Dean glanced sidelong at his brother, who seemed only mildly concerned and perplexed by everything he'd just told him. "Right," he confirmed dourly. "But you know what, Alex doesn't need to know that. It'll just scare her more and she doesn't need that. Not right now. If he's still kicking, I'll find out." He expelled a heavy breath through his nose, turned, paced the other way. "Anyway, she was pretty sure she killed the son of a bitch. So, I dunno. Maybe he crawled into a hole and died." Dean shook his head, filled with hatred. "I fucking hope he did."

"This is really unthinkable," Sam said, but even though Dean agreed with the words, the tone Sam used was devoid of the things Dean thought Sam should be feeling: hopelessness, horror, sadness, grief, pain. He just sounded… sort of chagrinned. And Dean stopped, looked at his brother with a what the hell is wrong with you expression. And then a phone began to ring, one Dean didn't recognize the sound of and he looked in the direction it was coming from—then saw it was Alex's cell. She'd left it on the night stand before going to take her shower. She'd been in there a really freaking long time, too. He cast a worried glance that way as he went to the phone and picked it up, frowning deeply. And when he saw the name on the screen he darkened. Jamie Ward. His stomach turned, his veins ran dark. He answered.

"What do you want?" he asked sharply, no pretense.

"...Dean? I was trying to reach Alex. What are—" she started.
Dean cut her off. "Listen, I'm gonna be real clear about this: your fucking brother tried to go Ted Bundy on my sister today and if he's not dead already, you better put a bullet in his head or I will. We good here?"

"What? Dean—wh—oh my god, I don't—what are you saying? I don't—"

"Trust me, sweetheart, I'm serious," he practically growled. "About all of it. And if I see you around me or my family ever again, I'll kill you too."

He hung up on her abruptly then angrily strode to the open bay window and tossed the phone out where it fell three stories and shattered on the sidewalk below. Sam turned in his chair. "Uh..." Sam looked at him oddly. "Why'd you do that? That was Alex's phone."

"So I'll get her a new one," Dean said flippant and forceful at the same time. He didn't have time for Sam's passive-aggressive comments. He heard the shower stop running right then and hoped he hadn't just made a mistake by tossing her phone out. He'd just cut Alex off from reminders of the Ward family, from contact with Jamie—in his mind, he was protecting her. It kind of went with the theme of the day, anyway: Alex had lost everything, it was all impounded somewhere in South Michigan—car, clothes, weapons, everything. And because of that, he'd stopped a couple hours back to get Alex new clothes—he'd run into Wal-Mart and cleaned out their stock of size small tank tops, flannel shirts, and size two jeans; he'd grabbed a pair of men's hunting boots in her size—then had gotten weird looks from an old lady when he picked out a pack of women's underwear. Dean didn't care though honestly—he'd had other things on his mind. Like maybe when this whole thing calmed down, they could go get Alex's car. If she even wanted it. Maybe she wouldn't. Maybe it would just serve as a reminder of what had happened to her and the people she'd spent so many months with.

This was insane. Trying to hold his broken, threadbare family together like this when Sam was being Mr. Robot and Alex was... he didn't even know. She'd been silent and brooding the car ride over, withdrawn and hadn't said but maybe ten words. Her expression the entire time? A stern, upset sort of frown, a tough I'm fine, don't ask kind of expression. She'd closed down, and he'd backed off, tried to be really careful about not pushing for conversation. He wasn't sure if he should try and get her to talk about it—what had happened—in a day or two or do it the usual Winchester way: pack it up and never talk about it again. Sweep it under the rug and pretend it hadn't happened. Ignore the issue and carry on like they always did. I mean, how could they though? He didn't know the details of what had happened to her, how bad it was, but the mere fact of it was horrible. And she shouldn't have to bury it deep and live with shame or fear or guilt. Maybe he should try and get her in to see a therapist? He didn't know. He'd never even considered being in this position before.

Getting frustrated, Dean realized he needed a fucking beer, now. Sam had the little motel fridge stocked and Dean pulled out a cold one, cracked it open, consumed it broodingly in the kitchen as Sam did stuff on his laptop, the picture of focus and interest in his work—the job. The job in which Dean currently had zero interest. It was making Dean mad how Sam was just able to act like this wasn't bothering him. And being Dean Winchester... he confronted his brother on it without a second thought. "Hey, so why the hell are you being so friggin' cold about this, huh? A year ago, this happened to Alex, you'd be a mess," he accused. "And now you're just... compiling research?"

Sam glanced up at Dean briefly then saw how ready to fight his brother was. He sighed, sat back, gave Dean his attention but acted as though it were inconvenient to him. "Dean. I dunno what to tell you. It's horrible what happened, it is, but be reasonable. Is getting upset going to help her? The best thing we can do is carry on like normal. Getting upset is only gonna upset her more."
Dean scoffed. "Please. Don't be *ridiculous* Sam, I'm worried about her and she needs to know it—me acting like I don't give a shit, how is *that* gonna help her out?"

Sam smiled briefly, a cynical little expression, and he seemed to be thinking about how to phrase himself. He hung an arm back over the chair, looked at Dean coolly. "You know, this is actually another reason I never came and got you from Lisa and Ben's. I realized this year that *this*..." he gestured vaguely, "this family dynamic of ours? The one where you set the stage and run the show and make Alex and I into your *kids*? Where you guilt trip us into emotion codependence?" He shook his head, emotionally devoid. "It just doesn't work for me, Dean. Not anymore. And apparently, it didn't work for her either." He turned back to his laptop, as if that was that.

"Excuse me?" Dean asked, eyebrows raised up high, shocked at his brother's little deadpan monologue.

Sam didn't look at him, just answered matter-of-fact: "You heard me just fine."

The bathroom door opened and Alex came out, drying her hair in a towel—dressed in her new jeans, a black tank, and a neutral flannel. The brothers went quiet for a minute, acknowledging her with a brief glance—Sam—and standing up straighter and looking at her carefully—Dean. He tried to assess her demeanor and posture, tried to see how she was doing, but he couldn't tell. "Hey," he greeted, trying to be light.

"Hey," she echoed, soft. She was avoiding his gaze and being systematic, acting really focused on her task—which she had apparently just finished. She tossed the towel back over her shoulder into the bathroom without a second thought and, walked toward the bed then frowned slightly, looked around like she was hunting for something. "Where's... my phone?" she asked, and she looked intensely worried—a genuine expression.

"Uh. In a hundred pieces," Dean admitted, not sure how she'd react. Maybe throwing it out the window had been a little much. Too late now though...

Alex looked at him with a panicked expression, and he wasn't sure why she was reacting so strongly. "*What*? That's not funny Dean, where is it?" She flew off the handle completely when he hesitated tellingly. "*Where is it*?!

At the outburst Dean realized he'd somehow made a huge mistake, set her off without meaning to. He attempted to pacify, calm her down, extending a hand slightly. "Hey, hey—it can be replaced, come on."

"No it *can't*—" she almost shrieked, then her face fell like she was going to weep—and as much as she'd held back all day, it was suddenly all pouring out. Alex looked like she'd lost something of immeasurable value and she flopped down to sit on the edge of the bed, seemingly defeated over the loss of her cellphone. "It had... it had a *picture* on it, the most important one..." she trailed off when her voice cracked and she put her face in her hands, began to sob like Dean had never seen—shoulders shaking, horrible crying sounds that were loud and pitiful and filling the entire room. Horrified, not sure what she was crying about—was it the phone? Was it what had happened? He faltering went to her, feeling awful. "I'm sorry, I didn't know," he said, and tried to sit next to her and put his arm around her but she yanked away and stood up, angry tears glittering in her eyes.

"Look, you know what? I don't need you to feel *sorry* for me," she spat, shocking him. "I'm fine. Stop looking at me like I'm *broken*. I'm *fine*!" Chastened and pretty sure she was the furthest thing from *fine* there was, Dean watched her visibly compose herself and grow outwardly stony almost frighteningly fast—she'd been hysterical not ten seconds ago, but now she was wearing that same
pinched, tight expression she’d worn all day. "If we can just not talk about it, any of it," she said lowly, and looked at Dean, then glanced at Sam. "I just want to do something normal, okay? I just wanna do something useful." She paused, looked at Sam, then peered at his laptop screen, walked over, crossing her arms across herself. "What kind of job are you guys working?"

She wanted to concentrate on a job? "Al..." Dean started, but she looked at him sidelong, sharp and sullen, silently telling him don't.

"I'm serious," she said. "The job."

"It's an interesting one," Sam said readily, willing to indulge her request, not sharing Dean's concerns. "Seems sorta Biblical if you ask me. Three deaths... first, guy liquifies into a pile of blood. Second, dude dies covered in boils. Third—the one you missed, Dean, while you were off getting Alex—locusts. Ate their way outta Officer Colfax's brain while I watched. Good stuff."

"While you watched?" Alex repeated, eyeing the jar of live, buzzing locusts that was on the table beside her twin.

"Yup," Sam confirmed, typing away on his laptop.

So they were gonna do this the Winchester way: act like nothing happened. Dean gave in, decided to go with it but he wasn't too happy about it. He heaved a heavy sigh, ambled over to the table slowly. "So blood, boils, locusts," he said, distracted.

"Right," Sam said. "Three of your more popular Egyptian plagues. Check this out." He held up a jar of bugs Alex had been looking at.

"I thought you got over your ant farm phase," she said, sullen and attempting to crack a joke, but failing, mostly because she sounded miserable. Dean looked at her sadly, not wanting her to be like him and close off like that. But he guessed he couldn't blame her. He was still reeling from the entire day. He could only imagine what was going on in her mind if his was such a disaster.

"So you're saying they chewed their way out of that cop's melon?" Dean asked, forcing himself to focus on the job. He took the jar from Sam, looked at it oddly. "I don't quite remember that in the King James, do you guys?" He sat down opposite of Sam.

Sam shrugged, rifling through some papers. "Meanwhile, a kid named Christopher Birch was shot in the head last month after a vehicle pursuit. Guess who the three officers were on the case? Our three dead cops. And they all filed the exact same police report."

Dean took the paper Sam was extending to him, read aloud: "'Suspect exited vehicle brandishing a firearm. We were forced to fire.'" He paused, set the sheet down. "So what you thinking? They pop the kid accident or otherwise, plant the piece, lie about what happened? Sounds about right. Bunch of dicks. So who's trying to put the hit on on the cops? Kid's family? Kid's friends? Mad girlfriend?"

Alex paced over the the bay window at the far end of the room, looked out of it quietly with that same stern frown of hers as Sam shook his head.

"Dunno, but actually... Colfax was kinda out of it when I got there, but he kept saying how God wanted him and the other cops dead." Sam paused, clarified kind of needlessly. "This was before he keeled over, obviously. Maybe Heaven has a hate-on for bad cops."

"What, like... Heaven as in angels?" Alex asked. Dean glanced at her, didn't miss the cautious, sort of embittered tone in her voice.
"Maybe," Sam said, shrugging mildly.

Dean scoffed. "So we're listening to the guy with the *bug* in his custard? That's—that's the, uh, the theory you want to go with? What about other sane theories—what I mentioned—family, friends, girlfriend?"

Sam brushed Dean's logic aside. "Yeah, but who'd have the juice to pull deaths like these out of their sleeves besides maybe a witch? It's not far fetched. I mean, angels gotta have *something* to do, right, now that we're post-apocalypse? And the deaths are blow-for-blow outta the good book. It makes sense, Dean."

"What, you're saying the halos are bored so they smite the five-oh with Egyptian plagues for kicks?" Dean shook his head. "I dunno." He sipped on his beer, thought hard. "Huh. I might know someone who could tell us though..." Dean hadn't thought of Cas in a long time, in fact, he was suddenly having a *wait a minute* moment. Where the hell had Cas been today when Alex was in trouble?

At the mention of Cas—his sister had looked at him abruptly with an unreadable expression, her fingers pausing—she'd been smudging dust off the windowsill. Sam looked confused for a second, then realized what Alex had and made a face. "Who, *Cas?* You're kidding, right?" He scoffed. "Dean, I *tried.* It was the first and second and third thing I did, soon as I got topside. Son of a bitch won't answer the phone."

"Hey, you got any other ideas?" Dean asked, standing back up and shrugging his hands out a little.

"Sam's right," Alex said flatly, smudging the windowsill with her pointer finger again, not looking at either of them. "Trust me. He won't answer." She glanced at Dean with hooded eyes. "Pretty sure we're on our own with this one." And Dean bristled as an infuriating thought came across his mind.

"Did you... did you try and *call him* today?" he asked, suddenly so angry at the thought of her in trouble and her freaking guardian angel bailing on her...

But Alex, chagrinned and cynical, shook her head, cutting Dean's escalating wrath short. "No. I didn't even think about it." And then, there was a flicker of sadness across her features.

Dean was shocked at her answer—*really*? She hadn't even *thought* about it? ...Damn. She must have truly lost whatever faith she'd had in the guy for that to be the case. And now that he thought about it, where the hell had Cas been this entire time, this whole year? What happened to all the 'but Dean, I love your sister and can't be apart from her' crap? What happened to that... that *love* between them? What happened to the utter obsession Cas had with keeping Alex safe? It made no sense, the way all of them had fallen apart from each other the past year and the only thing Dean could guess was that maybe Cas had changed his mind when he got his angel mojo refilled. The loose ends and unanswered questions were really troubling, and maybe trying to call Cas was a bad idea, but Dean didn't see any other options. He cleared his throat. "Well, okay. I uh... I guess I'll still try and call. I mean, I got no other angels on my speed dial, so..." he trailed off, looked to his sister for approval. "Worth a shot, right?"

Alex looked at her oldest brother grudgingly, shrugged one shoulder up apathetically. She was opposed to the idea, because she wasn't a fan of getting her hopes up and then being let down but... Dean could find out for himself that Cas didn't answer anymore. She turned away from her brother and gazed out the window over the city of Easter. It was an overcast day. A day like any other day. Except it wasn't. She looked down at the sidewalk, saw pieces of her smashed phone down there. Her heart clenched. Who cares about the phone. *Me. I do.* Because that stupid piece of plastic and
circuit boards had the only existing photo of Cas on it. And now it was destroyed. What, she couldn't even keep that small part of him? It all kept getting ripped away from her grasp and it wasn't fair but maybe... maybe this was fate, karma, telling her let it go.

She heard Dean shuffling over to the other side of the room and she swallowed a painful lump in her throat, tried to stop thinking about it. It being what had happened earlier that day. But she couldn't forget the feeling of being suddenly blindsided by someone she had trusted, someone she thought was her friend. She couldn't forget the feeling of having all the wind knocked out of her as his knee had jammed into her back and he crushed her down onto the bed—she could still hear his belt clinking and hear all the horrible, filthy things he'd said to her, trying to intimidate and demean her as he told her how she wanted it, how she had asked for it. She could still feel his horrible callous hands, unwelcome on her body as they touched her brusquely, and she unconsciously curled in on herself a little, protectively, as the painfully fresh and vivid memories refused to leave her mind. How had she allowed that to happen? How hadn't she seen through his lies and bullshit?

It made sense to her now, in hindsight. Now that it was too late.

It had taken every last ounce of energy and focus to save herself, to reach for the keys she'd seen on the nightstand despite the ringing in her ears and the threat of unconsciousness after being hit in the head so hard. She'd slashed him across the face with the keys brutally, clumsily, managed to get out from under him and grab her gun from the pocket of her jacket, which hung off the headboard of the bed. She heard the gunshot in her mind, saw him falling over and laying there, shock on his face as he clutched his bleeding chest wound and gagged on his flooding lungs—and she'd felt bad. She'd felt bad for shooting the man who'd just attempted to fucking rape her. Not for the first time that day, Alex wondered what was wrong with her, why she couldn't get over that. She'd left him there to die, ran out in complete panic. She was a mess over the entire thing, wondering if somehow she was misremembering it, if she'd given him the wrong signals, if it had been her fault somehow... had she asked for it?

No. Hell no, who asked to be raped, assaulted? Please. He was an asshole, a psychopath, he deserved to die and she was glad she'd shot him dead. She just wished she'd never trusted him, never fallen for what she now realized were carefully planted lies. He wasn't who she'd believed him to be. In fact, she had a strong hunch that no one had known who he really was. She'd done the world a favor by blotting him off the pages. Dread pitted in her stomach. Soon, she'd have to call Jamie and say 'hey, what's up? It's me. I killed your brother because he tried to make me have sex with him. Hope we can still be friends.' Jesus.

She rubbed her forehead with the palm of her hand then glanced back at Dean, who had just taken a seat on the edge of one of the beds, on the end of the room opposite of her. She knew he was about to pray to Cas. Why hadn't she called Cas for help? A question that had been bothering her all day. But she hadn't even thought to call for him earlier that day when Glen had attacked her. Not even for a second. She'd only depended on herself and then thought of him just before she passed out on the side of the road. It made her sad somehow. Hadn't she been trying to forget him all this time? She finally had and it felt horrible. Wrong. Like she'd betrayed him twice over—first by letting Glen touch her; second by not thinking of Cas at all when it came time to fight for her life.

So, seeing Dean preparing to call him—she hoped he'd come, she hoped he'd stay away. Both. She turned back to the window, bit her thumbnail, frowned out into the distance unseeingly, her heart beating fast, her stomach feeling queasy with that familiar feeling of hoping and telling herself don't let yourself do that—because hope was wasted on her these days.

"Now I lay me down to sleep," Dean said, covering up his discomfort at praying aloud by trying to act like a jackass. "I pray to Castiel to get his feathery ass down here." She heard Dean say that and she shut her eyes. Hearing his name spoken aloud made pain echo inside of her. It was the most
beautiful and devastating word she knew of.

"You're an idiot," she heard Sam say.

"Stay positive," was the curt reply.

"Oh, I am positive," Sam snarked.

Dean sighed loudly, aggravated. "Come on, Cas! Don't be a dick," Dean tried again. "We got ourselves a... plague-like situation down here, and... do you... do you copy?"

A little bitter smile tugged on her lips. It was hard not to be bitter. So hard. But it was easier to be embittered than to be lost in despair. She didn't want to believe he was dead, but more and more, that's exactly what she believed. She realized how much like a widow she was in that moment. Alone and in mourning; clothed in darkness at the thought of her other half lost forever.

"Like I said..." Sam said, smug. "Son of a bitch doesn't answer—" he trailed off and for a second Alex swore she had heard the sound of angel's wings. She opened her eyes, looked out at the city, suddenly breathing shallowly as she heard Sam speak. No. No way. "H-he's right behind me, isn't he?" her twin asked.

And Alex turned around slowly, as if in a dream, her nervous system screaming in suddenly unbearable anticipation—and when she saw Cas's back—his dark head of hair, his trench coat, his hands hanging at his sides—her mouth fell open in shock, her heart seemed to stop completely, her face contorted into an expression of utter disbelief, she froze completely, like if she moved, he might disappear. The way he stood, with his back facing her, he hadn't seen her yet and he greeted Sam. "Hello," he said—and his voice—the one she had been missing all this time—was soft, deep, fell onto her ears and she was doubly stunned, near tears almost and hardly able to breathe. Sam looked up at the angel in disbelief from where he sat.

"Hello?" Sam repeated.

Cas paused, slightly uncertain at Sam's are you kidding me face. "Y-yes."

"Hello." Sam imitated angrily in a mock-Castiel voice, deep and robotic and then he reverted to his normal voice. "Hello?!"

"Uh, that is still the term?" Cas asked—and Alex saw from the way his head moved that he glanced at Dean briefly.

"I spent all that time trying to get through to you. Dean calls once, and now it's "Hello"?!" Sam demanded—sort of, well no, exactly, speaking Alex's confused thoughts aloud. How was... where had... why...? Her mind felt cloyed, like her thoughts were stuttering slowly around inside her brain.

"Yes," Cas answered simply, sounding exasperated. He took a couple steps toward Dean.

"So, what, you—you like him better or something?" Sam asked.

"This isn't a game of favorites, Sam," Cas said irritably—and what Alex couldn't see was how he was looking left and right, sweeping the room in front of himself over with a questioning gaze—looking for her—Dean saw though. And when Cas opened his mouth and asked, "Where's A—" Dean was already gesturing in her direction with his beer, expression a little pinched.

Alex would never forget that moment as long as she lived: Cas turning around and seeing her, their
eyes meeting across the room. Her breath caught spectacularly as his expression changed from stern and rigid to soft and surprised, and maybe… relieved? Glad. Alex stared at him and felt her face twisting slightly into a questioning expression because she didn't understand how he could just reappear like this, how she had called and called and he had never come, how he was suddenly just there. No words or actions came to mind, she could only stand there, struck silent and dumb.

He took a step toward her and for a minute, from the way he held himself, she thought he was going to walk the five or six steps separating them and hug her—and then suddenly he seemed to realize something, he frowned and looked at the motel table—she followed his gaze and saw him swoop in and grab Sam's knife that had been laying there, he approached her quickly, as if suddenly in a great and urgent hurry. Alex shrank away from him with her back to the glass pane of the window, confused, then even more so when he slashed his own palm open and dipped his index finger into the blood. "W-what are you—" she started, but he grabbed the front of her shirt and ripped the button-up open enough to reveal her upper chest—and without explanation he finger painted a strange Enochian symbol there, fast, as if someone's life depended on it. Alex was left to stare at him in floored confusion, frozen.

"Hey, what the hell are you—" Dean said, already halfway across the room.

Cas held a hand out and back, silently telling Dean not to come closer. "Rah zod mah rah Castiel bay zoh dah," Cas said, and the blood symbol burned bright, stung a little, and Alex was startled by the quick rush of burning, let out a surprised sound—looked down, saw that the blood had disappeared off of her skin. She blinked rapidly, dazed.

"What was—what are you doing?" she asked, and she looked up into Cas's face for an explanation. But his fingers hovered just at her collarbone, he was looking at the welts on her neck with a deep, uncertain, concerned frown. His eyes flickered up to hers, then he took in her other battle wounds on her face… and seeing him do that overwhelmed her with shame, the need to disappear, and she looked away.

"What… what's happened to you?" He asked softly, startling her when he touched two gentle fingertips to the puffy skin below her eye. The tender touch was the most confounding thing she'd ever experienced. The way he was looking at her with gentleness and care confused her even further. He still cared? But… but then… why had he gone? Why had he been absent and silent and ignored her this whole time?

She couldn't respond to his question because she needed to know one thing more than anything else, everything else seemed unimportant. "W-where the hell have you been?"

He grew faintly confused. "What do you mean?"

What did she mean? "What do you mean, what do I mean? I called you so many times and you never came." Her voice rose slightly and Castiel seemed deeply puzzled.

"I couldn't—because of Raphael." He paused, and it was like he expected her to know what he was talking about. "Because of the war." He saw her no, still don't know what you're talking about expression and he was growing uncertain. "You know this," he stated, but it sounded as if he was losing confidence in the fact.

Alex looked at him like was nuts, trying to figure out what the hell he was going on about. "How would I know this?" She asked, wracking her brain. Did he mean from that two minute encounter with Nandriel?!

Cas faltered, growing concerned. "Because of the messages I sent."
Cas seemed taken aback completely and floundered momentarily, like he was the uncertain one, the confused one, not her. "I sent two different angels in my stead," he insisted. "At two different times." He was quickly becoming confounded and he looked down, his brow knit together. "Are you saying... you never got either message?" He sounded as though he could think of nothing worse and looked back up at her in wretched disbelief. "But Rachel told me..." he trailed off, seeming to realize something but then try to deny it internally. "She said..."

"Who the hell is Rachel?" Alex asked when he went silent. She didn't understand anything he was talking about.

"Not who I thought," Cas said darkly to himself, and he shook his head, shut his eyes, as if he were thinking he'd been a fool, as if he were in pain and kicking himself mentally. Alex watched, her head canting to the side in bewilderment. He opened his eyes back up and looked at her with such great pain that suddenly she wondered if this entire thing—the time apart, the separation—had been some gigantic misunderstanding.

When the two of them went silent, staring at each other in mutual confusion, Sam cleared his throat. "Hey, look, as touching as this reunion is..." he looked at the angel. "We kinda need your help, Cas."

Clear anger tightened Cas's features and he turned his head to look at Sam sharply. "You know, it's rude to interrupt, Sam."

Sam's eyebrows raised challengingly to Cas and even Dean and Alex were surprised at the gruff tone and sarcasm the angel used. "It's also rude not to answer when someone calls you," Sam replied without missing a beat. "Repeatedly."

Cas just scowled a little deeper and Dean—who so far had been totally ignored by Cas—sidled up beside him and Alex. "Cas—yeah, hi, nice to see you too—I think what he's trying to say is that he went to Hell for us. I mean, he really took one for the team. You remember that? And then he comes back without a clue and you can't take five friggin' minutes to give him some answers?"

Dean waited expectantly.

Cas's expression faded slightly into reluctance and he turned a little more to face Sam, who was still sitting in the chair. "If I had any answers, I might have responded," he said wearily. "But I don't know, Sam. We have no idea who brought you back from the cage... or why."

Sam made a face—not pleased with the reply. Dean, however, had something more to say. "Okay, right. Great. So then why'd you ditch out on my sister this whole year? What's your magic eight ball answer for that one?" Alex shot her brother a look—surprised he asked that and not appreciating it, honestly.

Cas tensed again, darkened, glanced Alex's way. "It's complicated, Dean."

"Yeah?" Dean scoffed. "Well I think we'd all like to know. And by the freakin' way—what the hell kind of angel magic did you just do to her, man?"

Cas glanced at Alex, obviously not wanting to engage with Dean and Sam yet—his hesitant body language conveying his desire to remain near her and speak with her—but he gave up and in to Dean's demands for conversation, even though he didn't seem happy about it. "I cast a temporary shield against Raphael's eyes so that—"
"And he's who, again?" Dean butted in.

Cas looked at Dean with narrowed eyes. "A powerful archangel, my nemesis."

"Wow, okay Captain Kirk," Dean said needlessly, a juvenile reaction.

"...so it wasn't God who brought me back?" Sam asked, breaking the strained stare between Dean and Cas.

Visibly, Castiel lost patience but he attempted to corral it. "Sam, no one's even seen God," he said, strained and apparently grumpy. "The whole thing remains mysterious."

Sam frowned. "What the hell does that mean?"

Cas turned, took a step toward Sam. "What part of 'I don't know' escapes your understanding?" The angel asked bluntly, and yet again, Sam's eyebrows shot up high at the uncharacteristically clipped tones and almost rude tone.

Dean cut in between the two, no-nonsense. "Cas, look, cut the BS. If Sam calls, you answer. If Alex calls, you answer. Okay? You wing your ass down here, and you answer the damn phone, problem solved! Why you being like this? Ignoring Sam and Alex then coming when I call?" He scoffed and gestured at Alex. "I mean, I thought you were supposed to be her guardian angel! She told me you just up and left her for the whole year, man, I mean... what the hell? I mean, to be honest, that was one of the only things that made me feel okay when I was wondering where she was out there: that you were looking out for her—and you weren't? Damn, that's ten kinds of fucked up, Cas. And after what happened to her today..." he trailed off, shut up.

Cas stood there in confusion. "What do you mean?" He asked, glancing at Alex—who was suddenly tense and looking at her brother like how the hell are you just gonna bring that up to him in front of everyone?! Before Cas could press for more answers, he seemed to process another thing Dean had said and a flicker of anxiety ran across his face. "Wait. I know that Sam remained apart from the two of you but... are you saying you two weren't together, either?" He looked at Alex and Dean in turn, and Dean chuckled cynically, saluted Cas facetiously with his beer and took a sip.

"Wow, Cas. You really have been gone, haven't you?" He asked, and shook his head as if he should have known.

Cas turned to Alex, his features etched with pained confusion. "You were alone all this time?"

The way he asked her that, the look in his eyes... she couldn't bear it and she had to look away. She could barely form words to answer, honestly, and she didn't want to, either. "More or less."

He was coming closer again and she swallowed, her nerves in overdrive. She hadn't thought their reunion to go this way, all the times she'd imagined it. And then she saw how intently he looked at her, his eyes running over her body almost as if he were examining her and then he seemed to be taken aback, gut-punched. "Wait... what..." he paused and his expression distorted with horror completely. "Alex—have you consumed demon blood?"

It was her turn to look gut-punched, to be caught completely, to be absolutely put on the spot. She almost passed out from the feeling of being discovered and she wanted to die—she also wanted to lie to his face, to shake her head and tell him no, of course not, are you crazy? Because the truth was so horrible and embarrassing and shameful and she was so scared for them all to know. Behind Cas, Dean was looking at her with this look of utter horror. What were they going to say and do when they found out? Would they treat her like she was less than human? Would Cas get disgusted
with her? Would Dean disown her? All she could do was try and save face, a little. Explain it pitifully. Try and excuse herself. "It was a hard year, okay?" She asked, confirming without saying yes. And she looked down, unable to meet any of their gazes. This was truly the worst day of her life, in every way possible.

The room was in shocked silence—then Dean spoke, his voice soft and disbelieving. "What?" He sounded appalled. "D-demon blood, Al?"

She chanced looking at him and was utterly humiliated, almost unable to look at her brother at all—he looked like he'd been let down in every way possible and then Cas—his expression was wounded and questioning, like he wanted to know how it had happened, like he couldn't believe her, like he was reevaluating something. Only Sam took it in stride—he was listening intently, a faint and attentive frown on his face. She wanted to disappear and almost burst into tears at the feeling of being exposed for what she was: an addict. She redoubled her outward mask and became stony, deadpan, as detached as possible, because she hadn't just done it for shits and giggles. "I didn't mean for it to happen, it just did, okay?"

"How?" Dean asked—and that's when she realized he was heartbroken, not furious. He put his beer down onto the table blindly, approached her, stood just beside and behind Cas. When she said nothing, just drew her mouth into a thin line and shook her head, Dean grew desperate. "Alex! Since when?"

She looked at him sharply, refusing to break down, refusing to tell him because it was all so painful. "Long enough Dean, now stop asking," she snapped. Her oldest brother recoiled as if bitten at her rude exclamation, he looked hurt and she was really at the point of running out of there any second—she couldn't do all of this, not today.

And then, surprising all of them, Cas—who had gone silent briefly, clearly thinking hard as he looked at Alex with great amounts of concerned speculation, looked at both of the brothers in turn, used a calm, neutral tone with them. "Dean, Sam. If I could just speak with Alex privately for a moment, I'd—" Cas began.

Dean was already shaking his head no vehemently. "No. Not happening," he said insistently. "I don't want her alone with a man other than me right now Cas."

Alex withered because she knew why and she hated that her brother knew what had happened to her. She looked at Cas timidly, who silently looked at her and asked why? She didn't want him to know, either. But she needed to talk to him, needed to, about other things. And so she looked at her brother meaningfully, tense. "Dean. It's okay."

Dean faltered, looked like he was going to protest, and she didn't want this to turn into another freaking fight like it always did but she guessed it was too much to hope that it wouldn't. But then he surprised her when he visibly held some words back, took a beat, looked at Cas carefully, then back at her. "You sure?" He asked.

She felt faintly amazed at that two word question. Was he really going to back off? She looked at Cas one more time—should she be cautious about being alone with him? No—definitely not. She wasn't afraid to be alone with him, she was okay with this. "Yeah," she told Dean.

Dean didn't like it—that much was clear. But in a surprising show of respect and maturity, he backed down and with what must have been great amounts of restraint, he let it go. "You guys have five minutes," he said in a short tone. "I will be right on the other side of this door. You call me if you need me, Al." He gave Cas another mistrustful glance. "Come on, Sam." Dean then shook his head at himself, left the room, his brother behind him, and Alex watched them go.
The door closed, leaving the room in total, brief silence. The angel and the hunter slowly looked at each other, both of their gazes veiled. Was he angry at her? Was he going to say she was an abomination? Was he going to tell her that he'd left her because he always knew she would end up too twisted, too low, too sullied for him? Suddenly, Alex was aware of how scared she was to hear why he'd gone—and she looked into his familiar face and didn't know if he loved her anymore and wanted to be anyone but herself in that moment. And then, wordlessly, hesitant and unsure and careful, Cas touched either of her arms gently, as if he were trying to comfort her. It startled her. "I didn't know," he said, three words that conveyed how agonized he was and how he hadn't known anything that had happened to her that whole year. But it wasn't enough, how couldn't he have known?

Pain tightened Alex's face and she didn't even realize that when he'd touched her arms, hers had raised up and she'd laid her hands onto his forearms. She second guessed her automatic reaction to his touch—withdrawed her hands a little, confused, fingers hovering just above his arms uncertainly. She couldn't look at him in the eye, she felt like she had to hold back from him even though all she wanted was to reach out to him. "I thought you left me," she said, so confused. Not even sure where to begin. She chanced a fleeting glance up at him, so vulnerable in that moment. Shock and hurt showed on his face. "No," he said immediately, and seemed stunned she could think that, and her heart burst with painful hope. "I thought—I thought you knew what was happening. I sent two angels, I sent two messages—and was even told that you replied." He said, trying to explain what had been briefly been mentioned earlier. He shook his head faintly, seeming to understand something and he became disillusioned. "I've been lied to," he said, and pain filled his features, he looked at her, seeming to put two and two together. "And you spent this whole time thinking I never sent word." He said it aloud and it resonated with both of them, visibly. Yes. Exactly. That had been her entire reality. And when he said what he said next, she realized she hadn't been wrong to hang onto hope. To believe that he still loved her. "I thought of you every hour, every minute, every second," he said, his eyes searching hers deeply, almost pleadingly. "I didn't forget you. I didn't leave you. I would never. You know that."

Her eyes stung as he said that to her and even though the words were what she had been so hungry to hear, somehow, she couldn't believe him—not after all that time, not after the utter loneliness and silence and broken trust. He did leave her. Cas appeared to recognize her reaction to his words as disagreement. And if Castiel, the angel who had once claimed to her that he possessed no heart could look heartbroken… he did. "I'm so sorry," he said, grasping at words weakly, clearly not sure how to speak to her about it or tell her, clearly doubting himself and beating himself up for it internally. "I didn't realize… I didn't know." He let go of her, stepped back slightly, as if he were shaming himself. He looked down, his hands hanging at his side. "Please forgive me."

The loss of his closeness, the distance between them was painful and Alex looked at him silently, long and hard, trying to put all of her jumbled emotions into words, trying to boil down a year of waiting and hating herself and cultivating bitterness into a few words. And if she wasn't still completely in love with the angel in the trench coat, she wouldn't have bothered with trying to explain herself or talk to him about it. But if possible, she loved him even more now and it hurt her, confused her, because he hadn't thought of her, he hadn't come through for her, and she didn't fucking understand how he could just stand there like that and ask her forgiveness. "I needed you," she managed in a trembling, faint voice. "I needed you so bad and you were gone and I didn't know if you were dead or alive or… or ignoring me… you just… disappeared right after Sam died, what was I supposed to think?" She shook her head, wishing she could escape herself and the inferno raging in her heart. "This year was hell, Cas, hell."

"I'm so sorry," he repeated and she got angrier when he said that—and felt angry at herself for being angry after what he'd said about thinking of her every hour, minute, and second. She should
be grateful he was back, right? She should just throw her arms around his neck and never let go and cry for joy but the bitterness wouldn't let her, she was wounded deeply and didn't understand at all. The only thing she could feel was painfully shattered trust and the agonizing realization that things would never be like they had been before, that they'd lost what they had been in the past, that the separation had done something irreversible to them. She had spent all this time wanting to pick back up where they left off and now she realized... they couldn't. And when she looked away, struggling with herself, wanting so badly just to reach out to him and beg him to tell her it would be all right, to please take her back to the place they'd been before—but stubbornly she insisted on holding herself back, trying to protect herself from hurting more.

Cas was studying her closely and carefully, again looking at her cuts, scrapes, and bruises. He seemed hesitant to ask, as if he could sense that if he asked too harshly, it would upset her. "What happened to you?" He asked and the care in his voice broke her heart completely, was exactly what she wanted to hear and she shut her eyes for a long second. "Who hurt you like this? Why did Dean say he didn't want you alone with a man other than—" he stopped mid-sentence, his face fallen with an expression that was scary for her to see—he looked completely taken aback, confused, suspicious of something awful. Alex said nothing—her pulse suddenly rising with dread and shame. He was looking at her neck and two warm, gentle fingers brushed against one of the marks Glen had made, he looked at it with a furrowed brow and squinted eyes. And then utter horror came over him, his eyes came back to hers. "Are these...? Are these from kissing?"

The way he asked—innocent and unaware of the term for what the hickeys were—Alex could barely keep her composure, and ashamed, she moved a hand up to cover herself however inadequately, no longer able to hide her emotional distress. She felt overwhelmed and defenseless and she didn't want him to know how she'd been violated and manipulated and used. Or how, briefly, she thought she wanted it. Sex with someone else, closeness with someone else. How she'd let Glen put his hands on her, how she'd let him kiss her neck and feel her up and... her head hurt, she felt dizzy. "Yes," she choked out, and turned away from him, fighting hard not to lose it. Behind her, Cas came a little closer. There was a long, rigid silence.

"Did... did someone force themselves onto you?" he asked falteringly, and his tone suggested that he could conceive of nothing more horrible in all of existence, that he hoped he was wrong about his assumption.

Oh god. How was she supposed to talk to him about this? She almost snapped at him and told him not to worry about it but... she couldn't. Maybe it was because underneath the heartache, she trusted Castiel more than almost anyone, wanted him to be the one she went to for help and comfort. She turned again and sank down to the edge of the bed, sitting there miserably, wishing she could lie to him, keep this horrible dark thing from him, pretend it never happened. "I-I don't know," she said, answering honestly because she was so confused and mortified, felt to blame somehow and yet didn't want to carry this alone. She shook her head, stuck an elbow onto her knee, let her head fall into her hand. She couldn't look at Cas, because confessing this meant telling him that she had gone along with it for however short a time. Cheated on him. "Yes, and no, I don't... I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" He asked, full of worry and stark confusion, and she saw his feet come to right there in front of hers, he crouched down and peered up at her, and he was so handsome and she loved him so much and had missed him so much and didn't deserve him in the least. She had done the unthinkable with a stupid waste of space man who could never compare to Cas—she should never have put herself in that situation at all. And maybe it was all her fault, everything that happened. She didn't know.

She tried to explain, even though it was the most sickening thing she'd ever had to say aloud. He
deserved to know. "At first I thought... I thought..." her voice cracked. "I thought I wanted it. I was confused—I thought you were gone and... I don't know. I thought I wanted it." She peeked up at him miserably, not able to understand herself at all, not able to identify with herself now that the heat of the moment had passed. Cas looked incredibly dispirited at her confession, she wasn't sure if the agony in his eyes was because she'd wanted another man however briefly, or because she said she thought Castiel was gone.

And seeing that look on his face, she felt the weight of her actions and thoughts threatening to crush her completely, her hands hung limply between her knees, she wanted to just disappear, she moved her hands to her knees, about to brace herself and stand up. And then he gently touched one of her hands with his, stopping her—and when she looked at him in surprise, she saw how he was soldiering through this with her. He swallowed, looked at her with a defeated kind of sadness resting there in every line of his face. "I was gone for a year. I understand. You were lonely."

Shocked at him, Alex suddenly scrambled to refute his argument because she couldn't stand the look on his face or the thought of him somehow assuming that anyone could ever take his place, ever. "No—I mean, yes, I was lonely, but... I wanted to wait for you, I tried to and I really thought... that you were gone. And then, at that point... I just wanted t-to forget you. And I didn't know how to." Confessing it out loud was wretched, seemed so shallow and awful when she said it. But his hand didn't leave hers and she curled her fingers around his, held on more tightly, even though she felt pitiful and disgusting. She looked at their hands the entire time she spoke, so ashamed of herself, wishing she'd just held on a little longer, run from Glen and the temptation a long time ago. But she hadn't. "I tried to go along with what—with what he was doing," she confessed, and a silent tear rolled down her cheek. "But I couldn't. So I said no." She paused, closed her eyes, trying to shut out the memories. "And he wouldn't stop."

Cas's expression—which had been supremely pained as she told him about it—darkened completely, storms gathering, and wrath flashed in his eyes. He stood up, clenching his fists at his sides. "Who?" He asked, sounding hurt. Why would that offend him? Alex was confused. And then, his next question made her realize why he sounded so wounded. "Why didn't you call me? I... I could have saved you."

She turned, a hand errantly resting against the wall beside the window and she looked at him sadly. Maybe this was the hardest thing to confess. "I... didn't think you would come." She paused, her eyes fell away from his. "I saved myself."

Castiel looked gutted, his shoulders visibly fell a little, his mouth parted open. And for once, he seemed utterly devoid of words. For a long and awful moment, neither said anything. Then he composed himself somewhat gruffly, attempted to look as though he were certain. "Let me heal your wounds," he said, and she heard his unspoken sentiment: let me do something, anything, to make this better.

She hesitated—almost said no because of angered pride—he couldn't take away what had happened to her just by making her physical trauma go away. The sudden burst of inward anger at his offer shamed her and she didn't understand her own motivations or reactions. She was in pain still all over... sore and bruised and cut up and her head was muddled, so she swallowed her negative reaction and nodded yes. And he came to her, put his hand against the side of her face.
The gentle touch affected her deeply and she looked into his eyes hesitantly, torn. Saw white light reflecting there as he took away her physical hurts, made her feel physically okay again. And when it was over, he didn't move his hand away. His thumb moved a little, against newly healed, unswollen cheek and she weakened completely at the touch, wanted to just fall into him. "I'm so sorry," he said again, and without warning, him repeating himself and offering a flimsy penance for neglecting her that entire year stirred the anger up again. She pulled away from his touch, not sure if she felt more guilt or misguided anger. Just knowing she felt shitloads of both, and could barely carry it.

"Saying you're sorry won't change it," she said stiffly, and suddenly she was lashing out, word-vomiting all of her hurt and confusion onto him without warning—letting her real emotions out, where they stampeded over Cas. "And taking away my injuries doesn't take away what happened to me," she said, voice wavering as emotions rose rapidly, as she tried to blame anyone but herself. "I wouldn't have even been around him if… if you… if things had been different, if I knew—if I had a single goddamn clue where you went or why you just split; I mean, you said you sent me messages but why wouldn't you come see me yourself? Did it really never occur to you to double check?" Her voice rose passionately. "Why the hell couldn't you just come see me, even once? You promised you would never leave me and I believed you and all the shit I got into this year was me hanging onto hope and dying more every fucking day that you didn't come back—and if you just don't want me anymore say it okay?!" And the room went silent.

Alex was momentarily taken aback at herself and her outburst, at the torrent of disjointed thoughts she'd just spewed. She didn't feel any better like she thought she would. Instead she felt worse. She wanted nothing more than to be angriest with him but really, she was angriest with herself and she couldn't understand it. Cas was taken aback by her angry rant and he appeared to have no idea of how to reply except to shake his head and look at her in wounded bewilderment. "How can you think that?" he asked, and Alex's mouth dropped open in renewed disbelief at him. How could she think that? How could she not? Didn't he know?

"Because you left me like everyone else ever has! Without a single word!" She exclaimed, and all of the deeply-suppressed feelings she'd spent sleepless nights mulling over began to tear out of her like a banshee. "Ever since you came along I've been a stupid, weak girl and when you left I broke apart; you ruined me! And then I ruined myself! I believed you and all the shit I got into this year was me hanging onto hope and dying more every fucking day that you didn't come back—and if you just don't want me anymore say it okay?!" And the room went silent.

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When she said that about him not loving her anymore, his reaction was immediate. "I am doing this because I love you!" He said, raising his voice emphatically, and subsequently bringing a stark silence over the room. Her heart felt like it dropped out of her completely. Transfixed and rendered completely still by his exclamation, Alex stared wordlessly, and Cas took hold of her arms gently, just below the shoulders, pleading with her silently for a moment. Then, out loud. "Alex, all my enemy's eyes are on me—the day that I left you at the cemetery I was ambushed by Raphael, he made it clear that if I came to see you he would follow me and take you from me, hurt you. I have stayed away to protect you. Because I know that if he takes you, I'll have no choice but to do whatever he says." He seemed to not even fully understand it himself, conflict shimmered across
I would sacrifice anything and everything if it would save you," he said intensely. "I would do anything for you—anything—and they know it. They're using what I feel against me. Against the entire world, and it's dangerous. I'm fighting this war for you, for us." His expression wavered into the territory of sadness, his eyes became gentler, more appealing, even as she felt herself becoming deeply ashamed at her one-sided, selfish assumptions as he told her everything. "I didn't even realize how long it had been for you. Time works differently here than it does there." He let go of her, she saw how weary he was, how jaded and taxed, and when he briefly rubbed fingers to his temple and forehead in a very human gesture, she was stricken with a sudden, grave worry for him. She was abruptly seeing and understanding just how hard the past year had been on him, too, and sadness deeper than the ocean settled over her. This was such a mess. He shook his head, frowning at the floor. "The war, it's… torn Heaven apart. It never ends, the fighting, the killing. I'm… tired, Alex." She forgot her own angers and fears and hesitated, then touched his arm gently, suddenly so concerned with how weary he seemed and how jaded, how uncertain and burdened. And alone.

He looked at her hand, frown clearing a little, looked at her, then seemed to feel badly for turning the conversation to his own emotional state. With his opposite hand, he reached over and took her hand and held it in his gently, looked at it somberly. "I never imagined it would be like this," he said softly, and his voice was filled with pain, remorse. "I thought… I thought I was doing the right thing," he confessed brokenly. "If I had known the things it would have set into motion, perhaps I would have… done things differently." He looked at her with pained eyes. "I didn't know what my absence would do and I know you said not to say it but… I am. I'm so sorry." His voice dropped to almost a whisper when he said 'sorry,' and Alex's heart seemed to reach out to him. They had both been through hell this past year.

"It's okay, Cas," she said quietly, choosing to leave the bitterness behind and instead hold onto the chance of them fixing this because it was all she wanted. She'd woken up that very morning thinking Cas didn't love her and had left her and might be dead… but none of that had been true and with him here, now, holding her hand and telling her what had happened… she had hope again. It scared her, but she clung onto it fiercely. It wasn't ideal, this entire situation they were in and the aftermath of the time apart wasn't anything but intensely painful… and she didn't know if there would ever be a way to undo it all but she could start with forgiving him. "It's okay," she repeated and he shook his head no, obviously filled with guilt.

"No. It's not," he said miserably. "The things that happened to you. Because of me. I can't take them away. I can't undo it."

A harsh, painful truth. Alex took in a deep breath, looked at his large, tan hand holding her smaller fairer one. Her voice trembled tellingly. "Are you… gonna leave again?"

Conflict was etched onto his face. "Raphael. The war, I… I can't stay. I can't endanger you. I'm leading a war." She was hurt all over again, but this time because it seemed like fate was cruelly determined to always find something to thwart them. And it wasn't fair. She couldn't bear the thought of him leaving again for however long, of being torn apart again… this time knowing he was missing her just like she was missing him. Cas quickly and emphatically amended himself at the look on her face. "But I'll find a way, from now on—I'm not sure how, but I will. To always come when you call. No matter what's happening." He paused, his eyes pleading gently with her, and she looked at him in hesitance. Saw, crystal clear, that he loved her. She believed him completely, and she knew that she might be setting herself up to get hurt all over again. "Promise me you'll call me when you need me, Alex."

She faltered, her inhibitions threatening to hold her back—she wanted to withdraw and save herself
from the heartache, she wanted to run away from the depth and intensity of this love. But she couldn't. Everything she'd held inside for the year—longing, desperation, readiness to be with him again—compelled her to take the chance, go out on the limb, have faith again, trust him with her heart.

"I need you right now," she confessed softly through a cracking voice, and finally—after a year apart, after days on end not knowing where the other had been, after sleepless nights and self-destruction and endless doubts, fears, loneliness—all of it was forgotten for the briefest moment as in unison, they reached for the other and embraced tightly in front of the window. She crumbled like a stone wall and cried in overwhelmed relief as he wrapped her in long-lost warmth and security and the knowledge that somehow it was all going to be okay, that Cas was still committed to this. And so was she.

Alex didn't know what tomorrow held, but she knew Cas hadn't left her, hadn't forgotten her, and that's what she'd been holding out for, what had been keeping her alive all this time, practically. She clung to his solid substance, felt his strong arms around her, and he was her rock and anchor and best thought, her friend and lover and companion, and even though she knew there was so much lost in the time apart and wounds that needed to heal and mistakes that had been made… she really wanted to believe that they could have the strength to weather the storm. Together.

Together.

Chapter End Notes

If you or someone you know has been abused, molested, or assaulted in any way, please reach out and tell someone who can help you (teacher, therapist, authority figure, someone you trust). If you carry that darkness alone, you shouldn't have to. I speak from personal experience and can tell you guys that the day you stop feeling ashamed about what happened to you is the day you can start to really heal. People will do all kinds of jacked up things to you your whole life but you don't have to be a victim. What wrongs are committed against you don't have define you or hold you back. "I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it." - Maya Angelou.
Jamie looked around the motel room again, totally stunned by the phone call she'd just made. Trying to reach Alex, instead she'd gotten Dean.

Listen, I'm gonna be real clear about this: your fucking brother tried to go Ted Bundy on my sister today and if he's not dead already, you better put a bullet in his head or I will.

Dean's words echoed in her mind starkly and she couldn't feel her feet or hands, her shock was so great. Ted Bundy was an infamous murderer and rapist... was Dean saying that Glen had... had tried to... no, Glen wouldn't... couldn't... do either of those things, to anyone, ever, and not Alex, their friend, their hunting partner—that was insane, Dean had to be wrong... right?

Glen was an asshole and an idiot and a huge flirt but... he wasn't a murderer, he wasn't a rapist. She knew him. She knew him. Didn't she? ...

Maybe not.

That was the scariest thought of all.

The motel room the three of them had been staying in the past few nights had been labeled a crime scene and was locked when she'd gotten there a few minutes ago—and she'd been shocked, clueless, not ready for what she found when she broke in. Blood everywhere. Glen's phone, discarded on the floor. No sign of him or Alex anywhere. Panicked, Jamie had called Alex, but had gotten instead a very angry Dean who had threatened her life, basically. Jamie stared at blood stained carpet—huge splatters, like someone had been bleeding out. Alex? Glen? She didn't know, but she thought, after talking to Dean, it had to be her brother's. Terrified, she looked at the room in a daze, trying to look at the details more closely, figure out what happened.

There was a broken lamp, a busted clock radio, bloody car keys tossed on the floor—and then there was the messed up bed to the left, close to the window—the sheets were coming off of it, mattress cover and all, like there'd been an intense struggle there. Her stomach twisted, she wanted to throw up. God. No. No, no... that was too horrible to think, that he would do that. There had to be another explanation, there had to be. Shaking now, feeling ill on every level, Jamie ran a hand through her uncombed hair. There was no trail of blood leading out of the room, Glen's car was parked outside... but he couldn't just have disappeared. Two bullet casings were circled in police chalk and numbered. Christ.

She stared at all the blood stains and splatters again, feeling herself beginning to have what felt like a panic attack. It wouldn't have been her first. This scene brought back horrifying memories of finding Mom all those years ago and Jamie tried so hard not to think of that... she closed her eyes, focused on deep breathing. In and out. One, two, three. Count to one, two, three. A calming technique she'd used on herself since she'd been young. And even though her pulse calmed down and her throat didn't close up, she remembered that horrible day without wanting to. Finding Mom sitting hunched over in a silk dressing robe spattered with blood, smoking a cigarette and downing sherry with a face of stone as she sat on the chaise in her bedroom. Behind her, Dad had been bloody and dead on the bed, stabbed repeatedly with a kitchen knife that sat beside Mom on the expensive lounge. You're supposed to be practicing! Her mother had shrieked, and thrown her
glass of alcohol at Jamie, missing by a mile, but sending her eleven-year-old daughter into a full-blown panic attack. She'd almost fallen down the grand marble staircase as she stumbled away blindly, trying to escape the bloodbath, trying to get away from her mother, who began to follow her with the knife as she drunkenly shrieked. One of the maids had caught Jamie on the staircase and saved her life… gotten them out of the house and called 911.

Jamie didn't like to think of that day. Or any day that involved her crazy bitch of a mother. Hate was not a strong enough word for what she felt for that woman—who had treated Jamie like a doll instead of a person, had demanded impossible things from her from day one, had stuck her with nannies and maids and never given her much attention at all, had spent all of her time obsessing over Botox injections and age lines. Caroline Ward was the most unloving and shallow woman Jamie had ever known, had insisted on being called "Mother" or "Caroline." Never Mommy or Mama. Jamie was terrified to become her mother. It was strange to remember her—tall, austere, beautiful and plastic—coming out of the house in handcuffs, smiling serenely for the neighbors and onlookers… all while covered in the blood of Jamie's father. You didn't forget things like that. No matter how hard you tried.

Every time she saw great amounts of blood, she always remembered that day with horrifying intensity. That had been the turning point in Jamie's entire life. With Mom going to prison and Dad dead and gone, Jamie and Glen had been thrust at the first willing family member—their uncle Gary, who was the opposite of everything the rest of the Ward family was. He was poor, salt-of-the-earth, genuine, loved life. He lived simply. He was a hunter. And he manned up in the biggest way to take Jamie and her brother in, raise them like they were his own. He'd been ten times the parents either of hers ever had. And when he died during a hunt when Jamie was nineteen, it had been devastating. Jamie opened her eyes back up, looking at all the blood everywhere.

And suddenly, staring at the crimson stains there on the motel floor, a terrible thought came to Jamie: Glen had always been the closest to Mom, had always been similar to her, had been more upset about Mom going to prison than Dad being dead… what if he was just like her? Crazy, murderous, psychopathic… and no one had known until it was way too late? Holy shit. Her nerves surged with renewed horror at the thought. That made so much sense that she wanted to pass out onto the floor.

She swallowed deeply and edged closer to the huge blood stain on the carpet, forcing herself not to think about any of it right now, to calm down, keep her head, find out what happened, then freak out. How long ago had this happened? She crouched beside the bed, noticing something that had almost blended in with the carpet perfectly. Was that… she ran two fingertips across the dusty ash-like substance then sniffed what came away. Sulphur. She stood up, fast, and took two steps back. Demons—she fucking hated demons! What was one doing here? Glen, what happened here? She stood there like a moron for two seconds before grabbing one of her bags and angrily digging through it for what she needed—several elements and a bowl. There was no way she was just going to accept this. No. She was going to find out what the hell happened here, she was fucking done with this endless bullshit. She slammed the bowl down onto the ground and crouched, beginning to scrawl the symbols for summoning onto the floor sloppily, rushing, finishing at a breakneck speed. Not thinking very straight, she shook as if her blood sugar was at zero while she grabbed things out of her bag—tossing the necessary ingredients in with a passion. Finally, she took out her butterfly knife and swung it open deftly, slashed the gleaming blade across her palm harshly.

Jamie hissed, squeezing her blood down into the bowl angrily then found her matchbook, striking one with a snap. "Eos coram me," she barked and dropped the match into the bowl. The contents went up with a poof of smoke.
On command, in front of her there appeared a short, curvy woman with dark brown hair and what appeared to be a bad attitude. *Huh?* Jamie didn't recognize this demon and faltered, stared. The newcomer was dressed in dark jeans, a loose purple top, and a black leather jacket. The demon looked at Jamie through narrowed eyes, seeming just as surprised and suspicious as Jamie was. "...and you are?" Her voice was strong, low, smooth, slow.

Jamie hesitated, thrown off. "You're... not Ruby..."

The demon rolled her eyes with gusto. "Gold star for you," she drawled sarcastically, her voice lazy and not expressive. She folded her arms, put all her weight on one foot and let her head cant to the side. She had a distinctly threatening look in her eyes but the softest little smile on her face, like she was at ease and relaxed. "Now, who the hell are you and why'd you summon me?"

Jamie frowned deeply, squeezing her throbbing, bleeding palm in an effort to dull the pain and stop the blood flow. "I summoned *Ruby,*" she said lowly, suspicious, not liking this unexpected turn of events. Did she do the spell wrong in her haste?

"Well you got *Meg,*" the demon said, bored, then paused, narrowing her eyes—and interest grew there, a smile crept up across her lips. "Wait... I know who you are," she said, and then she smiled broadly revealing white teeth. But it was creepy, because the smile didn't reach her eyes. Meg laughed lowly. "Ruby wasn't a crossroads demon but you and her dealed, didn't you?" She gave a short little laugh, like she was delighted now, but there was a sinister quality to all of it and she nodded, eyes sparkling with a dark light. "I remember hearing about you. The witch."

"So how's it feel, sweetie, knowing you helped raise Lucifer?" She purred, then at the shocked, confused look on Jamie's face, the demon feigned innocence and surprise. "Oh — *oops*—didn't know that?" The look fell off her face into superiority and she chuckled mockingly, deep down in her throat—a lazy sound. "Maybe you should have read the fine print before selling your soul, hon."

*Raise Lucifer?* Lucifer? The devil? Jamie stared in horror, trying to figure out how that was possible, because she'd heard the rumors about the apocalypse and all the stuff about heaven and hell being at war with each other; she'd seen all the shit that happened last year but... *no way.* And no way did she have something to do with it, either. In front of her Meg seemed incredibly over the exchange. She sighed impatiently and looked at her polished fingernails distractedly. "Look. Ruby's dead now and I inherited her deals, so... what do you want, princess?" She fixed Jamie with an unfriendly, hostile expression—which, coupled with a cool smiled, was chilling. "And make it snappy, will ya? I got places to be."

"What do you *mean,* I helped raise Lucifer?" Jamie asked in complete disbelief, forgetting, for a moment, her other questions. "You're telling me that really happened?"

"Geez Louise, giving blondes everywhere a good name, aren't you?" Meg drawled, cool, sarcastic, mildly amused, giving the impression that she'd never met anyone stupider. "Where have you *been* the past couple years? It was apocalypse central up in this bitch, or didn't you notice?" Meg grinned at Jamie's confounded expression, her slow and playful tone was absolutely infuriating. "Yup. That's right. And your cute little ass helped us out with it, too."

She looked Jamie up and down suggestively, then squinted a little, almost playful. "Didn't it seem kinda *peculiar* to you that Ruby wanted you to agree to something extra in return for your deal? Didn't you kinda wonder *why* she only agreed to take your soul deal if you'd agree to let her make you a little witchy?" Meg gave her a look that seemed to ask *how stupid are you?* "Put two and two together, why don't ya?"

Angry at the attitude, Jamie got defensive. "I don't make soul deals everyday, okay?" she snapped bitterly, her stomach turning sickeningly. "How was I supposed to know what was what?" She felt
out of her element, overwhelmed. Like all of her worst fears, ever, were coming true and all at once.

Meg's expression was smug and she shook her head slowly, clearly pleased. "They played you, Blondie... like a fiddle."

*They? "The fuck are you talking about?"* Jamie asked harshly, dreading the answer but sharpening her words like knives, not letting Meg see for a second how scared she was.

Meg's dark eyes glittered, she adopted an overly enthusiastic demeanor which was insulting, taunting, and mocking in the context of the conversation. "Well golly *Pete, Barbie*, what I'm talking about is how you were one of the seals—see, Ruby and me? We were on Lucy's side. We sorta... mm, *fludged* a few seals to speed up the big day. And yours was the one that went a little something like 'and a good woman shall give her soul over to the heresy of witchcraft to save a betrayer.'" She said that last part in a goofy, mocking voice. Meg chuckled, bit her lip, shook her head. "By the way... how'd it work out with the prince charming you traded your soul for? I mean, musta been a real *swell* guy if you did all that to save his life." She wrinkled her nose up, smiling, like she thought something was cute and started talking baby-talk. "Warms my cold, wittle black heart." She laughed, grinned again.

At the mention of Jake, the one she'd made the biggest mistake of her life for, Jamie felt gutted all over again. At the look on her face, Meg chortled. "Oh my, trouble in paradise? No happily ever after? What a cryin' shame..." Meg's smirk deepened infuriatingly. "Honestly, you made it too easy for them, sweetie, basically handed that seal over on a silver platter." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. "Way to give it up on the first date."

Why did she keep saying *them*? Ready to stab Meg in the head—at least Ruby had been straightforward and not constantly laying on the innuendoes left and right—Jamie glowered at the demon, done with that discussion. Suddenly, she grabbed Meg by the collar, not thinking straight. "Listen, *bitch*—"

"Oh am I?" Meg asked, voice cold and restrained with fury. Apparently, she didn't like being told what she'd do. She raised a hand upwards and suddenly Jamie flew backwards across the room, colliding back-first into the dresser with a painful crunch. She fell forward, catching herself with a hand, groaning in surprised pain, then suddenly felt her head being yanked up by the hair. Meg stared down at her contemptuously. "You hunters are all the same," she said throat bared teeth. "Fucking high-horse *morons*. Don't forget who pulls the strings around here, *cupcake.*" She suddenly laughed, a disturbing effect, gave Jamie a little, secretive smile, her anger gone. "How many years do you have left, anyway?" she asked, enjoying Jamie's reaction to the question. "Not that long, if I remember right, what, three, four years?" She giggled, bit her lip, arched her eyebrow again, scrunched her nose up. "Time flies when you're having *fun*, doesn't it?" She patted Jamie on the face a couple times, rough, her hand stinging Jamie's cheek. Her voice lowered in pitch. "Now, be a good girl for Mommy. Next time you see me... it'll be in hell," Meg drawled, and let go, stood to her full height, gave another chilling smirk. "Can't wait. Toodles!" And in the blink of an eye, the demon was gone, and Jamie was all alone.

Cringing against the pain in her back, the witch winced and shut her eyes, struggling to breathe—it felt like she'd cracked a rib. She held one of her hands against her side pitifully, trying not to breathe deeply, cursing herself and her thoughtlessness, her panic-dictated move. She should have planned that better. Shit. *Shit.* She sat back against the dresser, reeling from the pain. *You're an idiot, Jamie. A straight up moron.*
And not only was she those things, Jamie Ward was a dead woman walking, and had been since 2008. She’d never told anyone. Not even her brother. She alone lived with the dark knowledge that every morning she woke up, she had one less day to go until the Hellhounds came for her.

She remembered the fateful day when she made a desperate, thoughtless soul deal. She’d be in love for what felt like the first real time… his name, Jake. He'd swept her off her feet and then a horrible accident, all her fault, had claimed his life—and when the demon Ruby just suddenly appeared out of nowhere and offered to save his life—*all you have to do is give me your soul and let me make you a witch, then you never hear from me again until your time's up*—and Jamie had agreed without any consideration for herself, only wanting to save the guy she was so in love with, not caring what price she had to pay. And what a price it was.

She’d been cursed with being a witch that day. She’d never known why the demon had insisted on that stipulation either—Jamie had been so focused on saving Jake that she hadn't realized what becoming a witch would mean. She was still unsure of how to use her abilities… often destroying things or hurting herself in the process of trying to use them. She hated it most days, even though it came in handy and saved lives sometimes, it always left Jamie weakened and sick. She had always regretted the soul deal immensely, wishing so badly to take it back.

Now, she felt even more angry with herself. Ruby had been waiting. Had Jake been in on it? Had it been a trick, him being in love with her? Was he a demon, too? Sickened, Jamie thought so. She'd fallen for him so fast and hard, she'd been ready to call him *The One*—and after he'd been resurrected he'd had sex with her one more time then done a one-eighty and turned cold, telling her she had misinterpreted things and he didn't want anything to do with her. She had been absolutely heartbroken. It had never made sense to her in the past, why he'd had the sudden change of heart. And now she knew why. It had all been a trick. And she'd fallen for it, hook, line, sinker.

Love made you weak, and Jamie had learned that the hard way, becoming bitter after Jake. Ever since him, she fucked on her terms and pushed away anyone who tried to make it anything else than sex. The emotional bullshit was the last thing she needed or wanted; she refused to let anyone make a fool of her ever again.

But here she was, the fool as always. How was she supposed to cope, finding out she had been used to help raise Lucifer? *God.* On the same day Dean Winchester implied that her brother had tried to rape her friend Alex? What was she supposed to do? What was left of her world was crashing down over her.

In great physical and emotional pain, she bowed her head down toward her knees, which were drawn close to her chest. She tried not to cry. But she couldn't help it, and she felt so much younger than her age of thirty years old. Great gasping sobs tore her apart as bitter, repressed, ugly tears stung her eyes and flooded her face. Every shuddering breath she took made pain shoot through her ribs and she cried even harder, realizing she hadn't let herself break down in almost a year. She was so scared of it all, everything she'd gotten herself into. Of her coming death day, of Glen hurting Alex, of her brother being capable of true evil… of the realization that she was finally, completely alone.

Days like these, she was tempted to end it on her terms. She was so tired of trying to soldier through, she was so tired of trying to make a few things right before the curtain call, of trying to hang in for her brother's sake. And now, to learn he was so much worse of a person than she had ever suspected… to learn she might have somehow assisted in enabling him to commit heinous crimes… she thought of the handgun she had in the back of her car.

Several stories up from street level in an unremarkable motel in Easter Pennsylvania, the two of
them held onto each other tightly in the nearly-silent room—him: quiet and tense, head bent down over hers—her: shaking with tears, her arms circled around his middle, inside of the trench coat. Castiel had forgotten what she felt like, how warm and beautiful; how the sensation of being in an embrace with her was like something out of the Heaven he used to know. But her soft crying sounds were heartbreaking. And whatever gladness he felt at the reunion, he felt a hundred times more pain and guilt. There was dread, too, because he knew this was only temporary. He would have to leave soon, the camouflaging ward he'd set over her would only last so long. But how could he leave, especially after what he had learned today? After he'd learned that everything he'd believed for the past year was incorrect? Could he undo the damage caused by his ignorance and his false assumptions?

He had thought Alex knew where he was—fighting a war in Heaven. She hadn't.

He had thought she'd been with Dean, safe and relatively protected. She hadn't. Off on her own for reasons he didn't even know, she'd apparently spent the entire year alone, and he couldn't even imagine how she had lived, survived, managed. Retroactively, he was afraid for her safety and he cursed himself for not knowing.

The things that could have happened to her. The things that did happen to her. And there could be more things he didn't even know of yet.

It was devastating because he thought she had been safe, patiently awaiting his return, aware of what he was doing and the fact that he planned to return. That's what Rachel had said… he darkened. No, not said. Lied. He would deal with her soon, and harshly.

But right now, he held onto the moment they had been given, tried not to give up completely. This was his fault. All of it. Was it not enough to discover that he had damned her soul by being with her sexually? Was it not enough that he'd been the cause of her mute condition? Misery abounded wherever he touched her life, and it was too late. Too late. Not just for those things… but for the horrors that had befallen her today. His arms tightened around her as he thought of it, as if perhaps he could protect her from what had already happened.

Cas had removed the bruises and physical hurts from her, the red welts profaning her neck, but Alex was right. He couldn't erase what had happened to her. He couldn't take that away. He didn't even know, fully, what had happened to her and couldn't bring himself to ask her. Castiel thought of a man putting his hands on his Alex… kiss-biting her neck and forcing himself onto her, striking her across the face and making her hurt, making her suffer, making her do something she didn't want. His blood ran molten with furious despair as, unbidden, he envisioned her, frightened and struggling underneath that giant blond man who Castiel had seen a few months ago. Somehow, he knew that man was the one who had committed atrocities against Alex. The mental image made him feel physically sick, a feeling he hadn't experienced in quite some time.

Castiel remembered the last time he had cried, about a year ago, when Alex had been dying at Lucifer's hands. He felt the same way now, as if his grief was so much it wanted to spill out of him. At the thought of her being violated completely, being scared and afraid and harmed, breathing became difficult. He had never experienced such striking horror or such a deep sense of failure. She hadn't even thought to call him, and had told him as much. She'd given up on him, and he was so, so sorry. His stroked his palm down over the back of her head once, cradled the nape of her neck with his hand, realizing with guilt-ridden self loathing how in his quest to save Alex, he had lost sight of her completely. Maybe had lost more than just sight. Even though they were in each others arms, he couldn't explain it… he felt far away from her. His eyes closed and he felt how his eyebrows knotted together tensely.
He was a fool for assuming he could pause everything here on earth to fight the war in Heaven. He'd been so ready to believe what Rachel had told him—and now he realized he should have checked, he should have found a way to see Alex and tell her, himself, all the things she had been unaware of for the entire past year. But he'd been so crippled with fear of endangering her, so afraid of Raphael laying claim to her, that he'd let the fear control him. And by doing so, he'd handed her over to the cruel wiles of fate. And now look what had happened.

He could sense by proximity that her blood ran thick with demon's blood, and he couldn't understand, even for a second, how this could have happened to her. Cas was torn between both wanting to remove himself as far from her as humanly possible to end the pain he seemed to cause her, and the need to take her hand and never let her leave his side again. How would she be all right after this? He had failed her in every way possible, and he had been so negligent of her. He'd done it all for her… but had he lost her in the process? He didn't know. Their bond, so strong and profound before, seemed unsure and flimsy to him now. Even though she was there, enveloped in his arms, he felt as if she had already slipped from him, as if he'd taken their relationship and dashed it onto rocks. He didn't understand this emotion he was feeling, this dread, this unease.

Alex drew back, her eyes red and watery, cheeks shining with tears. Looking up at him with what seemed to be guilt as his hand moved from the back of her hair to the side of her face, she shook her head faintly, struggling. Like she were resisting his touch, almost. "Cas… I really thought you were never coming back," she said, devastating him even further. Her words, her quietly breaking voice, the confirmation she had truly believed he would leave her forever without a word… it was all the most gut-wrenching thing. How could she think that? He had done so much for her, for them, and besides that, didn't she remember like he did? What he had promised and sworn to her? They had belonged with and to each other, they had an understanding before everything fell apart. And now… now he didn't know. How had he let this happen? She sniffed, looking down, another tear rolling down her cheek as her expression crumpled again. "I'm so sorry," she said softly.

He felt how his face was twisted into a pained, confused expression. Sorry for what? He didn't understand—she had nothing to be sorry for, if anyone had things to be sorry for, it was him. The motel room door abruptly opened back up with a loud bang, startling the two of them. Dean came into the room like a dark cloud, a suspicious glare on his face. Behind him, Sam looked bored with his arms crossed as he peered in lazily.

"You two set, or what?" Dean asked gruffly. Alex pulled away from Cas, trying to hide her teary face from her brothers. She mumbled something about needing a minute and disappeared quickly into the bathroom—Cas had to stop himself from following her like a magnet. He watched her, then stared at the closed door.

Alex shut the bathroom door and leaned her back against it, looking upward. Too many eyes on her, too many eyes. She was reeling—her emotions were so intense that they'd begun to affect her physically. Or maybe it was because she needed more demon blood. She moved away from the door and braced herself against the stained ceramic sink and stared into her reflection with a strained expression. The bathroom was dark and lit only with a single overhead light, making her face look long and shadowed. She appeared, to herself, like what she was: an addict. Jumpy, on edge, not normal. How had this happened to her? All too well, she remembered when Sam had been the one with this problem. She'd been so quick to judge him for it, too. So callous, so quick to side with Dean and not empathize with her twin in the least.

Funny… she and Sam were more alike than she'd ever thought; she'd followed in his footsteps almost exactly. It was almost laughable, drawing the comparisons. How when Dean died, Alex and Sam had fought and separated and Sam had subsequently given in to a demon blood addiction. And
now, almost blow-for-blow, Alex had done what he had. Fought with Dean and ran away when Sam 'died.' Lived on her own and gotten addicted to the substance just like Sam had. She understood now, a little, maybe why he'd gone for it. It got under your skin, it made you feel good when everything else in the world felt bad. What she didn't understand was why her twin was being so cold and unfeeling right now towards her and Dean. He was almost unrecognizable, and it unsettled her, and more than that, it scared her. What had happened to him?

Maybe he was just acting weird because it had been so long. But… it didn't make sense. They'd gotten so close the past year or so, had been friends again. He seemed so different than she remembered. Alex ran some water, hearing Dean and Cas’s voices indistinctly in the other room. Her heart suddenly jumped at the thought of Castiel being there. He was really there. Everything that had just happened—his appearance, their few minutes alone… that had really happened.

Suddenly crumpling into shame and guilt, Alex gripped the sink tight as she sobbed, trying to hide the sound and muffle it. Doubled over almost, she tried to breathe, to stop crying. How could he love her, with the things she'd done? She felt low and dirty, not just for the demon blood. The knowledge that just earlier that day she'd considered sex with another man just tore her up inside, almost as much as the trauma from the assault did. The word rape, ugly and uncomfortable and shameful bounced around in her mind and she gripped the sink even tighter, pressing her lips together, trying to stay calm.

Come on, baby, just relax. That voice haunted her. Hold still, bitch, you're making it really hard for me to enjoy this.

A gunshot. His look of shock and pain. She remembered the sound of her blood hammering in her ears painfully. Alex had killed humans before—two of them—but neither of them had been a person who she'd thought to be a friend. Glen made it three; three people she'd killed. And he deserved it, the fucking asshole. She realized that her whole body was shaking with sickened adrenaline and her head hurt, her veins begged for demon blood because it would help her forget this awful feeling. She suddenly remembered the running water and looked at it blankly, recalling a callous voice in her ear and hands that didn't belong on her body touching her inappropriately, painfully. She could somehow still feel those touches and without realizing it, she wrapped an arm around herself stomach protectively, as if she could shield herself from those memories and horrors.

Alex didn't want to admit even to herself how deeply Glen's actions had shaken her. So, true to the Winchester family name, she pushed her thoughts and emotions concerning the matter down and away, angrily refusing to think about it. Instead, she cupped her hands under the water and splashed her face, washing away the evidence of tears that had been there. She finished and cleared her throat, then patted her face with the little towel hanging beside the sink.

Standing to her full height, she drew her shoulders up and took in a deep breath. She couldn't let them see how bad off she was, how confused or scared. Having them worry over her and treat her like she was useless wasn't gonna happen. She hated that shit, because it implied that she was weak and stupid, and that's exactly how she felt… so, she'd act like she was okay. She didn't want to depend on someone to help her with this and she didn't want to admit how desperate she was for help. That, and Alex didn't need anyone else confirming the horrible suspicion she carried that she was lost, beyond help, and messed up for good. I'm fine, she told herself in ever-increasing doubt, I'm fine.

She heard Cas saying something as she turned the water off, that deep, unmistakable tenor carrying through the closed door. She looked at the door silently, toward where he was, her heart flip flopping at the sound of that low voice. Finally, she had some answers, enough for now anyway.
She understood that there was a war in Heaven, that Raphael opposed Cas and had sworn to hurt her and find her, should Cas return to her. That fact alone spoke of how important she was to Castiel and she squeezed her eyes shut at the sudden onset of more overwhelming guilt that threatened to turn to tears. She clapped a hand over her mouth, muffling a soft, grieved sound. She thought of all the times she'd decided he didn't love her. She thought of how she'd let Glen touch her and was ashamed at herself. At her lack of faith in Castiel, at her willingness to give up. She couldn't take that back and she wasn't sure what would happen between them now.

Her palm moved from her mouth to scrub her forehead as she breathed out shakily. *Get it together.* What now? What now? He said he couldn't stay, that him being around her endangered her. How long would the war last, though? How was she supposed to just keep waiting around? This was so hard. She thought you were supposed to find the love of your life and then things were neatly wrapped up, the sad times would be over. That's what all those stupid books she used to love reading had implied. That's what she'd wanted to believe. But reality was that she loved Castiel painfully and the circumstances around them were pulling them apart completely. It felt hopeless.

That, and… it wasn't like she remembered. It hurt, it was broken and weak. All this time she'd been longing for not only him, but *them*—the way they'd been there at the end. They had been deeply bonded and comfortable together, *used* to each other. Even though she hated to admit it to herself, he seemed strange to her again, unfamiliar, and she was disillusioned with herself. Was it supposed to be like that? Or maybe he felt distant because of the demon blood. She remembered how much he had detested Sam's addiction to it. Would he detest her now, too? Change his mind about loving her? He wasn't a human like she was. He was an *angel.* And she was filling herself with the blood of freaking *demons.* She knew he hated demons and all they stood for and dammit, so did she! She hunched over the sink again, propping an elbow onto the ledge there. This was scary and she felt *alone.* She put her face in her hand miserably.

She hated that they all knew now, that Cas had just blurted it out for Dean and Sam to know, too. Dean's look of utter disbelief and heartbreak had been worse than a fiery tirade. And Sam's apathy had been another unexpected low blow. What were they going to do with her? She couldn't just stop. Starting had been accidental but now it was impossible to escape the clawing, itching desire for more. She'd had a flask of it in her car and she thought of it anxiously… she needed more soon or she'd start to get sick. In fact, the headache she had was probably the first symptom. *Damn.* Alex resolved to explain it to them and tell them she'd wean herself off of it. If she'd gotten on it, she could get off of it, too. Maybe she could turn this around. No, not maybe. She *had* to.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror again. And didn't like who she saw there. Her eyes fell away from the mirror and she was disappointed with herself on every level. Looking at the closed bathroom door, she almost didn't want to go out again, face them. Face him. There was this creeping fear that the longer he saw her now, the more he'd see how low she had become. And when he saw that, how she wasn't this perfect version of herself that he kept in his mind, he really *would* leave her.

And the worst part, she couldn't blame him even for a second. Who would want this disaster she'd become?

Dean watched, flabbergasted, as Alex disappeared into the bathroom after mumbling something about needing a minute. Behind him, Sam came in and shut the door. What was going *on* here? When he'd walked in a couple seconds ago, it looked like the two of them were mourning something… arms resting on each other's, heads bowed down sort of, faces scrunched up in pained emotion, and Alex had clearly been crying. Did she tell Cas things that she wouldn't tell Dean? Or was Cas like, *breaking up* with her? It could have gone either way and Dean didn't know, was
driving himself crazy over his sister's wellbeing. He'd paced back and forth in the motel hallway
cagily as he kept an eye on his watch. Five minutes. That's what he'd given them. Not that he'd
wanted to—letting his sister out of his sight felt wrong, knowing she'd been attacked so horribly
just hours ago. But she'd wanted it, and as hard as it had been to, he had respected it, realizing that
if Cas and Alex really hadn't seen each other in a whole year, there would be things they both had
to say to each other. A year ago, he wouldn't have allowed it, he would have been a prick. But…
his time with Lisa had changed some things about him.

There wasn't really a way for Dean to deny that it was clear Cas still really, really cared about
Alex. It was obvious. He was gentle with her in a way that he wasn't with anyone else, just like
Dean remembered… but something was different. Something had… changed. Dean felt guarded
and suspicious of this entire thing. The war Cas had mentioned however briefly... the way Cas had
flipped out and done some angel blood thing to Alex the moment he laid eyes on her… the
shocking gut-punch when Cas had asked her if she'd been drinking demon blood. In a million
years, Dean had never expected to hear that. What had happened to her this year? Why had Cas let
that happen and just ditched her without a word? Stressed to the max, Dean set his sights on the
angel, wanting some damn answers. "What'd you say to her?" he asked in a low, warning tone.

Because if Cas made her cry, if he'd hurt her feelings or broken her heart, it didn't matter if the guy
was an angel. Dean would find a way to beat his face in.

"That's between myself and Alex," Castiel replied, matching Dean's rough tone and not looking at
the man. Dean's eyebrows shot up at the reply, but Cas wasn't even looking at him. He looked out
the window he stood beside instead of meeting Dean's expectant gaze, and he seemed heavy, jaded.
Not sure what to make of the angel's statement, just not liking it, Dean did what he was best at:
glated. Cas seemed to sense it and turned halfway, looked at Dean sidelong. He spoke in a low,
rueful tone. "Dean—we have to get her away from the demon blood." He paused heavily, dipped
his chin down. "Like we did with Sam."

Dean's expression softened from foul to oh god. What, put her into lock down? Let the demon
blood tear its way out of her system? Watch her hallucinate and go nuts like Sam had when he
came off of it? It had been bad enough watching Sam go through that, now her? Castiel seemed to
share Dean's horrified feelings on the matter, only Cas seemed more grim and resigned about it.
Like he'd already thought it through. "By my best guess, she drank some a day or two ago. She'll
crave more, and soon." He took in a deep and wearied breath then let it out and turned from the
window to face Dean better. The angel looked as defeated as Dean felt. "I suggest you check her
things, she may have some with her."

This was… unthinkable. Horrible. The worst. All of it. Everything. "She… she doesn't have
anything, man," Dean said, and his voice was strained with emotion. His shoulders slumped a little
and he crossed the room, needing to sit down because everything weighed too much and gravity
was defeating him. And he'd thrown the last thing she owned down onto the street without a
thought. Maybe that's why she was so upset… because her phone was the last thing she'd had, and
she'd known it, too. "It… it all got impounded by the cops. Whatever she had is all in her car, a
state away." Dean sank down onto the little couch pushed up against the wall. Shaking his head, he
said nothing more, just stared vapidly into middle distance. What had happened to her? She'd been
so reckless this year, she'd endangered herself and cut herself off from everyone who she'd ever
supposedly loved and needed. Dean wondered if maybe she wanted to die. He knew he had, some
ights. He rubbed his face with the palm of his hand, silent and tense. Across the room, still near
the window, Cas was stone-faced and deep in what looked like distressed thought.

"Dean. You flipped your shnit when you found out I was on demon blood," Sam said, looking back
at Dean from over his shoulder—he'd sat down at the table again, and his tone was cooly
accusatory, he put his hand out and gestured with a strange scoff on his face. "And you're just…
down in the dumps when she gets hooked?"

"Shut up, Sam, I don't wanna hear any of your crap right now," Dean said, his tone depressed. He
didn't even conjure up a dirty look or glare for Sam.

"You know, the more you drink, the more you want," Sam said, matter of fact. "And the less you
have, the crazier you feel." He shrugged. "At least, that's how I remember it. So, if she had some a
couple days ago… she'll start jonesin’ soon. Real soon." He seemed so unaffected by the thought
that even Castiel paused to look at Sam strangely for a moment. Dean felt disgusted with his
brother and his blasé attitude. But no words came to mind, no tirades or rants. He just wanted
things to be how they had been, why couldn't he just have his brother and sister back how they
used to be? Dean pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to gather himself.

Standing off to the side, Castiel saw how Dean looked at Sam with so much questioning confusion,
and Cas, too, was unsure. Why was Sam so different? It was clear to the angel, now, that Sam was
not fully himself. He glanced at Dean and Sam guiltily. Another thing he had done wrong: raised
Sam from the dead wrong somehow. He couldn't tell them—any of them—that he'd been the one
who raised Sam. Not until he knew how to fix it. There were other things he couldn't tell them.
How Alex's soul was damned because of him, how he'd claimed the right to her soul and hidden it
away like a dark secret. And with that in mind, at the reminder of how much sin he had
accumulated against the Winchester family, he grew angry with himself. The anger translated into
helplessness, which only made him more anxious to act now.

"We should do this now, Dean," Cas said in a low, urgent tone, and he approached the man.

Dean stood up at Cas's insistent suggestion, an adamant expression on his face. "No, no," he said,
whispering furiously, glancing at the bathroom door, and he came to meet Cas in the middle of the
room, his voice and expression intense. "After what happened to her today?" He made a face, put
his hands out wide. "I'm not throwing her in lockdown. Not yet, Cas."

The two men stared at each other with similarly worried, tense expressions, and Castiel felt another
 pang of emotional pain. Strange. He saw how the way he felt was reflected in Dean's eyes and
face, he saw clearly how much this man loved Alex, too, was worried for her and recognized how
dire the things were that had transpired upon her. And if Dean loved her, he should agree with Cas,
to do what was best for her. Trying to convince the man, Cas attempted an appeal. "Dean, I don't
like it either," he started, intending to tell Dean that he would personally take her to Bobby's, find a
way to stay with her as she healed and let the demon blood addiction go. But he got cut off.

Dean made an ugly face, threw his hands out sarcastically, lost his whisper in favor of his regular
rumbling voice. "Yeah well congratulations, Cas, on being such a sweet, caring guy!"

"...why are you directing your anger toward me?" Cas asked quietly, feeling attacked.

"Well who else should I direct it toward?!" Dean asked, aghast, then quickly accusatory. "You
were supposed to be her guardian angel and look what happened to her!" The man's expression
wavered into almost pleading sorrowfulness. "I mean, where the hell were you, man?" Dean's
disappointment and emotional turmoil only furthered Castiel's. "I thought… I thought you were
looking out for her." That was even worse than his thunderous accusations. That quiet, wounded,
disillusioned statement.

"I... thought I was," Castiel said guiltily, staring at the ground. If only he had known. Perhaps he
could have found some way to do things differently. And what could he do now? This was
temporary. Raphael was still out there. The war wasn't over. And his allegiances were torn. Cas
met Dean's gaze and the two of them looked at each other with similarly agonized expressions.

The bathroom door opened at that moment, and both of the men turned. Alex hesitated in the doorway, looking from Dean to Cas. She'd splashed her face off and it looked like she'd run her fingers through her hair. She looked like she's recovered, for the moment, from her emotional distress. Eyes narrowed, she frowned suspiciously, obviously sensing the tension in the room. "What's... going on?" she asked slowly.

Cas and Dean glanced at each other silently, both seeming to come to the wordless agreement to say nothing of what they'd been discussing. Alex's frown deepened. Dean wet his lips and put on a disarming smile, shrugged, all extremely convincing. "We, uh... Cas was just telling us about how he thinks he can help with the case," Dean said, and looked at Cas pointedly, a smile stretched across his face. The smile didn't reach his eyes and Cas saw how Dean's worries were eating at him below the surface.

"Uh... yes," Castiel faltered, catching on and realizing he was expected to lie. "Yes, uh..." Cas began to walk over to the table where all of Sam's research was piled up. He actually did have a few things to add to this investigation. Had come to Dean for that specific reason. However, now, he was not in the frame of mind to do much but worry over Alex. However, he forced himself to try and put it from his mind in the meantime, to focus on helping with this case. Sitting at the table, Sam glanced up at Cas, who picked up one of the printouts. It featured a Renaissance depiction of the angel of death.

"First it should be known that your theory is incorrect, Sam," Cas said, distracted and not looking the man in the eye. "Angels are not the ones behind these killings. But, they were committed with one of our weapons." He paused heavily, glanced at Alex, who was quiet and unreadable, arms folded as she leaned against the bathroom doorframe. Cas was finding it extremely hard to think about the case. He only wanted to take care of what was most important to him right then: her. But he supposed Dean was right to resist the idea of sending Alex away so soon. To just suddenly sweep Alex away, unaware, and to the panic room for demon blood detox would be jarring, add to her clear trauma. So Cas went along with the deception, and couldn't look at her anymore as he thought of how she'd needed him and he'd been far away. "There's... only one thing that could have brought these specific deaths into existence," he said, setting the paper down somberly. "You call it the staff of Moses."

"The staff?" Sam asked, incredulous. "Huh."

Cas picked up the jar of locusts on the table, looked at it, distracted despite himself. "It was used in a dominance display against the Egyptians, as I recall."

Dean scoffed, trying for amused sarcasm as he stood off to the side of the table. "Yeah, uh, that one made the papers."

"...didn't the staff turn a river to blood?" Alex asked, seeming to think something was amiss. "Not one guy?"

Cas glanced at her briefly, guiltily. He wished so much that she had called him but only saw himself as the one to blame. "The weapon isn't being used at full capacity." He saw how her eyes took on a note of questioning at his demeanor. Again, he looked away.

"Okay, but... what is—what is Chuck Heston's disco stick doing down here, anyway?" Dean asked, and Cas saw that he was trying to act light-hearted, his tone was joking. Cas didn't understand the reference and didn't know how that was helpful or beneficial right now. "I mean, don't you guys put away your toys?"
Always with the jokes. Cas didn't have time for jest. How could he explain all of what had happened to the weapons, to Heaven? Cas took a moment, staring at the jar of locusts and walking off a few steps into the middle of the room, effectively hiding his face from them all for a moment. He felt so heavy and burdened by everything. He turned the jar over in his hands, focusing on it briefly. "Before the apocalypse, Heaven may have been corrupt, but it was stable. The staff was safely contained." He sighed heavily, thinking of how utterly decimated paradise was. He turned and then looked from the brothers to Alex, who still watched from the bathroom doorway. "It's been chaos up there," he said. "The war, it..." he looked away. He felt distant from all of three of them, he felt out of place here with them again, he felt to blame for so much, including what had happened to Heaven's weapons and for these deaths, too, in a way. "In the confusion, a number of... powerful weapons were stolen." He glanced sidelong at Alex, who looked at him with a certain degree of sadness. He wondered if he looked sad, too. As close as they'd been a moment ago, he felt worlds apart. Was it too much to ask for a reprieve from all of the circumstances that were determined to sever them apart? He felt certain that what they needed was more time together so that he could explain more, so that he could ask her more, understand what had happened to her.

"Wait, you—you're saying your nukes are loose?" Dean asked, forcing Cas to remain present in the moment.

He took a moment to reply. "I'm... afraid so," Cas confirmed, realizing that his desires, as usual, would have to wait. "But you've stumbled onto one of them. We must find the weapon that did this." He indicated the jar of locusts that he still held, growing deeply somber, realizing that he could use some support in this matter. He looked at Dean, the one in charge. "I need your help."

"You need our help," Sam said, scoffing and standing up, crossing his arms. "After all the help you gave us this year," Dean put in without missing a beat, immediately riled up, full of indignant defensiveness—Cas had come when Dean called, he had done what he could, he would have done more if he had known—but he hadn't. He'd been lied to and made what felt like endless mistakes and nothing could undo the consequences and he felt himself bristling because it was true. He'd been needed and he hadn't responded because he hadn't known. His anger surged because he felt so helpless and lost, stuck between a rock and a hard place, unable to do anything, at all. Cas reacted without thinking, and tossed the jar of locusts at Dean, who caught it with a soft, surprised oof. Pouring all of his frustrations into his words, Castiel adopted a decidedly sharp, foul tone. "Sam, Dean, my 'people skills' are 'rusty'," he ranted with a surprising amount of acid, using air quotes over the words he was emphasizing verbally. "Pardon me, but I have spent the last 'year' as a multidimensional wavelength of celestial intent, unaware of your individual plights here on earth," he snapped, then relented slightly, even though his tone was still forceful, louder than normal. "I'm sorry, I am, for failing to be here when you needed me." He glanced at Alex darkly, expression conflicted, and he softened, pulling himself together. He looked at Dean again. "But I am here now and believe me, you do not want that weapon down here." He paused significantly. "Help me find it. Or more people will die."

Dean and Sam looked at him, surprised at the rant. And when Cas glanced sidelong again, he saw that Alex, too, was deeply confused at his reaction. Perhaps he had overreacted. But all he could think of was her being attacked, assaulted, and him being none the wiser. It made him want to destroy something, utterly decimate it.

"All right," Dean said, cutting into the thoughts. "Okay. Well, if the angels didn't pull the trigger, then that brings us back to motive," he said, seeming to accept Cas's request for help. He headed to the little table.
"What?" Cas asked, not sure whose motive was being mentioned.

"The case," Sam explained. "If angels didn't pop the kid, who did? Right now, we got three dead cops." He reached for what Dean had picked up off the table—a newspaper clipping. "Only thing linking them... is this." He read off of the clipping. 'Father of slain suspect calls for investigation.'

"So you suspect this man of committing the murders?" Cas asked, narrowing his eyes as he followed the logic.

"Seems like a good place to start, anyway," Sam said with a shrug.

"Maybe this guy got his hands on Moe's staff, huh?" Dean put in.

Cas frowned. The sooner he could help them solve this mystery, the better. He planned to take Alex to the panic room by the end of that day, whether Dean liked it or not. He glanced at her and felt guilt over what he was planning. It seemed like an ambush, but there was no guarantee of how she would react when she realized. "Do you have this man's home address?" Cas asked, his focus divided down the middle between this case and Alex.

"Yeah, hold on a sec, I got it earlier… public records…" Sam leafed through the papers that were piled high.

Alex finally seemed to decide to leave where she'd been stationary in the bathroom doorway, she tapped her fingers on her upper thigh as she walked into the kitchenette, distracted. Cas watched her, sadly. What was she thinking? She had her other arm wrapped around herself, like she was cold, or trying to protect herself. She winced, frowning at nothing, like she had a headache. If Sam were right, she'd begin to crave demon blood again soon, if she hadn't already. Again, Cas wondered about her year alone. Alone. And to think, he'd spent all that time lamenting his own loneliness in Heaven. How selfish he was. How shortsighted.

Alex ran a hand through her hair, glancing at Cas, her expression hooded. He noticed fully how she looked so much more physically healthier than she'd been the last time he'd seen her. Her skin was tanned and she seemed to have gained weight, she looked strong and supple. He knew it was the demon blood's effects—it made the human body stronger for a time, before it began to destroy it instead. Sadness spanned across his mind as their eyes held a gaze. Her eyes slid sidelong to her brothers and she paused, seemed to consider something. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips in thought, her eyebrows creased together slightly, then she seemed to give up on hesitance and she approached him, came to stand in front of him.

"I... thought you said you couldn't stay," she said, and it was a question just as much as it was a statement.

"I can't," he told her, knowing that was the truth. He met her tense gaze with one of his own. "Not long. Only long enough to recover this weapon."

She nodded once her understanding, silent and looking like she had many things to say. Yet she said nothing, just grimaced a little, touched her fingertips to her forehead. When she saw Cas's questioning, concerned look, she tried to downplay it. "Headache," she mumbled, but he saw how her eyes shifted downward in distinct, jittery guilt.

_Oh Alex._ He remembered when Sam had been so abominable to him. The boy with the demon blood. That seemed a lifetime ago, when he'd been so different of an angel. He felt no such feelings of disdain for Alex. The only thing he felt was horror that this had happened to her. And the need to fix it. Because if the addiction became too severe, it would kill her, begin to destroy her body.
completely instead of empower it. And he was not going to let that happen.

Dean was watching them quietly, not looking his usual fire-and-brimstone. Just sort of troubled. Unsure. "Here's the address, Cas," Sam said, reading off a sheet of paper and catching the angel's attention. "Twenty-two twenty-two, Sycamore Lane—"

One second, Sam was reading out the address for Darryl Birch, the next, all four of them were suddenly standing, in a row, in a dim living room in front of a very surprised, middle-aged man who was sitting on his couch.

"Cas, a little warning next time," Dean complained, surprised and a little disoriented. This day just kept getting crazier and crazier. Beside him, Alex was confounded—beside her, Cas was stoic—and beside him, Sam was frowning mildly.

"What the... how'd you get in here?!" the man on the couch exclaimed, shooting up to his feet. Dean recognized him from the newspaper article he'd glanced as the father of the boy who the police had killed.

Sam, on top of it and not seeming to be disoriented like Dean felt, flashed his FBI badge, which apparently he kept in his jeans pocket at all times. "Mr. Birch, settle down," he said, then snapped the ID shut. "Federal agents."

"But... you can't just walk up in here!" Darryl protested, aghast.

Sam ignored him. "Quite a collection you've got there, huh?" He nodded toward the coffee table, which was littered with newspaper clippings.

"What are you trying to—" Darryl began, his eyes widening.

"Look, we know the truth, all right?" Sam cut in coldly. "Chris didn't have a gun on him when those cops shot him. They set him up."

Mild surprise showed on the man's face. "Yeah," Darryl said softly, looking down. "They're all getting theirs."

Accusatory, Sam stared at the man. "And who's giving it to them, Darryl?"

When the man frowned and said nothing, Dean spoke up, testing Sam's theory. "Darryl?" He paused meaningfully. "Did you kill Toby Gray and the others?"

"Me?!" Darryl asked, flabbergasted, panicking. "I didn't kill anyone! Look at how they died!"

"You smote them with the staff of Moses," Castiel said, deadpan, stern.

Darryl looked at him oddly, going still. "...the hell kind of Fed are you?" he asked softly, weirded out.

"He's new," Alex excused casually, speaking up for the first time and putting a wan smile across her face. Dean glanced at her sidelong, not for the first time that day wondering if she was really, actually okay or not. She seemed fine, well a little sick looking, actually... like there was a bad taste in her mouth.

Darryl looked at her oddly, too. "I'm supposed to believe you're an agent? What are you, sixteen?" Alex looked thoroughly annoyed at the question. Darryl looked at the four of them suspiciously,
"Who are you guys, really?"

Getting impatient, Cas shook his head. "We don't have time for this." He took a threatening step toward Darryl. "Where is it?"

"Leave my dad alone!" Came a young, scared voice. And everyone turned to see a skinny boy maybe thirteen or fourteen, holding a stick in his hand—he aimed it like a gun at them. The second Cas turned around and saw it, he transported through space to put himself in front of Alex, startling everyone in the room. The boy started at the sudden movement and being only an arm's length away, Cas took the stick away, surprising the boy completely. "Cas, take it easy—" Dean said, even as Darryl flipped out.

"Hey, what are you—how did he—?!" Darryl cried, then suddenly found Cas in his face, and he fell over, unconscious at the touch of two fingertips to his head.

"What did you do to him?" the boy asked in rising panic, stepping back in horror at what had just happened, at the man who had disappeared one place then reappeared in another.

"It's all right," Dean said, holding a hand out to the kid, trying to get him to calm down. "He's just sleeping." Cas was looking at the stick in his hand, brow furrowed deeply and Dean glanced at him sidelong. "Is that...?" he asked.

"Yes," Cas confirmed, then looked at the boy oddly.

"Why's it so short?" Alex asked, head tilted to the side, features screwed up in confusion.

Cas frowned deeply, looking at the stick oddly. "It's—it's been sawed off."

"Who are you people?" The kid asked, voice rising in panic, and he kept edging backwards. "It wasn't my dad who killed those cops, please, don't hurt us!"

"Listen, we're not here to hurt you, okay?" Alex said, following him slowly.

"But we need to know," Dean said, right with her. "Where did you get this thing?"

"Please don't kill my dad," the boy said, still backing up as the four adults followed. "It was me. I did it."

"We're not here to kill anyone, okay?" Alex repeated herself, more assertively this time. The kid stared at her with big brown eyes from underneath a frizzy afro of brown hair.

"What's your name, kid?" Dean asked—the boy had physically backed himself into a corner and had no place else to go.

"Aaron," he said nervously. "Aaron Birch." He must be the murder victim's younger brother. Alex and Dean exchanged a glance—behind them slightly, Sam was silent. Off to the side, Cas was looking at the boy with a predictable frown.

"Okay, Aaron, where'd you get that stick?" Dean asked him.

The boy hesitated. "You won't believe me."

Dean raised his eyebrows, smiled a little cynically. What wouldn't he believe these days? "Try me."

The kid glanced at Alex, then Cas, then looked back at Dean. "It was an angel."
"An angel?" Dean repeated, eyebrows shooting up.

Alex looked at Cas questioningly, and Dean caught that little exchange of looks. Aaron explained, drawing Dean's attention. "Those liars, they killed my brother, and nothing bad even happened to them," he said, voice trembling. "It's not fair. So I prayed to God every night he would punish them. God didn't answer. But he did."

"His name—did he give you a name?" Castiel asked.

"No," Aaron said. "He just said I could have justice, but I was gonna have to take it myself. He... he gave me the stick."

"What, just... just handed it over?" Alex asked, eyebrows raised doubtfully.

"Ah, come on," Dean said, calling the kid's bluff and elaborating on his sister's question, walking a little closer, which clearly made Aaron even more nervous. "He didn't just give it to you now did he, Aaron?"

Considering his words carefully, the boy was silent, cautious. Then swallowed. "Okay, fine. I bought it."

"You bought it?" Sam repeated, and chuckled, leaning against the staircase casually. "With what?" He seemed sarcastic, mocking. "What's your allowance?"

"What'd the angel want for it?" Dean asked, not giving Aaron a chance to reply to Sam's dumb question. "What did you give him for it?"

The boy was quiet, somber, trying to put on a tough face. "My soul."

"Your soul," Alex said, shock filling her voice.

"You sold your soul to an angel?" Sam asked, sounding similarly caught off guard.

"Can that even happen?" Dean asked Cas, who looked confounded.

"It's... never happened before," Cas said, looking at Dean, then Alex, seeming to be vastly confused, then almost appeared to speak to himself, not them. "An angel's buying souls. That could explain why he cut the staff into pieces."

"What? Why?" Sam prompted.

Cas looked dour, and made a good point. "More pieces, more product."

"More 'product'?' Dean asked. "Who is this guy?"

"I don't know. But we'll find him." Without warning, Cas stepped forward and smacked his hand to Aaron's forehead, and the boy fell unconscious.

"Hey wh—" Alex started, even as Dean stepped back in surprise. "What'd you do that for?!" he demanded.

Suddenly, they were in their motel room again, and Cas was standing in front of them, Aaron slung over his shoulder like a sack of grain. The room was dimmer, the sun was setting. "Portability," Cas said, and turned and maneuvered the kid onto the bed roughly, laid him out there flat like a pancake.
"Cas.... you realize you just kidnapped a kid?" Dean asked, shocked at the angel's audacity.

Slightly behind him and beside him, Alex watched Cas and he turned around to face Dean with a stony, resigned expression on his face. She was noticing, more and more, how Cas seemed distracted, troubled, jaded, different. She thought about what he'd said about the war. She knew what fighting constantly did to a person. Her head pounded painfully and she ignored it angrily. I'm fine.

"If the angel we seek truly bought this boy's soul, when a claim is laid on a living soul, it leaves a mark, a brand," Cas explained stiffly, gruffly.

"What, like a—like a shirt tag at camp?" Sam asked.

Cas looked at Sam uncertainly, faltering slightly. "I... have no idea. But I can read the mark and find the name of the angel that bought the soul."

"How can you read the mark?" Alex asked cautiously. She felt uncomfortable for a reason she couldn't name and walked a little closer, to the opposite side of the bed. She looked over the kid closely. Was it like Dean's handprint he'd had when he first came back from Hell? She didn't see any marks on Aaron, but maybe it was on his back or chest or legs somewhere. She looked at Cas across the bed, across Aaron's still body. "Where is it?"

Castiel's gaze flickered away. "It's... on his soul. And reading it... well, it'll be painful for him."

Cas seemed bothered, distracted, but resigned, and began to roll his sleeve up. "Excruciating." Alex stared, mouth dropping open slightly. She was taken aback. Was Cas gonna like stick his hand into the kid's head or chest or something?

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa," Dean said, holding a hand up, coming a couple steps closer. "Hold on."

"Dean." Cas seemed inconvenienced by Dean's protests, which startled Alex further.

"He's a kid, Cas," Dean insisted. "A ki—Sam?" he looked to his brother for support, expectantly.

Sam just looked at Cas. "Any permanent damage?"

"What?!” Dean looked at Sam like he was nuts.

"Physically, minimal," Cas said. His sleeve was rolled halfway up his arm and he began to reach down for Aaron—Alex's hand shot out and grabbed his wrist and his eyes snapped to hers and momentarily, she forgot everything, just felt his warm skin against hers. It panicked her somehow, made her throat close a little, and she pulled away abruptly, feeling stung for no reason she could name. Confused with herself and seeing how Cas's expression faltered, how he seemed to be a little taken aback at the physical contact and then her reaction, Alex tried to maintain her course, brush her reaction aside.

"Cas... you, you can't just do that to him without him saying okay," she said, a strange sensation rising up in her, a horrifying feeling she didn't recognize. She felt bare and stupid, like there were too many eyes on her—Sam, Dean, Cas. Without warning, she was remembering Glen's vile voice in her ear, his knee and weight pressed into her back, one of his hands pulling on her hair painfully. He had done that to her without permission, without consent, and the feeling of being violated resonated over her all again.

"I have to, Alex," Cas insisted, unaware of her inner thoughts. He looked conflicted about it, but not enough, and she was staggered, not even fully cognizant of the conversation anymore, just
remembering what she wanted to forget. She heard Dean saying something but Alex was staring at
the patterned bedspread unseeingly, becoming quickly short of breath. How could she have been so
stupid, and how could anyone do that to someone else?

"I mean, Jesus, Cas, let's just look at our options here!" Dean exclaimed, trying to be reasonable,
but close to panic from the sounds of it.

"What options?" Cas asked, his voice rising, too—and he turned his head to look at Alex's older
brother almost angrily. "Dean! If I get the name, I can work a ritual to track the angel down."

"And I'm all for that," Dean insisted loudly. "But come on, there's gotta be another way."

Cas stared at Dean stonily. "There is no other way."

A long silence. And then: "Uh… Al? You okay?"

She flinched, starting out of her waking nightmare. Dean was looking at her oddly, and Cas was
too. "What is it?" the angel asked her, seeming to see through her, and she flipped out, hating being
looked at.

"This isn't right!" She burst out, shaking, a little bit off kilter. "You shouldn't do this!" Dean
seemed to pick up on the fact that she wasn't talking about Aaron, made to move toward her, but
she held a hand out, looked at him and shook her head adamantly, her expression caged. "I'm fine,
don't touch me, I'm fine." The room fell silent, Alex stared at Cas, feeling somehow sold short.
This wasn't the Cas she'd known, the one who hated to hurt anyone, who was gentle and kind
unless you gave him a real reason to be angry with you.

"Maybe it's not right, but it's the only choice I have," Castiel said in a deep, regretful voice.

"So… you're gonna torture a kid, just like that?" Dean asked appealingly, like he shared Alex's
convictions, like he found it strange that Cas would do this.

"I can't care about that, Dean!" Cas insisted, and he seemed suddenly to be talking about
something else entirely. He grew quiet. "I don't have the luxury of that kind of thing anymore." He
glanced at Alex and turned to bend over Aaron. Dean seemed to give up, but Alex didn't, in fact,
she got furious.

Maybe she was just hypersensitive because of what Glen had done to her earlier that day, but she
felt protective of Aaron, she couldn't just let Cas stick his hand in him or whatever and hurt the kid
without Aaron at least knowing about it. So she blocked Cas's attempt to bend over the kid with a
firm, staying hand against his shoulder. When his eyes met hers sorrowfully, she looked at him
with tears gathered in hers. This was suddenly so important to her that she could scream and her
head hurt and her body felt like it was dying and she just wanted things to be like they had been
before life turned to crap, she just wanted to know Cas wouldn't really do this to an innocent kid.
That he would listen to her, give her a chance to try a different way. "Cas, please." Even though her
brothers were right there, she attempted to make this conversation between just them, attempted to
get Cas to respond to her, using a soft voice, almost a whisper. Her mind spun weirdly. "Just, just
think for a second," she appealed. "At least let Aaron have as say in what you're about to do to him.
He's just a kid."

His bright blue eyes flickered between hers. Unlike his responses to Dean, Cas seemed to actually
consider her words. "He won't agree to it," he insisted regretfully.

"You don't know that," Alex replied vehemently, her tensions running high. "Wake him back up.
Let me talk to him, m-maybe I can get him to, to give us an okay." At this point, she felt dumb and the room was too hot.

Cas just looked at her sadly. "Alex, I realize this must seem very cruel of me, but—"

"'But' nothing!" Alex shrieked, then was subsequently shocked at herself, how loud she had been. Embarrassed, she swallowed, shook her head, averted her eyes. She wasn't supposed to show them how off she felt. I'm fine. She tried to calm herself, act like nothing was as wrong as it really was, for her own sake, too. "Just, just don't do this without his permission, please. Cas, for me. Do this for me. If I can't get him to agree, then you go ahead. But please, give me a couple minutes to talk to him. Come on, Cas. Just a couple minutes. You can do that, right?" She'd asked it so fast and thoughtlessly, she couldn't tell if she'd repeated herself or not. She felt insane, and Cas didn't seem sure, seemed concerned about her reaction and the way she was word-vomiting and pleading. But, he looked down at Aaron, hesitating, then back at her. And she knew he was going to grant her request.

He relented, nodded. "Yes. All right." And he touched two fingertips to Aaron's forehead, waking the child up.

Disoriented, Aaron sat up breathlessly, almost hyperventilating, looking around in a panic. "W-what did you guys do to me?!" he demanded, voice cracking pre-pubescently.

A little surprised and unprepared and feeling everyone in the room looking at her, Alex's mouth suddenly felt like cotton. What was she supposed to say? "Hey, uh, relax," she said, glancing at Cas nervously, then Aaron, who looked anything but relaxed. "It's okay."

"Where am I?" he asked, looking at her in fear, then Cas, then Sam and Dean. He was breathing hard, sitting ramrod straight against the headboard, looked like he might try something. Kind of like a wild animal. "What do you want with me?!"

Alex sat beside him on the bed, a leg folded underneath herself as she put out a hand toward him, trying to get him to calm down. If this didn't work, she didn't know if she'd be able to let Cas go through with the soul reading so she gave it her best shot. "Aaron, right? I'm Alex. And uh, those are my brothers, Sam and Dean. And our angel friend, Castiel." He looked really scared and she wracked her brain, which felt incredibly muddled. "We just, we really, really need to know the name of the angel who sold that piece of the staff to you," she told him, trying to ignore the splitting headache. Son of a bitch, she needed something to help it go away.

There was a flicker of guilt across the kid's face and he shook his head, slightly shamefaced. "I told you… I don't know his name." He looked at Cas fearfully. "W-what are you guys gonna do to me?"

"You're gonna be fine, I promise," she said automatically and repeated herself. "We need your help, that's it." He looked at her with that same fear, not believing her, and Alex opened her mouth to tell him what Cas needed to do, then suddenly realized she recognized that fear in the kid's eyes. She softened a little, empathized with him, surprising herself a little because suddenly, she knew exactly what to say. For a minute, she felt better. "Aaron, I know what it's like to lose a brother," she told him honestly. "It hurts. Every day, all day, in every part of you." He listened to her intently but guardedly, glanced at Sam and Dean, then back at her. "You kinda feel like, I dunno, like you lost a piece of who you are, right?"

His face faltered; he was clearly trying to hide his true feelings of sadness. "Yeah, I guess."

Really, she identified with this kid more than she realized. She thought of when Sam had died—
twice now. When Dean had died. How bad it hurt. How much she'd wanted to change it, do something, get justice somehow. "Yeah. So when you found out you could give those cops what they deserved, when you found out you could have revenge… you did what a lot of people would have done." She understood. She did. "But I don't think Chris wouldn't want you to be messed up in all this. Soul deal, murder? Aaron." She fixed him with a meaningful, heavy gaze. He was messing around with grown-up stuff, so she was gonna treat him like he was grown up, ask him a pretty hard question. "Those cops died at your hand. You get that, right?"

His eyebrows knit together a little, she saw how he didn't want to think about it. "They deserved it, though," he insisted with wavering confidence.

Alex shrugged mildly, realizing how sweaty she felt. "Maybe they did." She looked at him unflinchingly and forced herself to be mind-over-matter, to ignore the discomfort of her headache and dry mouth and sweaty palms. "Those cops were the guilty ones but… now you live with the guilt, don't you? It's not over. And the worst part is you're a murderer now, just like them." His mouth worked oddly, his dark brown eyes shone with tears that he was fighting, hard. Alex felt tired and almost lost her train of thought—where had she been going with this? She forced herself to focus. "You, you can't take it back, and I dunno if you want to or not. But right now—we need you to help us stop the angel who sold that weapon to you, okay? Soul deals aren't something to play around with. Trust me."

Aaron looked at her with flickering eyes—he looked at her knee, then her eyes, about five times before he frowned deeply and got really quiet. A tear escaped his eye. "I wish I hadn't done it," he managed, his voice cracking with tears. "I thought it would be like the movies. I thought I'd feel better. But it feels bad." He looked at her with great amounts of pain. "You wouldn't understand. What it's like to kill someone and know you killed them."

Alex had to smile a little at that, a cynical, wan reaction. "Actually, I do understand. I've killed." Her expression faltered. "I have a lot of blood on my hands." The word blood made her mouth feel thirstier than ever and she was ashamed. She hid it, or tried to. "So trust me, Aaron… I know for a fact that you don't wanna keep going down this road." She looked at him silently for a second, then ran one of her hands across her forehead. It was damp with perspiration. This wasn't good. "Listen. I need you to tell me that you're okay with this. My friend Cas here needs to read your soul. And it's gonna hurt, a lot. So, he'll knock you out for it, so you feel less pain." He looked freaked out at the words 'hurt' and 'pain' and Alex scrambled for a way to convince him. She came up with: "I, uh, I can hold your hand, if you want." Didn't kids like to have their hands held?

He scowled sullenly, looked away grumpily. "I'm not a baby."

Alex glanced at Cas briefly. Aaron said nothing else. "Uh… so is that a yes or a no?" Alex prompted the kid. She tried not to show how anxious she was, realized she'd been moving the fingers of her right hand back and forth like a crazy person would. She forced herself to hold still.

Aaron's eyes came to hers cautiously. "Am I... in a lot of trouble?" he asked.

He definitely was. Mostly because he'd played around with things that would haunt him forever. Alex just looked at him, sorry for him, even though she thought she shouldn't be, even though she was in such bad shape at the moment. "What do you think?"

Aaron was silent, then steeled himself, raised his chin up and put on a brave, tough face. "Yeah. All right. He can do it. And..." he moved his hand so that it was palm up. "I guess you can hold my hand, if you have to." Alex smiled faintly at him and reached out, put her sweaty hand in his. Aaron's brave front wavered and Alex squeezed a little, suddenly feeling like she was Dean and Aaron was her. She looked up at Cas and nodded a go ahead. He had watched the entire exchange
closely, seemed thoughtful but also worried—clearly, about her. She withered a little. *I'm fine.* Cas focused his attention onto the boy.

"I am going to render you unconscious now," he said. Aaron shrank back a little as Cas reached for his forehead. The boy looked at Alex with wide eyes.

"It's okay." She squeezed his hand again, stifling a grimace because another shooting pain wracked her head without warning. She felt an inward panic. What if she couldn't get more, soon? Would she die? Cas's fingers touched the boy's forehead. Aaron fell unconscious.

Watching silently, Dean was pretty damn impressed that, *one*, Cas had listened to Alex. *Two*, that Alex had exhibited so much thoughtfulness and maturity. He wasn't sure if he'd ever seen her talk to anyone so much who wasn't either himself or Sam. He watched Cas and Alex exchange a glance, and both seemed guarded, sad, unsure. He realized how different both of them seemed to him from what they'd been last year. Cas seemed like he'd grown up, somehow. Gotten colder, too. He'd been so human the last time Dean saw him. Dean looked at his sister again, noticed how she looked sort of... sweaty. When had that happened? Dean swallowed his worry. Maybe Cas was right. Maybe he should get her to the panic room before the shit really hit the fan.

Castiel stuck his hand *into* Aaron's chest, and Aaron screamed in pain, even though his eyes remained shut—and Alex hissed as his hand tightened like a vice on hers. Cas stared hard as light seared through Aaron's body, emanating from his chest. Strange red veins lit up in zigzags across his neck and face. Aaron's screams and cries were horrible. "Cas, *hurry*," Alex urged softly, unable to look away from the kid's pained features. And then it was suddenly over—Cas withdrew, Aaron went slack, his hand went limp in Alex's, he went silent.

Cas stood, and he looked more disturbed than ever, thinking deeply. "He'll rest now," he said, looking at Alex, who was checking his pulse. "You... really seemed to know how to speak with him."

She was emotionally drained from it, just heaved a heavy sigh and looked at Cas falteringly. Feeling weird about all of this. Unsure about everything. She wanted to hide from everyone and everything, because it was getting worse and she was struggling to keep up the *I'm fine* act. She checked Aaron's forehead, laying her palm tremulously across the hot skin. It felt like he had a fever, or maybe that was *her*. Everything felt generally unwell and her stomach churned. She suddenly wondered: When had she last eaten? She couldn't remember, and was pretty sure she hadn't slept in a couple of days. Across from her, Cas began to roll his sleeve down again.

"Did you get a name?" Sam asked, not bothered by what had just happened like Alex and Dean were. "What is it?"

"Yes. And... I thought he died in the war," Cas said darkly, shaking his head, rounding the end of the bed and pacing toward the other wall.

"What, he—he was a friend or something?" Sam pressed.

"I thought he was," Cas said in deeply confused tones, as if he had been mistaken. "I'm... very bemused at this turn of events."

"Yeah, well, your frat buddy is now moonlighting as a crossroads demon, that's just great," Dean snarked.

Cas wasn't paying attention. "Balthazar," he muttered to himself, "I wonder—"
"So we can find him now, right?" Sam asked.

Suddenly, a new voice near the room doorway sounded. "Balthazar." Everyone whirled, Alex shot up to her feet between the beds. A dark haired man in a suit stood there, and in his hand, an angel's blade. "Thanks, Castiel. We'll make good use of the name." He lunged forward and attacked Cas, who sprung forward to meet the assault, his blade out from seemingly nowhere. The metal clanged together loudly as Castiel blocked the blow, then ducked another one aimed for his head.

The two angels grappled, grabbing the others wrists in a temporary standstill. "And by the way, Raphael says hello..." the newcomer said and turned his head slowly, looking directly at Alex, who, weaponless and standing alone between the beds, was frozen. There was a creepy smile on the angel's face. "Oh, and he knows who you're hanging out with again, Cas..."

At that comment, Castiel snarled and threw the angel sideways—Sam and Dean had to practically dive to get out of the way. Recovering to his feet, the unnamed angel just chuckled as Castiel, standing between Alex and the attacker, stared him down murderously. The angel had obtained both blades and charged at Cas, who sidestepped him and grabbed his wrists then kneed the angel in the stomach as he simultaneously yanked the angel's wrists down so that both blades dropped to the floor with loud clatters. Vengeful, Cas grabbed the angel hard and shoved him hard then pursued, grabbing him again and charging them both into the window with a loud shatter—and they plummeted several stories down to the street below. There was a loud crash like glass and metal and then the sound of a blaring car alarm—and Sam, Dean, Alex rushed to the busted window, shocked. On the street below, in the dying light of day, Cas laid back-first in a huge dent his body had made in the top of Sam's douchey car—and the other angel had smashed the hood and windshield. Cas was pushing himself up like it was nothing, a mere inconvenience.

"Holy crap," Alex breathed, not sure if she were awed or horrified or what. The strange angel disappeared, leaving Cas, who looked up at them.

"My car..." Sam said, staring.

"Silver lining," Dean said, clearly not too upset about it. In fact, looking kind of amused about it. Cas disappeared suddenly. What the—

"He's gone." The Winchesters turned in unison. Cas was behind them and had picked his blade back up. He came forward, looked at Alex closely as, without warning, he put his hands on either of her arms and stared into her eyes intensely. Arms stiff at her sides and expression like what are you doing?, Alex stared back, obviously kind of surprised.

Dean looked at the angel weirdly—he really didn't know what was going on between these two anymore. "Uh... what're you doing, Cas?" He asked uncertainly. "Staring contest?"

"Checking the ritual I did," he said without missing a beat, still staring into her eyes. Seeming to be satisfied, he nodded, his eyes became less crazy, he glanced at Dean. "It's still intact." He let go of her, seeming to be distracted, and strode to the kitchen as he tucked his blade away. He began to open cabinets at seeming random, leaving the Winchesters gaping for explanation.

"Alright Cas, who was that guy?" Sam demanded, the first one to find his voice.

"A soldier of Raphael," Cas answered, slamming a cabinet shut, then glancing back at them, his gaze resting on Alex briefly. "I told you—it's dangerous for me to be with you right now. I'm the most wanted angel and you're..." he trailed off.

The brothers exchanged a glance and Alex just stared, looking queasy. "She's what?" Dean asked.
Cas's jaw tightened. "Important to me. And they know it." He resumed banging around in the kitchen without explanation and the Winchesters hung back. Beside Dean, his sister suddenly reached for his arm, as if she'd been about to stumble, he felt how she hung on and looked at her, silently asking if she was okay, trying to help her stand. She batted him away and stood on her own, glaring angrily. Cas slammed a cabinet shut, oblivious. "He must have followed me when I answered your call, I'm not sure." He found a bowl and set it down onto the little kitchen table.

"Sit down, will you?" Dean said quietly to Alex, and jerked his head toward the bed. She wasn't doing too good, and he was beginning to realize how real this demon blood thing was.

She looked like she was going to argue, then changed her mind and gave up, complied, seeming to be very physically worn down. Cas watched her with renewed concern. "I'm sorry... but what's going on here?" Sam asked loudly, obviously wanting an explanation, and fast, forcing Castiel to refocus.

"I can explain later," Cas said shortly, and began to head for where Sam's weapons bag was, seeming to be more urgent than before. "Right now we have to—"

Dean moved to block his way. "No, not later. Now. Stop, all right? Too many angels, Cas! I don't know who's on first, what's on second."

"What is 'second'?!" Cas asked, exasperated.

"Oh my god," Dean muttered. "Forget it. Just explain."

"It's simple," Cas said, his tone sharp again. "Raphael and his followers, they want him to rule Heaven. I—and many others—the last thing we want is to let him take over. It would be catastrophic."

Sam narrowed his eyes in thought. "You're talking... civil war."

Cas glanced at him. "Perhaps the term 'revolutionary war' is more fitting, but technically, yes." He turned, walked around Dean, strode, really. "Which is why we have to find Balthazar and his weapons before Raphael does. Whoever has the weapons wins the war." Cas opened Sam's weapons bag with a yank and began to sort through it, looking for something.

"Help yourself," Sam commented sarcastically.

"And what happens if Raphael wins?" Dean asked. "What—what does he want?" On the bed, Alex sat with her forehead in her hand, eyes screwed shut.

Cas took out a flask of holy water from the bag, looking at it hard, then Alex, then Dean. "What he's always wanted—to end the story the way it was written."

"You mean the apocalypse? The one that we derailed?" Dean asked in growing alarm.

"Yes," Cas said, taking out a box of chalk, too. "That one. Raphael wants to put it back on the rails. Undo everything we did."

"...why?" Dean asked.

"I need myrrh," Cas said, looking around and frowning.

"Myrrh?" Sam asked. Cas disappeared.
"Freakin' angels." Dean sighed.

Suddenly they heard sounds behind them. Cas had reappeared and was drawing on the little kitchen table with chalk. "Cas… are you okay?" Alex asked slowly—she was hunched over, sitting with horrible posture, but watching him, seeming to be very doubtful that he was, in fact, okay. Dean was kind of wondering the same thing, actually.

The angel glanced at her oddly, as if he were avoiding her gaze. "Yes, perfectly fine," he replied gruffly. Alex looked dubious of the fact.

Dean wet his lips, trying to get to the bottom of things. "Okay—so why does Raphael want to bring back all this crap?"

The reply was vague. "He's a traditionalist."

Dean looked at his angel friend closely, wondering why this was the first he'd heard of this. "Cas, why didn't you tell us this?" he asked, stepping closer, truly wanting to know the answer. They could've helped, maybe. Sure, they had their differences, but when it came to the important stuff, Dean wasn't gonna let those differences stop him from helping a guy who'd proved he was on their side several times over. This was, after all, the angel who had saved their lives several times over, brought Alex and Bobby back from the dead and helped them stop the freaking apocalypse. It had been a team effort, so… why had Cas not asked for help? Why had he avoided them like this? Something just wasn't adding up.

Cas stopped drawing at Dean's question, seemingly startled by the question. "Many reasons," he said, and his shoulders slumped forward, he glanced Dean's way briefly, his tone reluctant and grudging. "I... was ashamed. I expected more from my brothers. I didn't want to weary your shoulders with more unnecessary burden. And… Raphael, he… he's holding something very precious over my head, attempting to control me." Huh? Dean didn't follow, just saw Cas and Alex exchange a very tense glance. What the actual hell was going on between those two? Cas shook his head and bowed his head, looked at the table. "I'm sorry," he said softly, deeply, genuinely. And then the brief moment was abruptly over when Cas suddenly grabbed Dean by the wrist and yanked him close. "I need your blood."

"Whoa, whoa! Hey!" Cas was too strong and Dean couldn't get away, and the angel sliced his palm open without warning. "Ahh!" Dean protested with a hiss. "Why don't you use your own?!

"It wouldn't work," Cas said lowly, and his gaze flickered up toward Alex, he sounded deeply regretful. "I'm... not human." Cas roughly held Dean's hand over the bowl on the table and Dean squeezed his hand, letting blood drip into the bowl grudgingly. Not exactly thrilled, Dean glared when Cas let him go.

Cas proceeded to ignore Dean again and added the myrrh and the holy water into the bowl, and as it drizzled in, he chanted in Enochian. "Zod ah mah rah mah ee es loh voh pah." The contents of the bowl began to smoke and Cas closed his eyes as if in thought. The Winchesters watched silently, all of them sort of befuddled by the display, then Cas's eyes snapped open. "Got him. Let's go."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. All of us?" Dean pointed to Aaron, unconscious on the bed. "What about him?"

Cas paused. "Don't you think the police will take him home?"

Dean's eyebrows rose up high. "Wow, yeah, sure Mother Theresa," Dean said, then gestured to
Alex, who looked like she'd been sitting in a sauna—sweaty and uncomfortable. "And her? You're gonna bring her along to pow wow with your dick angel friend? Doesn't that seem kinda, I dunno, dangerous?"

"Can you stop talking about me like I'm not right here?" Alex asked, mildly perturbed. "I'm fine and I'm going." Dean looked at her in indignant innocence and shrugged. So-rry. For caring. For looking out for you. Geez. He noticed how on edge she was, how her hands were working oddly at her sides. Her forehead was practically shining with perspiration. He recognized the beginning signs of withdrawal… Sam had the exact same reaction in the past. This wasn't good, and he looked at Cas, wondering if maybe they should just go ahead and… get her safe. Put this case on hold. But they were so close to wrapping it up…

Cas looked at Dean, seeming to understand the silent question. "She's safest with me for now. Until…” he narrowed his eyes conspiratorially, meaningfully. "Later."

"Right," Dean said, darkening. God. Alex frowned, catching the exchange and not understanding it. She stood up stiffly.

"What—" she began.

"Sam, the holy oil," Cas commanded starkly, cutting her off purposefully, avoiding her gaze.

"Got it," Sam said, grabbing up the bottle from his weapon's bag.

"Wait, what are you two—" Alex started again.

And without warning, suddenly they were standing outside. It was early night, the sky was dark gray. They were on the edge of a beautifully manicured lawn, in front of a mansion. "—talking abou…” Alex trailed off, looking around in impressed surprise, forgetting her question. There was a huge swimming pool, a fountain off to the other side of the house, the house itself was huge and extremely expensive looking, awe-inspiring.

"Huh," Dean commented as he took in the sight of this place, too. It was pretty damn extravagant and for a minute, he too was surprised. "I was expecting more Dr. No, less Liberace."

"He's inside," Cas said, all business, and looked at Sam and Dean. "You boys stay out here. I suggest you prepare some angel sigils, should Balthazar have friends here. Alex is with me."

"Whoa, no, Cas, I don't—" it was too late, and Dean sighed softly when his sister disappeared along with the angel. "Son of a bitch," he muttered in resignation, put a hand through his hair.

Sam shot Dean an almost amused look. "Relax Dean, Cas has her."

Dean scowled, huffed, glowered at his idiot brother. "Exactly."

"Why'd he tell us to bring the holy oil?" Sam asked, looking at the jar in his hand and not paying attention to Dean's petulant attitude.

Dean looked at it and frowned. "Good question." He thought a minute, getting an idea. "Sure would be a shame to let it go to waste, wouldn't it?"

Alex and Cas were suddenly inside of a darkened mansion foyer—it had an incredibly high ceiling from which an ornate crystal chandelier hung. Polished marble floors reflected the rising moonlight outside, and several suits of armor lined the walls. Kind of creepy, honestly. Alex could hear the
sound of muffled, upbeat music coming from someplace deeper inside the house. Okay… so, where was this rogue soul-buying angel? There was no movement, and besides the music, no indication that anyone at all was in the house. "W-where is he?" she asked softly, in a whisper. Her voice echoed in this large, stark room and the sound messed with her ears, which felt a little muffled.

"Close," Castiel said, squinting and seeming to see things she couldn't. Beside her, he seemed far away and they looked at each other at the exact same moment. He looked so defeated in a way she didn't understand that for a moment, she could only be worried about him.

She forgot how afraid she was to be seen by him, really seen, and didn't even think about it. "...are you sure you're all right?" she asked, because he'd been acting so strangely and they'd barely been able to speak and she didn't know where they stood or what was happening, only that things were so unsure, and maybe he was ashamed of her addiction, which she knew had to be so obvious. She was still sweating profusely, and now in the cold mansion, it felt bad—her shirt was damp and cold, her skin felt numb where sweat caught the cold air. But her head felt a little clearer, for now. Maybe she was gonna be okay after all.

He said nothing, didn't reply to her question, only looked down wordlessly and Alex turned a little, faced him, a hand going to the middle of his arm as she tried to seek his gaze. She didn't shrink away from this, because she'd learned this past year that she should take the moments she got, never expect another one to be given to her. But it took a lot of courage to talk to him, because she knew how awful she looked and wasn't sure if maybe he was avoiding looking her because he was ashamed of what she'd done. "Cas. I know you." She faltered a little, genuinely suddenly realizing maybe she didn't anymore. "Or, I, I think I do. Something's wrong."

Cas's eyes finally raised to hers, his voice and expression both softened. "Yes. You do know me." His words surprised her, made her heart skip a beat, affected her deeply, made her feel okay in a place that had been wrecked before. And wonder of wonders… a soft, cautious, genuine little smile briefly came to her face, it was like a deep and heavy worry she'd been carrying was suddenly lifted. Cas reached for her free hand and looked at it sadly, held it gently, sighed, relented, explained himself, staring at their hands the entire time. "This angel—Balthazar—is one of the ones who promised me that he would deliver a message to you. Now I find out he's alive, well, and… living here." She saw how his jaw tightened and how his eyes couldn't quite meet hers. "And you were hurt today and I knew nothing of it and…" he trailed off, her chin lowered a little as the shame returned at the mention of that. "Your instincts are correct. I am not all right." He paused, his eyes raised to hers, and the effect was intense. "Are you?"

His question blindsided her and she felt like he could see everything wrong with her and she wanted to shrink away, hide forever. "Me?" she asked, her skin crawling with horrible physical sensations, her head pounding, her throat tight. She wanted to tell him, she wanted to tell him so badly how not fine she was. But she lied, kept up the crumbling act, because she was afraid of the truth. She smiled tightly, but it felt like a grimace. "I'm fine."

Castiel looked heartbroken at the lie, obviously seeing it as such right away. "You're not fine," he said, and she let go of him and stepped back, because he was right and she was shamed and felt small, didn't know what she was doing anymore, didn't know how he could see through her like that. He only seemed sympathetic and grieved. "How could you be?" He asked gently, and she realized he understood it. That after the things that had happened, 'fine' wasn't really in the cards.

And so touched by his words, so affected, the horrible truth blurted right out of her mouth... because Cas always helped her when she asked and she needed help right now more than ever and she was getting too desperate to hold onto pride. She almost cried for shame though, because it was
so horrible to admit: "If I don't have m-more demon blood soon, Cas, I… I'm gonna die, I know I am." Overly dramatic, yes, but it felt true and her ability to reason well had really, really lessened. She looked down, fighting tears, realizing how pathetic she was, feeling how her cells screamed for the relief of the acidic, burning liquid. She hated herself. "I need it," she confessed, wanting to die from embarrassment. Her arms wrapped around herself.

Cas looked broken at her words but remained calm, his reaction comforting. "I'm going to help you, Alex," he told her, touching the side of her arm gently, reassuringly, his expression emphatic and genuine, if a little conflicted and she looked at him in breathless hopefulness. He was going to help her? "As soon as we finish here," he promised. She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding—mortified at herself, struggling to hang onto function, but trusting him, so thankful, so relieved that he was going to help her. She imagined him getting a demon for her after she explained everything, imagined him being proud of her when she weaned herself off it in time. She nodded her understanding and took in a shaking breath, wiped her cheeks with the back of her hands, felt how intense her headache was becoming again but ignored it with a great amount of resolve. Cas was gonna help her. If she could just hold it together a little longer, she'd be okay. And the best part, he didn't seem to think she was an abomination. She wouldn't be able to take it if he did.

Castiel tore his tense gaze away from her and looked into the darkened mansion—there was a grand room with a staircase through the doorway of the foyer. "Let's get this over with," he said grimly, his eyes darting around in cautiousness. "This is not a safe place for you to be." He looked at her again. "Stay close to me," he said. She nodded, and the two of them went further into the house.

He led the way slightly, she was right beside him and behind him. As they entered the room with the staircase, they could see that halfway up on the ornate railing, a very fat frog sat inexplicably. Ribbit, ribbit. Alex shrank a little closer to Cas. "Why is there a frog?" she asked in a whisper, wishing she had a weapon. Not that she was scared of frogs, but… it seemed ominous.

"That's... unclear to me at the moment," he replied, staring at the amphibian hard. Alex was caught off guard when she felt his hand slip into hers—and suddenly they were standing at the top of the staircase, bypassing the croaking frog completely. Alex looked at Cas in surprise, he was looking back at her with an unreadable expression, then looking down at their hands. He let go of her hand before she'd even had a chance to really take in the feeling and he nodded toward where the music was coming from, indicating that they should go in there.

An ornate set of double doors seemed to be where the sound was originating from, and Cas led the way by a step and pulled the doors open to reveal a darkened room with flashing strobe lights, a grand piano on a small stage, several huge statues. Loud, annoying music played. Alex looked around warily, not able to see anyone. But it was too dark to see very well, anyway. Cas cautiously walked into the room and Alex stayed on his heels, casting glances around, trying to breathe deeply to calm her racing heartbeat. The doors suddenly shut of their own accord, clicked loudly, locking, and both of them looked back down at their hands. He let go of her hand before she'd even had a chance to really take in the feeling and he nodded toward where the music was coming from, indicating that they should go in there.

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"Cas," came a friendly, smooth male voice, and the angel and hunter turned again.

Beside the grand piano, a man now stood. He held a short glass of some kind of alcohol in one hand. It was hard to see very well in the dim room, but the man was an average-height guy who looked to be in his early forties. He had sandy blond hair, was handsome, had an air of charming self-assurance to him. He spread his arms out, swaggered down the stairs of the little stage slowly,
smiling. "You're here," he said pleasantly in a mellow English accent, then looked at Alex and smiled a little bigger. "And you brought your ladyfriend—how nice! I didn't have time to clean up, hope you'll pardon the mess..."

"Balthazar," Castiel greeted lowly as the other angel came close, smiling as if he were glad to see Cas. Alex tensed a little, noticing how Castiel's fists clenched at his sides. As Balthazar reached Castiel, without warning, Castiel pulled back and smashed his fist into the other angel's face with incredible force—sending him crashing at least ten feet back into the piano, which shattered when Balthazar hit it. Alex almost fell over from surprise and low blood sugar, grabbed onto the arm of Castiel's trench coat to steady herself.

Laughing leisurely, Balthazar picked himself up even as Castiel, fists clenched, went a couple steps closer, so angry that he didn't even notice how Alex hung onto him momentarily. "Well," the angel said, dusting his hands off and straightening his blazer. "Showing off for the girlfriend, are we? 'Spose I deserved that," he chuckled. "It's good to see you, too, Cast."

"You have some explaining to do," Castiel growled.

Balthazar just sighed comfortably, gestured with a nod to the side of the room as he came back to stand in front of Cas. "He told me you might be coming to see me, but my goodness, didn't think it'd be so confrontational." Castiel and Alex followed his gaze, and suddenly the lights came on and the music stopped. On the floor, the angel who'd attacked Castiel in the motel room lay, still. "Oh, you know, the old frog in the throat," Balthazar said, and a frog suddenly jumped out of the angel's mouth, croaked. Alex looked at the blond angel weirdly. Seriously? Even in her semi-delirious state, she pulled a face.

"Even I know that that's a bad joke," Castiel said, annoyed, seeming to share Alex's sentiments. He took in a heavy, weighty breath, let it out, shook his head a little. "I grieved your death, Balthazar. I trusted that you had delivered the message I asked you to send. Today I found out you didn't."

"Yeah, yeah," Balthazar said, seeming to be earnestly regretful, to a point. "I'm sorry about that, you know. I wanted them to think, you know, so... they wouldn't come looking for me?" He shrugged helplessly. "Terribly sorry; Cas, I am." He turned his attention to Alex. "Well don't be rude, Cas, introduce me! This is her, isn't it?" He smiled charmingly at Alex, suddenly reached out and took her hand. "Enchanté, mademoiselle," he said, letting his eyebrows wiggle up once roguishly. "Delighted." He kissed her clammy hand, smiled at her, produced a rose from behind his back with a flourish. "For the little lady."

Alex pulled her hand away, glanced at Castiel. This guy was weird. "Uh... I'm good," she said, declining the rose. Balthazar produced a fluffy white towel instead.

"A towel then?" He asked helpfully. "You look a bit shiny—Cas been giving you the workout, has he?" Balthazar winked, trying to be coy, not realizing why Alex was sweating so hard.

Castiel grabbed the towel and threw it errantly sideways. He seemed to have reached his limit. "Enough of your show, Balthazar. What is all of this? What are you doing?"

"Whatever I want," Balthazar said breezily. "This morning I had a ménage à—what's French for twelve?" He cracked a grin. "You two tried it yet? Very enjoyable."

Castiel looked positively abhorred. "You shouldn't be so reckless."

Balthazar looked at Castiel slyly. "Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black, my friend?"
Frowning and squinting, Cas seemed suspicious. "What... does kitchenware have to do with it?"

Balt sighed as if he should have expected that. "Oh Cas. Always were a little slow on the uptake, weren't you," he said, then looked at Alex and chuckled. "How is it you put up with him, Alex? Is he always like this? You must have the patience of a saint." He spread his hands out briefly in a shrug, became a little more serious. "Listen you two, in all honesty I am sorry. I really didn't like having to let you down the way I did. It was a difficult decision. But..." He shrugged helplessly, tried a charming smile. "Here we are."

"You don't realize what your decision set into motion," Castiel said bitterly. "I trusted you."

"Let me make it up to you," Balthazar said, voice filled with earnestness.

"And how would you do that?" Castiel challenged.

"I'm sure we could figure something out," Balthazar said confidently, suddenly produced a little tub of some sort of food from behind his back—the label looked fancy. "Alex love, could I interest you in some pâté?" At the sight of food she wanted to puke. She could barely keep up with the conversation at this point—her veins felt sharp and pointed inside of her, she wanted to claw her way out of her own skin.

"Stop trying to distract from the issue," Castiel said angrily, and the pâté disappeared.

Balthazar dropped his pleasant attitude in favor of slightly irked reluctance. "Look. If I had it to do over, I would have delivered the message, all right?"

Cas looked at the other angel long and hard. He seemed to relent a little bit. "I'm not here to argue with you over what can't be reversed. I'll deal with you regarding that matter later. I'm here because you stole the staff of Moses."

"Sure, sure," Balt admitted readily, seemingly not bothered either way, in fact, seeming a little proud. "I stole... a lot of things."

"You stole it then you decided to pimp it out and steal innocent little kid's souls?" Alex asked, unable to help it. She didn't like this guy and her agitated physical condition almost made her feel drunk or feverish. "Real dick move."

Balthazar looked at her as if he were delighted. "Oh look, she does talk."

"Shut up, Richard Branson," Alex retorted, trying to be fiery and badass but feeling dweeby and drowsy. The room was so hot all the sudden.

The blond angel's eyes crinkled up in amusement. "Ha! That was funny!" He looked at Cas. "You didn't tell me she was funny, Cas." He looked at Alex again, and she didn't like that coy, knowing smile. "I can see what he likes about you—you have a sparkle about you, don't you?" He looked at her closer, saw how sweaty and sick she looked. "And possibly some kind of virus, eugh..."

As if Cas sensed Alex's unease, he stepped a little closer, blocking her a little bit more from Balthazar's uncomfortable glances and stupid comments. "Balthazar... you were a great and honorable soldier. We fought together. I'm struggling to understand this betrayal." "Come on Cas... it's not betrayal," the other angel protested, then shrugged and smiled. "It's liberation."

"Liberation?" Cas asked, growing increasingly mystified. "I know you. You're not some common
"Common? No. Thief?" He thought a second. "Eh. Hez and I, we pulled off the heist of a lifetime, Cas. I thought about including you in the plan but... well, I knew you wouldn't go for it." He spread his hands again. "It's a new world, Cas. I can be whoever I want to be, have whatever I want to have." He glanced at Alex briefly, then looked at Castiel meaningfully. "So can you."

"No," Cas said. "I'm leading a war in Heaven, or have you forgotten? I need your help, Balthazar."

"I know," the other angel said, surprisingly seriousness and seemingly caring. "I've been hearing all about you, and as far as I'm concerned, you and me, Cas, nothing's changed. We're brothers. Of course I want to help you. I'll make it up to you, I told you I would."

"Thank you," Cas said, and his shoulders relaxed slightly. He paused. "I need the weapons."

"Ah," Balthazar's expression soured a little. "Don't ask that."

"But you just said—" Cas huffed, frustrated all over again. He was starting to lose patience, and Alex could hear it. She stared at the arm of his trench coat unseeingly, listened to him talk, but sound seemed increasingly muffled. "Why take them? Why run away?"

"Because I could!" Balthazar seemed indignant. "What? You're the one who made it possible," he reasoned, gesturing to Cas. "The footsteps I'm following—they're yours. What you did—pursuing your own desires, stopping the big plan, erasing the prize fight from the timeline? You did more than rebel. You tore up the whole script and burned the pages for all of us." He laughed, smiling easily, seeming well pleased with his lot in life. "It's a new era. No rules, no destiny. Just utter and complete freedom."

Cas had listened to all of that with silent denial written on his face. "And this is what you do with it?" he asked, obviously angry.

"Hey, screw it, right?" Balthazar said, brushing off Cas's question. The blond angel turned and slowly ambled back toward the destroyed grand piano. "I mean, Dad's not coming back. You might as well blow coke and jump on the bed." He turned around to look at them again, now standing a few feet away. He was smiling offhandedly. "You proved to me we could do anything, so I'm trying... everything. What difference does it make?"

Castiel was incensed. "Of course it makes a diff—it's... civil war up there!"

"I know," Balthazar said softly. "Why do you think I left?"

"If we can beat Raphael, we can end this!" Castiel insisted loudly, his voice trembling with fury. "I have to end this, Balthazar." He paused, looked at the other angel warningly. "Just give me the weapons."

The other angel just laughed, shook his head. "Do you know what's funny about you? You actually believe that you can stop the fighting." His smile faded and in its place, ominous certainty. "It... will... never... stop." He looked at Alex, craned his neck sideways a little, looking at her expectantly. "Do you hear me, Miss Winchester? This war of your boyfriend's is the eternal kind. Get used to him being gone."

"Balthazar—" Castiel interjected.

"My advice to you, Cas—grab something valuable—" he looked at Alex pointedly. "Ahem—and fake your own death."
With a slight shake of the head, Cas looked down, disappointed. "You've gone insane," he said, then looked at the other angel warningly. "Your little holiday is over. Raphael knows you're alive by now."

"Oh, Raphael can try me anytime," Balthazar said casually. "I'm armed." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Cas. But I'm looking out for me now. And, all else aside, I really, really am happy to see you alive and well." He paused, squinted slightly. "Even though Alex still hasn't managed to pull that stick out of your ass."

Suddenly, thunder crashed loudly, startling all three of them. "...was that you?" Balthazar asked Cas, whose eyes were wide suddenly. Oh no. Cas shook his head slowly, filled with dread, and Balthazar seemed to be getting ready to leave. "Oh, that's my cue then. Tell, uh, Raphael to bite me." He snapped his fingers and disappeared, the lights went off, and thunder crashed, lightning flickered brightly.

And Cas, looking upward, realized it was far too late. "He's here," he breathed out, realizing how foolish it had been to bring her here. Panicking, he whirled and grabbed hold of Alex by either shoulder to take her as far away from here as possible... then... nothing. What!? "He's cutting me off, somehow," Cas said aloud, his voice rising in alarm. What could he do?

"Who? Who is?" Alex asked, and her words slurred, she looked so unwell.

"Raphael," Cas said, and looked over his shoulder in fear. He shouldn't have brought her here, he should have realized...

"Hello, Castiel."

Letting go of Alex Cas whirled and saw his brother Magdiel ten feet away. His blade was out and his face promised murder. Fear filled Cas—if Magdiel was close, that meant Raphael was, too. Cas held out a hand, trying to stop Magdiel from doing this, trying to appeal to him one last time. "You're making a mistake. Please. There is another way." Magdiel only began to walk toward Castiel and Cas raised his own blade, not wanting to do this. "Brother, please. I don't want to hurt you!" The angel didn't listen, didn't stop, and Cas didn't have a choice. He threw his knife into the Magdiel's chest, killing him instantly. And when his brother fell to the floor, dead, Cas stared down at the sight, defeated inside. "Why won't any of you listen?" he asked, and filled with heaviness, he looked behind himself... and suddenly saw that Alex was gone.

That's when he heard her—a soft little sound of pain—and he whirled, panicked, then suddenly came face to face with Raphael, who held Alex by the front of her shirt, like a wet kitten, beside himself. She seemed barely conscious.

"Looking for this?" Raphael asked, baiting Castiel boldly, and the second Cas thoughtlessly lunged forward for Alex, she was sent flying at super-human speed into the double doors, shattering them off the hinges—she disappeared beyond where he could see, there was a horrible thud—and before Cas could react at all, he was hit in the face and knocked down by the powerful archangel who grabbed him by the collar. "They don't listen, Castiel," he hissed, "because their hearts are mine."

Raphael grabbed Cas up and then let go, kicked him in the chest with enough strength to break all of Cas's ribs. The force of the blow sent Cas skittering across the floor in the direction Raphael had thrown Alex. Rolling to a stop in a heap on the ground at the top of the stairs, Cas tried to get up, grunting in pain—and Raphael met him there, yanked him up and slammed his fist into Castiel's face, sent him reeling—then grabbed him by the back of the neck and hit him again, let him go, let him fall down the staircase. Castiel rolled, fell, and came to a stop, groaning, on the midway landing. He was panting, in pain, but trying to see where Alex was, if she was okay. He glimpsed
her, briefly, laying in a broken heap there on the ground level. She didn't seem to be moving. No…

Cas struggled to get up, even as tall, imposing, powerful Raphael came to stand over him and kicked him to the bottom of the stairs brutally.

The second Cas came to a stop at the bottom, he attempted to get up and when he did, when he turned, he found himself facing Raphael, who was unharmed and smiling coolly and suddenly striking his fist down like a hammer onto the top of Castiel's head. The blow confounded Cas, who collapsed down onto his knees. He could taste blood in his mouth and the world was spinning strangely. Raphael roughly grabbed him by the collar, raised his blade high. Just behind the archangel, on the floor in a crumpled heap, Alex moaned in pain.

Raphael saw how Cas's horrified gaze went to her and he gloated menacingly. "First, you die," he said. "Then, I kill her with the blade still dripping with your profane blood." He leaned closer to Cas. "Somehow, I don't think God will be bringing you back this time." He drew back to make the kill and Castiel panicked, froze.

"Hey!" Came a loud, ringing voice, and Raphael whirled. Balthazar was there and held a strange, glowing crystal. He smirked. "Look... at my... junk."

"No—" Raphael said, frozen in place, unable to look away. "No!" He began to crackle and crystalize, his skin turning white as snow. And in a matter of two seconds, his entire vessel turned to salt, which lost its form and clattered to the floor harmlessly. Cas stared in shock.

"Same thing happened to Lot's wife," Balt said cheekily. "Iodize the poor sucker, and your kitchen is stocked for life." He laughed, but Cas was already moving over to Alex in a half crawl, half drag.

"Christ, Cas, you look like an old man," Balthazar commented mildly, watching with folded arms. Cas ignored him, trying to get to Alex as fast as possible—and when he was beside her he realized that her back was broken and her head was bleeding and she was at the point of dying. With shaking fingers that couldn't move fast enough, he touched her forehead to heal her, then remembered he was injured, too, when the attempt to mend her only hurt him. "Ahh—!" he grimaced painfully, a hand going to his forehead automatically as the pain jolted him. Alex stared up at him, breathing shallowly, her face a mask of complete pain, and he forgot his own physical distress completely. He caught her hand when it weakly reached up toward him, horrified at himself.

"Oh enough of the dramatics," Balthazar said and rolled his eyes, uncrossed his arms, crouched down and touched Alex lazily on the forehead with two fingers, healing her. She seemed surprised and more cognizant again, began to sit up, and Cas felt relief overtake him. Balthazar was looking at Alex oddly. "Has she… been drinking demon blood?" He asked, sounding intrigued. "My my, Cas, this is a twist. Explains the..." he trailed off, gestured at her entirety—the sweaty skin, the general look of illness. "Well, everything."

Cas only seemed protective of Alex at Balt's comments, pulling her up silently to sit as he looked at Balt somewhat mistrustfully.

"You two are positively sickening, anyone ever tell you that?" Balthazar said, standing up and crossing his arms again, looking at how near Cas held the human girl to himself. "By the way: you owe me."

Cas looked up at him slowly. "I don't deny it." He turned his attention to Alex. "Can you stand?"

"Yes, of course I can stand," she said, sort of grumpy, although Cas had to help her do it. Even though he was injured, he was still much stronger than the average human man.
Once they were standing, side by side, Cas looked at Balthazar, who was smiling, pleased. Cas didn't understand. "You came back. Why?"

Balthazar shrugged and stood, his face pleasant. "Told you I'd make it up to you. Well. Now Raphael will have to go shopping for a new vessel. Should give you a nice long head-start on him." His smile widened, his eyes crinkled. "Some, dare I say, quality time together? Don't say I never did anything for you two. In fact, I'd say you owe me twice over." There was a good-natured, friendly tone to angel's voice. He winked. "Well. Until next time."

Cas nodded briefly. "Next time."

Balt smiled, took about three steps backwards, smiling knowingly… and a new voice suddenly sounded. "No time like the present."

A ring of fire suddenly blazed to life around Balthazar, who had just unwittingly stepped back into it. Sam, who'd been hidden in the shadows, smirked, flicking a lighter. "Holy fire," Balthazar said, looking at it in disdain and slight panic. "You hairless ape! Release me!"

Sam turned slightly to the area behind himself, spoke loudly, like he was talking to someone a room away. "Dean—looks like we caught ourselves a little cloud-hopper."

Dean appeared from another room, the jar of holy oil in hand, like he'd been off setting up more rings of holy fire just in case.

"You fools—let me go!" Balthazar demanded.

Dean took control quickly. "First you're taking your marker off of Aaron Birch's soul!" He retorted, standing on the edge of the fire circle and staring at Balthazar challengingly.

Offended by the demand, Balthazar balked. "Am I?!"

Dean smirked. "I think you are. Unless you like your wings extra crispy." He indicated the jar of holy oil he held.

Balthazar turned back to Cas, who was supporting Alex at this point. "Castiel, I stood for you in Heaven," he said angrily. "Are you gonna let—"

This was what humans called 'just desserts,' he thought. Castiel merely narrowed his eyes coolly at his brother who had betrayed him. "I believe... the 'hairless ape' has the floor," he said, sarcastic.

Balthazar was surprised, looked around, seemed to realize he was outgunned and he laughed, a cynical sound. Reasonable as always even if unenthusiastic, he gave in. "Very well." He shook his head, inhaled, and touched his clasped hands to his forehead, exhaled. He lowered his hands. "The boy's debt is cleared. His soul is his own."

Dean looked at Cas questioningly across the circle of fire and Cas nodded just slightly. Dean refocused on the angel in the fire. "Why you buying up human souls, anyway?"

"In this economy? It's probably the only thing worth buying." Balthazar looked at Dean with total contempt. "Do you have any idea what souls are worth? What power they hold? Now... release me."

Predictably, Dean became belligerent. "Suck it, ass clown. Nobody said anything about—" he started, even as Castiel raised his hand then lowered it. The flames flickered and then died out.
"Cas, what the hell?" Dean asked, aghast.

Castiel looked at Balthazar, who had saved Alex's life and destroyed Raphael's vessel—two things that were very difficult to repay. "My debt to you is cleared," Cas told him grimly.

Balthazar smiled faintly, a slightly soured expression. "Fair enough." He disappeared.

"Cas, are you out of your mind?!" Dean demanded.

Cas looked at him almost angrily. "No," he said. "Enough Dean." His voice lowered, full of meaning. "It's time."

The other man's expression registered understanding, mild dread. "Yeah," he said, taking full notice of his sister's strained expression. "Yeah, okay."

"Time for what?" Alex asked, dazed. And then when they were no longer standing in the mansion, but in the familiar dark basement of Bobby Singer's home, just outside of the panic room... she seemed to realize and as dazed as she'd been, she suddenly seemed to have a burst of clarity. "No, guys, wait—wait!" she protested, trying to back away—but found that she couldn't with Dean holding one arm, Cas the other.

"This is for your own good, Al," Dean said even as she began to make sobbing sounds and repeat no no no over and over again. "Sam, the door, move it!" Dean commanded thunderously, urging his slow, unhurried brother along.

Sam yanked the door open with a loud, metallic creak, and as Dean and Cas manhandled a thrashing Alex in, Sam just watched, sort of removed or skeptical, it was hard to tell. "I'll, uh, go tell Bobby we're here," he said. "Before he decides that we're intruders and comes down here to shoot us." Sam had a point—they hadn't called to announce their coming arrival. Sam disappeared up the steps, leaving Dean and Cas alone with Alex, who was fighting their hold hard, making it difficult for them.

"No... no!" She shouted, panicking. "Don't put me in here, I don't want—Dean! Cas! Stop! Don't do this! I can't live without it! Stop! Sto-oop! You don't understand!" She gave a great frustrated shriek and yanked on their holds uselessly. "Let me explain, let me explain you fucking assholes!" Her panic turned to fury, especially when they let her go and backed up to stand and block the way out.

Breathless and betrayed, she stared at them, her posture that of an animal that was about to attack. Dean stepped toward her a little and held both hands out slightly, as if he were silently telling her be cool, calm down. She did the opposite, abruptly lunging for Dean and punching him in the face, falling down with him when he grabbed at her blindly, trying to restrain her. She attempted to scramble away but he held her there in a bear-hug as she twisted and screamed. "Let go, let go-o-ooow!" Cas, surprised by her outburst and attack stood back—not seeming to recognize her, hesitating to step in.

"Cas!—ugh—" Dean protested as she elbowed him in the stomach. "Cas! A little help!" he managed as she pulled on his ear, hard. "Ow, ow!" Her fingernails clawed at his face stingingly and he flailed, yelped embarrassingly when her knee smashed into a very sensitive area between his legs.

She suddenly went completely slack when Cas touched her and Dean let out a breath that was both relieved and pained. Damn—his jaw stung from where her fist had landed, and he could feel the smarting lines across his cheek where she'd scratched him. And, of course, his precious family
jewels... son of a bitch, ouch. And to think, he'd been the one who'd always told her "kick a dude in the nuts when you're in trouble." He'd meant other guys... not him. Why'd she have to kick so hard?

A little stunned at her attack, Dean took a few seconds to sit up—Cas helped him put Alex onto the little cot, and they stood back wordlessly, Dean slightly doubled over.

Laying there, she could have been sleeping and she looked harmless and sweet... but also extremely sweaty and a little gross, too, hair plastered to her sweat-damp face. Only Alex could look all those things at once. Dean's heart hurt, because he couldn't help her with this, not how he wanted. This was gonna be mostly her, getting through the withdrawals. And he was worried. How bad, exactly, was this gonna get for her? It had been hard enough with Sam going through this. Unable to stand the sight of her there and the way it reminded him of Sam's struggle with the same dilemma, Dean turned, limped out of the panic room, because he felt entirely lost, claustrophobic, and overwhelmed. He leaned his back against the cold metal wall of the panic room once he was out of there, closed his eyes and let his head fall back. Dammit, Dean, man up. Don't cry about this. He'd already cried today, in the hospital closet. But when he felt helpless, when he felt so clueless as what to do next... he couldn't help it.

Dean slid down and sat on the floor there, resting his arms on his knees, hanging his head, putting his hand to his forehead. He wanted to escape this horrible reality. This was too much.

He heard Cas's soft footsteps beside him and immediately checked himself, put forth his steely exterior. He glanced up at the angel, whose expression was rigid, as usual. "How long will she be out?" Dean asked, putting on a gruff, hard to read tone.

"A few hours, at least," Cas said. He sounded pretty upset about it, surprisingly. Like... emotional. And then Dean was even more surprised when Castiel sat down, on the ground, next to him, mimicking his positioning.

For a long couple of beats, they were both silent, pensive. And then Dean shook his head, unable to stop himself from asking. It was a desperate cry for help if there'd ever been one. "What am I supposed to do, Cas? My brother's acting like a freaking robot and my sister's a demon blood addict —I mean how the hell did this happen?"

Cas didn't seem to have any answers. "I don't know, Dean."

Dean had hoped for some kind of magical solution, some reassurance. He was disappointed when Cas had nothing to say. For a minute, they were both silent and terse. And then, Cas looked at Dean sidelong, spoke hesitantly. "Did she... tell you what happened to her?"

Dean's heart jumped unpleasantly. He knew what Cas was asking about. The... Glen thing. "No, not really." He paused, looking at Cas, filled with dread. "She... she tell you?"

Cas shook his head faintly, looking down. "No."

Dean felt blank. Hollow. When it rained, it poured, huh? She didn't deserve this crap. She wasn't like any other girl he'd ever known; she felt deeper than she let on, she took things to heart, she was just like him in the way she beat herself up about stuff. She overanalyzed the shit out of everything and what she'd been put through today and recently... what if she was never okay again?

"I should have been there to protect her," Cas said abruptly, and the guilt... the guilt. Dean felt that, identified completely.
"You and me both, buddy," he said, defeated, seeing no point in trying to make Cas feel worse. He obviously felt like shit. Join the club, man. A few more minutes of silence passed and Dean stood up, went to the open panic room door, looked at his sister. Cas remained seated, far away in thoughts.

Sam came down the stairs, jogging almost, seeming to be just fine. Dean turned slightly at the sound of his approach. "Dean—Bobby's got a job for us," he said, and Dean looked at his brother like he had grown a pair of antlers.

"Come again?" He asked, thinking this had to be a joke. "A job?"

"Yeah," Sam said, then made a face. "What? Dean. She'll be fine. She's a strong girl." He scoffed at Dean's are you fucking serious right now expression. "Trust me: she's gonna just hallucinate shit for the next week or two, she won't know the difference if we're here or not."

Dean stared dumbly—maybe that was true but... come on. "You got to be kidding me."

Sam didn't seem to see the problem. "Uh... no. People are dying, Dean. Bobby can watch her. The job isn't far from here, and it'll only take a few days. Come on."

Growing indignant, Dean's voice rose. "Someone else can go, not us." Feeling betrayed, he threw his hands out. "I can't believe you're even suggesting this, man!"

Sam huffed, seeming to be annoyed that he had to explain himself. "Okay, look Dean. I'm worried about her, I am. But I know she'll pull through."

"Sam, do you hear yourself?" Dean asked. "I mean, call me crazy, but I feel like you don't even care."

There was a frown on Sam's face. "You're wrong," he said factually. "Of course I care."

"Could have fooled me," Dean muttered.

"I'll stay, Dean." Dean hesitated, actually considering it, which was a shocker in itself. "Let me atone for what I've done. What I've failed to do. In what small way I can. I owe..."

Dean stared at Sam, not recognizing him fully. Rough around the edges? Try freaking different guy. Hell really must have worked a number over on him or something. That was the only explanation he could come up with. And the ironic part was that he felt guilty about wanting to stay here with Alex—if Sam went by himself and got hurt—Dean clenched his jaw. Why the hell do you have to put me in this position, man? Don't make me choose like this.

Dean heard Cas standing—the trench coat rustled briefly. "I'll stay, Dean."

Turning, frowning, Dean looked at the angel, wondering if he'd misheard. "What?"

"I'll stay with her."

Dean hesitated, actually considering it, which was a shocker in itself. "Cas, I don't know..."

"Let me atone for what I've done," Cas said. "What I've failed to do. In what small way I can. I owe..."
this to her. To you." He paused, looked down briefly. "You know that I want nothing but her safety, Dean. And I'm not like you. I don't eat, I don't sleep. She can't harm me. I won't leave her side for a minute."

Dean looked at the angel reluctantly, then at Sam, who waited in impatient expectation. You know that I want nothing but her safety, Dean. Yeah. He got that, as much as it still weirded him out, made him slightly uncomfortable. But the biggest thing was the point Cas had made about not needing to eat or sleep. Cas could watch her better than Dean ever could. Dean broodingly glanced into the panic room. This was the selfish part… he didn't know if he could stand to see her hallucinating and having fits like Sam had. Was that horrible of him? And letting Sam go off on a hunt alone couldn't happen. So, Dean caved in, despite some misgivings, despite not feeling a hundred-percent about the decision. "All right," he agreed ruefully, unable to believe himself. "All right." He got intense. "But only if you promise to stay here, not go anywhere else, for anything, even for a second. And if something jacked up happens, you'll come get me immediately."

Cas nodded briefly, seeming to be both surprised and humbled that Dean had agreed. He straightened. "Yes. You have my word." He looked at Sam briefly. "But before you two leave… I have two things I need to accomplish." He paused. "I'll be back in a few moments."

And the angel disappeared from Dean's sight.
Castiel ascended the celestial heights, slipping through the dimensions to leave earth behind. Once again, he was in Heaven. This particular Heaven was a tranquil scene: a wooded glen with a rustic old cabin overlooking a small pond—autumn burnt the trees into brilliant yellows and oranges, the sky beyond was a stunning blue. The pond was a mirror, reflecting the vivid fall foliage on its still smooth surface. A wooden dock stretched out several feet over the water, and at the end of the structure, an elderly couple stood next to one another, holding hands. They were unaware of his presence.

He’d arrived to a Heaven that belonged to soul mates, Cas realized. These were the rarest Heavens of all, and for a moment, he felt stirred—reverent of this and of them, the two souls who had created this place together. He saw how the woman laid her head contentedly onto the man's shoulder. How wonderful it was that these two people—meant for each other, entwined at the soul level—could remain together even in the life beyond life. Cas wondered without warning: if he were human, had he been born on earth instead of created in Heaven… would he have been her soul mate? He thought of soft hazel eyes and freckles scattered across fair skin. He thought of the sound of her voice and the privilege of her smile directed at him. And then he thought of how he hadn't seen that smile in so long. How, instead, there was pain and anger and fear and utter helplessness etched onto her face. How she had been unguarded and unsafe and completely on her own the entire year that he had believed she'd been all right, with her brother. And with rapidly increasing anger, he remembered why he’d come back to Heaven in the first place.

As if on cue, Castiel realized another angel had arrived. He immediately became guarded and turned around, reaching for his blade. When he saw who it was, he had to stifle his true reaction of contempt. He let his hand fall and did not draw his blade. "Hello Rachel." He greeted neutrally—watching her every move hawkishly. She was the reason he’d returned to Heaven.

"Castiel," Rachel returned. She stood just a few feet away and she was difficult to read. Mildly perturbed, maybe. Suspicious, certainly. "Where have you been? We've been calling you."

"Yes. I know," he said brusquely, giving away nothing with his tone or demeanor. "I've been busy, and I still am."

Her features twisted into mistrustful confusion. "What do you mean?"

Cas stepped closer to her, narrowing his eyes. "I came here to tell you that my presence is required on earth for some time." He paused, noting the distinct note of distaste that ran across his angel sister's face. "I'm leaving Ezekiel in charge in my absence."

"You can't be seri—Ezekiel is just a foot soldier!"

Cas was diplomatic in the face of her outburst. "He's proven himself loyal."

Rachel was absolutely scandalized. "And I haven't?"
"Hm," Castiel feigned thoughtfulness, even though inwardly he was thinking of her lies and betrayal. "I suppose you have." And here was the trap he laid for her, the test. With utmost convincing emotion, he smiled a little, as if expression gratitude. "I wanted to thank you, Rachel, for traveling to earth and delivering my message to Alex, all those months ago."

He studied her reaction, thought perhaps he saw the briefest glance of guilt in her features. But instead of confessing her sins—which would have been the correct action to take—out of her mouth came more untruths. "Of course, Castiel," she said, smiling at him with graciousness that was insulting. "I was happy to do so."

Without any warning, Castiel grabbed Rachel, two hands at her collar, and he smashed her into the side of the cabin with great force, splintering the wood. "Lies!" he snarled furiously. She was shocked and wide-eyed. "I know you never gave her my message," he accused, and her face showed realization and then fear. He truly couldn't believe her gall. "And then you had the audacity to lie to my face and falsify a return message?" Cas demanded wrathfully, thinking of Alex's plight the entire year, the things that had happened to her—if he had known, if only he had known, those things wouldn't have happened at all. He was so angry he could have killed Rachel on the spot; he needed someone or something to pin his anger onto, and she was the perfect scapegoat. Still, he managed to maintain control and reason. "Give me one reason I shouldn't demote you or worse right here and now."

Rachel was stiff and frozen in his vice-like grip, she seemed completely unprepared for his assault and demands. Fumbling, she tried to answer him. "I-I saw her drinking the blood of demons, Castiel, she's an abomination, I only wanted—" she clearly recognized how that had been the wrong thing to say when Cas's face darkened in growing fury. Scrambling for a way to placate him, Rachel's voice rose in something close to panic. "I only wanted to safeguard you, keep you focused!"

She was pulled out of the side of the cabin and slammed back in with brutal force. "It wasn't your place," Castiel spat, only growing angrier with himself when he realized how his trust, placed so readily in his sister, had been his biggest mistake in a very long time. How this was truly his fault through and through for not being wiser. Great helplessness grew inside. Castiel just didn't understand his sister's actions in the least and he was dismayed at how she could have done this. He begged her to help him understand, to make her motivations clear to him. "You lied to me, knowing that it would keep me from her—why?" She said nothing for a long moment and Castiel mourned what Rachel had done, what she had chosen. "Why? I am her protector," he said, great sadness drenching his words. The irony was not lost on him: he was Alex's protector, yet had failed in every way.

"And I am your protector!" Rachel retorted loudly, much to Cas's confusion. "If I don't protect you from your own foolishness, who will?!" She demanded, and she seemed so genuine that Cas was momentarily taken aback, losing his grip on her. Rachel's tone became pleading. "She's broken you, Castiel. Ruined you. I don't recognize who you've become."

Cas said nothing for a long moment, merely stared at her in renewed scorn, not even fully hearing the insults she lodged against him. Only the confirmation that she had done it purposefully, intentionally. There was no explanation that would exonerate her from guilt, she displayed no remorse whatsoever for her actions. With a mighty shove, Cas let her go and he stepped back, not letting her out from under his glare for even a second. "I could say the same for you," he accused, utterly despising what his sister had done. Rachel knew what Alex meant to him. He had trusted her and been burned—but his wounds were nothing compared to what had happened to Alex. Castiel shook his head stiffly, looking at Rachel with new eyes that detested her. "The things you set into motion by not telling me—you've done the unforgivable."
"To keep you safe; to keep all of us safe," Rachel insisted tremulously. Castiel was astonished. How could she think that? He merely shook his head again as he gritted his teeth together harder. She didn't know what she was talking about. She didn't care like he did, in fact, it seemed like she didn't care at all. It broke something in him. Rachel became apologetic and looked down, her features becoming confused. "I knew you would leave us if you knew what she was doing, Castiel; I knew you would go to her when you were needed here. I know you care about her, brother. But… we're fighting a war. And you're our leader. You can't have divided interests or we will not win."
She saw how his expression was souring again. "Castiel, please—I didn't mean to cause harm," she insisted, and held her hands out placatingly, pleadingly. "You came back and told us we were free to make our own choices. And that was the first choice I ever made. To lie to you. I... I've never had this freedom before, and it seemed right to me, Castiel. I swear to you." She paused, then spoke with utmost seriousness. "I thought I was doing the right thing. I made a choice. A wrong one, I see that it must have been wrong, now." She looked at him in an odd expression. "Forgive me, brother."

"I will not forgive you," was the immediate, hostile answer. He didn't care about her excuses or reasons, no matter how good they were. No matter how sorry Rachel might truly be (and he didn't know if her words were genuine or not—she could be lying more now, it was impossible to tell), she had still done what she'd done. And there was no taking it back, no explaining it away. The reality remained: Alex never knowing where he'd gone, assuming him dead or worse, lonely and alone, afraid, and physically dependent on demon blood. Assaulted by a man who'd had no business touching her. Refreshing these things in his mind made him feel murderous. But… he thought of his dwindling forces, his desperation to win this war and end the fighting. He had to end it.

He was loathe to admit it even to himself, but Rachel needed to remain on his side. She had proven to be a good soldier on the battlefield and was a strong warrior. He needed her to stay alive and fight the fight. He didn't like this at all. But it was strategy and necessity that drove him to the decision. He regarded her with utmost deadly seriousness. "I will grant you exception this one time. Only because you are an asset and a good soldier." He raised his chin, looked at her bitterly. He cursed himself for trusting her at all, ever. It had cost him too much. It had cost Alex too much. And he wouldn't make the same mistake twice. "There will be no more chances for you, Rachel," he said flatly. "And I will never trust you like I once did."

Without anything further, he turned his back on her and left.

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**Five Days Later**

Alex was someplace dark and shadowy, indistinct. She couldn't make out any real shape or structure, and the effect was completely disorienting. There was a general feeling of physical illness, a hollow sensation. Like an itch she couldn't scratch. She was very aware that she felt uncomfortable in her own skin, like she needed something really badly, like she was craving something intensely. What, food? Water? Also, where the hell was she, anyway? She looked down, raising her shaking palms up to inspect them. She could barely see, but her skin seemed dirty and gray, pale. Something was wrong here.

"Well, hello..." came a smooth voice somewhere nearby and she whirled, found herself face to face with Lucifer in the rotting vessel of Nick. Holy shit! Suddenly filled with fear, she backed up, or tried to. But she felt stuck.

"Get away from me," she ordered tremulously, trying not to give away how afraid she was. Weapon. Did she have a weapon? She felt around for one, realized she was completely unarmed.
Panic surged. What was happening? *How* was he here—he was supposed to be in the cage!

"Get away from you?" Lucifer repeated innocently, doing just the opposite and edging closer instead. "But Alex, how?" He asked, feigning confusion. "I'm... inside of you. Your head. Your mind." Oh. Oh *no*. He smiled a little, his pale, peeling face and gruesome features making it a sickening display. "I like it in here. A little cluttered, a little paranoid, lots of issues, lots of self-flagellation... you're my kind of gal." He chuckled and came close, patting her face with his cold, heavy hand. She flinched away from his touch, unable to move or run away... and the realization that she couldn't do either made her even more scared. *What is happening? Is this another dream?* Lucifer kept talking, started to pace leisurely in front of her. "Come on, Al... don't act like this is the first time we've... hooked up." He shot her a playful look and a coy eyebrow raise. "I recall lots of late night visits this past year... well." He shrugged thoughtfully. "On those nights you actually managed to fall asleep, anyway." A low, dark chuckle, and those dead eyes flashed ominously. "Insomnia's a real *bitch*, isn't it?"

Alex shrank away, or tried to. "I said, get *away*!" She shouted with increased volume, like if she said it louder it would work better. *Wake up,* she told herself, *wake up!* This was just another dream of the devil, like the others she'd been plagued by since Sam died. "You're not real!"

An amused laugh. "*You're* not real!" Lucifer mocked jovially, then gave a playfully irritated sigh. "Oh come on, lighten up will ya?" He paused, tapped a thoughtful finger to his chin. "Maybe it'd make you more comfortable if I looked like someone less... Nick?" His features distorted, he was suddenly *Sam,* and Alex's anger faded into breathless horror. "Hiya, sis," Sam's familiar voice said, low and smooth as polished marble. He was smiling, but it wasn't friendly. He frowned a little through that lifeless smile. "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Stop it, just stop!" Alex shouted, twisting against ropes that she was aware of suddenly. Wait, when had those gotten there? She struggled hard, feeling her throat close in panic. *Let me out—let me out!*

"But I'm just warming up," Sam said, only it was Lucifer speaking, and it was obvious from the cadence he used, the coldness in his eyes. "Come on, Alexandra. Get *over* it. Stop being a drama queen," he said, rolling his eyes at her. When she looked at him wrathfully, Lucifer shrugged his mouth downwards thoughtfully. "Hm. You must *really* regret our little deal, huh?" He sighed, pretended to be apologetic. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry you're such an *idiot.*" A huge grin broke Sam's face—dimples and everything. He laughed, a sound that was profane because it belonged to Sam, not Lucifer. "Actually... I'm not sorry, not really," he said, wincing with mock apology. "I mean, it got me Sam, didn't it? Ah, you shoulda seen the look on your brothers faces when they realized what I did to you, what you agreed to..." he trailed off, got overly thoughtful. "Oh wait. You *did.*"

Another huge grin and self-satisfied laugh. He sauntered over to her. "And hey, the way Sam is *now*? That's *your* fault. You got that, right? Hell stripped away everything Sam ever was. Burned away the Sam you loved. All thanks to you." His eyes, the same color as hers, were cold and dead, soulless and inches from hers. "Everyone you love burns in the end, don't they?" Lucifer asked in a taunting whisper that made her skin crawl. He reached over and stroked her hair with great interest and it seemed so *wrong.*

Alex squeezed her eyes shut, grimacing in disgust. "Not real, he's not real, you're not *real,*" she whispered over and over, trying not to gag on her racing heartbeat. Things were wobbling and uneven but she felt Lucifer withdraw, heard him step away, retreat a few steps backward. A small relief. *Go away, just wake up, it's okay, it's not real.*

"Oh, I'm *real,*" came a male voice that wasn't Sam's. Alex's eyes popped open because she knew
that voice and was more scared of it than maybe any other voice she could think of.

A familiar, tall blond man stood there and smirked down at her. Stark terror shot through Alex's veins, she immediately struggled away, tried to escape. But she was still stuck in place and her fighting was in vain. "Don't be scared, baby," Glen said softly, approaching slowly, and each step made her even more afraid. "It's me. I'm gonna take good care of you… you know I will." He stroked the side of her face with his fingers and she shuddered, a sound of terror broke out of her mouth and he just chuckled softly, as if she were cute when she was terrified.

"Stop—" she managed, then found a stronger, louder voice. "Dean! Cas!" She called out with growing alarm because maybe this wasn't a dream. Maybe this was real. "Someone help me!"

Glen's sandy eyebrows shot up high in surprise, then angry disbelief came over his plain features. "You think they're gonna help you?" He asked, then grabbed her, threw her down onto her back, and stood over her like a giant. She backpedaled fast on her elbows, trying to get away, but found herself against a cold, hard wall. She was trapped. "Wow. You're stupider than I thought, bitch," Glen said as if remarking on the weather, following her leisurely. "Dean doesn't love you; Cas doesn't love you. Why would either of them, huh?" He crouched down at her level, stared at her hatefully, and she was so afraid of him that she couldn't move one bit. "You're a disappointment at every turn," he told her acidly. "Weak. Why would they come when you call? You're not worth saving." He picked her up by her collar and he stood with superhuman strength, he smashed her back-first into the wall and she whimpered and cried out in pain, tried to fight, but nothing worked and her body refused to cooperate. "No one will ever want you again, you get that right?" Glen asked in a low, vile whisper. He suddenly morphed, and a new man now looked at Alex. "Especially me."

Alex's eyes widened in shock and horror, she ceased fighting. "Cas?!" She gasped out, shocked to be face to face with the one she loved, shocked at the look he was giving her. In his eyes, pure contempt. He hated her and it was obvious—and Alex was ashamed, confused, hurt. She'd known he would despise her, so why was she so stunned to see evidence of it? His hand tightened on her painfully.

"I leave you for a year—only a year—and you betray me?" He asked in the familiar gruff voice—only it was filled with accusation and disdain. "You let another man touch you? You let another man kiss you?" She withered away from him as he paused. Her eyes were filling with stinging tears. Yes, to both questions. How could she have done either? Her heart was beating so hard and fast she thought she was going to have a stroke, but Cas didn't look concerned. "I thought I loved you," he said sneeringly, tightening his grip on her collar painfully. "But I don't." He yanked her sideways and threw her down to the ground without warning, letting her land hard on her stomach and palms. She was crying now—his words and actions were like knives, cutting her apart.

"I'm sorry, please believe me, I'm sorry—" she choked out raspingly, looking back up over her shoulder at him and barely managing to. She felt lower than low, and the furious way he stared down at her didn't do anything but make her feel even further down.

"You are sorry," he agreed derisively, slowly circling her and coming to stand in front of her, his shoes almost in her face. "And selfish and pathetic. Human, below me. I never loved you, how could I have? You're a monster, an adulteress, an addict," he growled, each title hitting her where it hurt and she tried to cover her ears because his words literally seemed to be killing her. But nothing could block the stinging accusations he was hurling down at her. "You took what we had and ruined it, you took what I gave you and promised you and acted like it was yesterday's garbage, like I meant nothing to you—you should have waited for me, you should have believed in me, you friggin' idiot!" Those last three words rang in a higher pitched voice, Cas's face and body changed
—and Alex was now staring up at herself. Only she was bruised and battered and had demonic eyes black as night. Seeing herself like that was shocking as hell—was this her future?

"Look at yourself, Alex! Look!" Black-eyed Alex ranted disdainfully. "You deserve this. To be alone. You're nothing. You're no one. They all left you alone, do you think they were trying to tell you something? Cuz I do! You had the right idea, going off that whole year on your own." She scoffed, kicked Alex in the arm when she tried to push herself up to stand. "Stay down, you bitch," black-eyed Alex hissed, then began to pace around Alex slowly. "Dean doesn't need you ruining his life more than you already have; I mean, have you thought about it? If he hadn't been stuck with your dumbass self all those years? He could have been out there living his life. You're nothing but a burden, and you know it. You should have never been born." There was a disdainful little laugh. "No wonder Daddy wanted to give you away… no wonder Sammy left and is acting the way he is now… he doesn't care about you. He can't pretend he does anymore." There was a cold smirk. "I wonder how much longer Dean can keep the act up, don't you?" She paused and there was no smile on her face anymore. "No one loves you. Not even you love you. Sad."

Alex watched the black-eyed version of herself crouch down in front of herself and saw more clearly how there were big hand prints marring her, hiccups on her neck. Evidence of what she'd done and what had happened to her. Alex felt herself being grabbed by the hair at the top of her head, and black-eyed Alex's face was right in hers. She was seething. "And Cas. Don't even get me started on that, on him. Do you remember what you promised him? Or were you lying to his face when you said what you did to him?" Alex felt like she'd been punched in the gut. Of course she remembered that, but—"You can't take things like that back!" Black-eyed Alex screamed with sudden passion, then hit Alex across the face with her fist. The pain exploded, blinding Alex temporarily. It felt like her jaw was broken—she clutched her face and rolled sideways from the force of impact, groaning in pain. Above her, standing up again, black-eyed Alex stared down without remorse at Alex, who just lay there pathetically, sobbing from pain and anguish, at the thought of the things she'd done. "And here you were this whole year, acting like what you and he were was nothing, like you could just decide to take it all back," Alex snarled contemptuously, her features twisted in disgust. Every word was sending Alex hurtling toward the ledge of total insanity. "And you claim that you love him. Please."

Something inside snapped in half. "I thought he was dead!" Alex screamed, pushing herself up and trying to attack her assailant. She rushed at the black-eyed bitch, attempting a tackle, but it was like nothing and no one was there, she pitched forward into empty air and fell down onto all fours clumsily.

"You liar," came her voice from behind Alex. A steely boot tip crashed into her ribcage and Alex cried out in pain, tried to get up. "Liar! LIAR!" The accusations kept coming, so did the painful kicks.

Managing to stand somehow, Alex whirled and let a wild, uncontrolled punch fly in the general direction of her attacker. "I'm not a liar!" She shrieked, her fist sailing through empty air and sending her staggering sideways but she recovered just before she fell. "You don't know what I went through!" she insisted tearfully to no one, hysterical at this point.

She was grabbed roughly from behind and felt a knife at her back. "I know exactly what you went through," she heard herself say in a low, angry voice. "I'm YOU! I know every self-centered, stupid thought in your egotistical little head. And you don't deserve him!" A violent shove sent Alex flying into the darkness—she tripped and fell face-first, making contact with the ground painfully, jaw-fist. She tasted blood in her mouth and groaned. Just let it be over—all of it—please. Enough!

"You know who you do deserve?" Alex's voice asked.
She felt herself being grabbed by the hair and being yanked up then thrown down onto her stomach, being pinned down from the back, and it was Glen's voice in her ear again. "Look what you're making me do, look what you've done!" He accused. She felt a jarring blow to the back of her head and she cried, sobbed, protested with great sounds of pain, fought against his heavy weight, the sharp pain of his knee in her back. She thought she heard someone ask her name faintly. "Alex?" And then a very loud: "You fucking bitch!"

"Let go, let me go!" She shrieked, only to be hit again. "Stop! Please stop, just sto-ooop!"

"Hold still," he commanded in a hiss. Then she heard someone asking her name again "Alex?" And Glen was yanking on her, she was struggling. "It'll be over soon," he growled, "Hold still!" He roared when she refused to, somewhere nearby, that same voice she recognized but couldn't place: "Alex, wake up—wake up!"

She flailed, eyes snapping open—had they been shut? There were several things she realized all at once: Someone was touching her arms, she was laying down on a softish surface, and she was in danger. She didn't even bother getting her bearings, she was blinded by panic, by the thought of it being Glen over her, holding her down. "Get away! Don't touch me!" She screamed, and rolled off of the soft surface, her chest stinging with breathless alarm. She fell away, tumbling to the ground painfully, surprised at the shockwave of pain it sent through her when she collided shoulder-first. Scrambling to get away, she ignored the pain and pushed herself up and ran for the door—it was locked and she whirled, scared as hell. Cas stood there at the opposite end of the small room, arms at his side. Not pursuing her or looking at her with hatred. Instead, holding a hand out slightly, as if to try and tell her to calm down and take a second.

"Get back, get away from me!" She warned in a breathless and hysterical voice—and she let her eyes dart around in a frantic search for a weapon. Cas moved toward her fractionally and the movement caught her attention, she shrank against the door behind herself, feeling renewed with frantic alarm. Oh god, what now? What would he say and do to her? Was he going to tell her more about how she'd let him down in every way? "Just stay away, please, stay away," she begged, wincing as if she was about to be struck.

His face was filled with worry and he stopped, didn't come closer—remained about five feet away. Alex frowned in confusion because… this seemed different. He wasn't going to berate her? Rake her over the coals?

She looked at him in growing puzzlement, saw how his features were filled with worry and sadness. "Alex. It's me," he said. "You're in the panic room. You've been hallucinating."

What? With a hammering heart, Alex looked around, trying to get her bearings, trying to figure out what was real. The panic room. Yes. Like he said, this was the panic room. But... why? And why was it such a wreck? It looked like there had been some kind of huge fight here in the dim panic room. She saw the old desk knocked over onto its side, the things that had been on its surface scattered nearby. The cot was a mess, the pillow was halfway across the room and ripped partly. The gun shelves were bare, like all the weapons had been moved out of the room completely. Some supplies had been smashed and scattered on the floor, knocked off the metal shelves that stood near the desk—it looked like a storm had blown through here. Wait. Had… had that storm been her? She looked at her palms again—they trembled badly, like she was hungry or weak or… going through withdrawals. Oh god. Alex looked at Cas again, feeling shock run over her like cold water. What was happening? Even as she wondered that, she realized how physically weak she felt. How long had it been since she'd eaten? Her legs buckled a little and she slackened, unable to stand on her own. She used the solid metal door behind her to break what would have been a fall—and Cas was there with her before she hit the ground, helping her into an awkward sitting position
leaned against the wall. His touch was warm and gentle and she was woozy. "Hallucinating?" she asked sluggishly, dumbly, trying to remember what had happened. "I've been hallucinating?"

"Yes," Cas confirmed ruefully. Crouched in front of her, he was quiet for a couple of beats. She couldn't understand why he was looking at her with so much barely concealed distress and concern. Or how he was even there at all. "You have been for a few days now."

"A few days now?" She repeated, confused and scared, because she literally could not remember anything with real clarity except what she'd just hallucinated. She sounded dumbstruck and slow to herself, disoriented. Wow—and she felt awful, horrible, physically sick like from the flu. But a lot, lot worse. Her arms weakly went around herself in an attempt to feel better against the aching chills she was becoming aware of. Wait a minute. Alex looked at Cas, then around, as if she'd missed someone in her previous sweep of the room. "W-where's Dean?" He would be here if something was wrong with her, right? Where was he?

Cas's expression faltered, like he didn't want to tell her the answer. "Not here," he said, and Alex thought she'd misheard. But… why? Before she could ask, Castiel volunteered the information. "He and Sam are on a hunt."

"A hunt?" She repeated woozily. No, that made no sense. "They left me? Dean left me?"

Devastated, she blinked twice, rapidly, not understanding. "But…" she trailed off. It felt to Alex like she was six years old again and upset, wanting the comfort of her big brother, needing it more than anything else. "Why? He never leaves me…" she said blankly, trailing off. Remembering that wasn't true. Mortified and dazed, Alex looked down, a hand covering her forehead and eyes. Not knowing what was happening to her was truly terrifying. Maybe this was more hallucinating. Maybe this was hell. Was she dead?

"Do you know why you're here?" Cas asked her in a hushed, serious voice. "In the panic room, with me?"

He sounded like a doctor talking to a patient and gently trying to break the news that she had cancer—she thought hard, because she knew the answer to his question—she knew she knew the answer, but… nothing came to mind. She buried her face in her hands now completely, at a loss. Why was Cas even here? When had he come back? Hadn't he been gone for a really, really long time? She remembered but didn't, and it was maddening, frightening. "God, Cas—I feel… I can't remember anything," she confessed, even more scared than before, her theory on this being hell becoming more and more viable. "My brain feels like scrambled eggs." She let her hands drop and tried as hard as she could to remember something—anything—about why she was here. And then, like a lightning bolt, it hit her. She remembered. And she almost wished she didn't. But at least this meant she wasn't dead and in hell. Slowly, she met Cas's waiting gaze. She was ashamed, completely. "The demon blood."

"Yes," Cas confirmed. Alex was horrified, her mind was sent to spinning—so this was real. How long had she been here? Where were her brothers? Where was Bobby? Had she been acting insane this whole time, or was this the first time she'd been conscious? Did Cas despise her like she suspected he must? She tried to escape the questions by getting up. A very sad attempt as her muscles were uncoordinated and her body was weak. Cas stood with her, a hand on her arm and she angrily batted him away, trying to do it herself and get out from under his gaze that saw everything. Helplessness and anger was beginning to church below her surface, as well as the desire for a very foul, abominable liquid.

"You and Dean tricked me," she said, not looking at him—turned halfway to face the other direction. Her arms wrapped around her middle and her stomach boiled uncomfortably as she
remembered more and more details, more and more things that had happened recently. "Into coming here."

"We did," he said readily, not hesitating to be truthful. His tone was soft, as if he were trying to be gentle with her, as if he were trying to placate her. It pissed her off. "I'm sorry for the deception," he told her, and he sounded truly apologetic. Heavy, weighted. "But would you have come freely, had I told you the plan?"

"No, of course not," she snapped, gritting her teeth together, realizing she felt so bad because of how bad she needed a fix. "Dammit, Cas. I need more—shit." She stumbled and leaned heavily against the cold metal wall beside herself. She was sick, bad, and all it would take was a little drink to make her feel better...

"My advice to you is that you try not to think of that," he said wearily. He got a dirty look for his unwanted advice.

"Yeah, thanks," she muttered sarcastically, hating everything; becoming completely focused on the thought of blood, blood, blood. Her stomach abruptly growled insanely loudly as a hunger pang shot through her.

Cas heard it, frowned slightly, then realized what it meant. "You need to eat something," he said, and gestured to a plastic plate that was on the floor, a fallen-apart sandwich on it. Had she thrown it earlier? "Bobby brought a sandwich for you this morning," Cas explained, and crouched, put the sandwich back together as best as he could as Alex watched, suspicious and mad about everything against the wall. Distantly she thought that was cute, Cas putting a sandwich together. It made her more despondent, inexplicably.

Standing, Cas brought the sandwich to her, held it out. She looked at it balefully. When she didn't take it, he extended it toward her further. "Eat?" He asked. "Please?"

She was ravenous and he looked so very upset that she didn't accept it right away. "Fine," she said, and snatched it from him, took a huge, impolite bite. Even as she chewed, all she could think about was how to get out of here, how to get the jump on Cas and get herself more demon blood. That was all that mattered to her in the entire world... sating the insane need she had for the blood. Castiel watched her sadly, she wondered if he knew what she was thinking. She took another huge bite of the sandwich. It had no taste at all.

"You asked about Dean a minute ago," Cas said, and sighed quietly, turned slightly and walked off a few steps, deep in thought. His shoulders were slumped. "He left because... I don't think he could bear the thought of watching this happen to you." He paused and looked back at her meaningfully, or at least it seemed meaningful. And the way he said it, she almost thought that's how he must have felt, too. He turned away again, set his back to her, and Alex set down the sandwich, her eyes went to the little metal chair that was knocked over just a few feet away. That would make an excellent weapon. She crept closer to it, planning to grab it and hit him over the head, make an escape of some kind... then his voice abruptly stopped her. "Aren't you growing tired of trying to fight me, Alex?" He asked, as if he knew exactly what she'd been planning. He wasn't even looking at her, and unless he had eyes in the back of his head, she didn't know how he'd seen her.

She'd frozen in her tracks and he turned halfway, looking at her with weary eyes. "I'm sorry but I will not allow you to leave this room until the demon blood is out of your system completely," he told her quietly. "But if you must keep trying to hurt me... go ahead." He seemed so resigned. "It won't work. I'm an angel." He turned to face her then walked to her, presenting himself to her almost as if he were inviting an attack. "You can't hurt me, Alex," he said ruefully, simply. "No matter how hard you may try." His words rattled her somehow, she had an odd sense of deja vu.
Wordlessly, she stared at him for a long moment, and his sad blue eyes held hers and seemed like an anchor, pulling her back to a shore she'd drifted far from—she couldn't look away. And then he broke the trance and nodded back to her discarded sandwich, his expression tense and distracted. "Now please. Eat more. You need your strength."

Alex stared at his downcast face and eyes, feeling an epiphany strike her. She looked at the chair she'd been about to grab and hit him with, a sense of shock coming over her. Had this happened before, this attempt to escape and knock Cas out? Was that why Cas seemed so accepting of it? What was happening to her? Really, trying to attack Cas? Trying to hurt him? This wasn't her—and for a minute, she felt clear-headed, and as a result, horrified. Ashamed. She had never guessed it would get like this, she'd thought she could stop any time, but she'd been fooling herself, obviously. It was terrifying, not being able to remember what she'd done. 'I've been… trying to hurt you?' She asked in a quiet, dismayed voice. That thought was so entirely awful she could barely bring herself to look at him.

"Repeatedly," he confirmed grimly.

He seemed hesitant to look at her and something in her broke at the thought of herself being wild and unhinged, attempting to hurt him at all. Alex felt her eyes stinging, her chest swelling with pain and in that moment, she couldn't deny it—she stepped backwards, stunned and speechless. When he followed her movement, looked at her with worry, she couldn't hold it in: "I need help," she managed desperately, just barely, through a throat closing with tears. His eyes softened, and even though they were still filled with pain and grief, she saw empathy and love there when his eyes met hers. "Please help me," she begged, not even sure how he could. She forgot her fears and reservations about him, only remembered that she loved him and trusted him and he always saved her—and she was desperate to be saved—so she pressed herself into him, circling her arms around his middle, holding on for dear life as she buried her face pathetically into the front of his shoulder. She cried miserably, and she only cried harder when she felt how his arms wrapped around her without hesitation. He accepted her instantly, even though she'd been fighting him and trying to attack him.

"Of course I'll help you," he told her, and his deep, rich voice echoed through her comfortingly. He sounded emotional, his voice softened and wavered. "I will always help you." Her eyes fell shut, one of her hands clung to his shirt, and for a moment, they were them again. She calmed down, trusting him wholly, letting herself believe that he could help, rescue her. Alex let him hold her there in the long-lost but familiar space of his arms, and it was powerful, the way touch transcended words. He hadn't forgotten her or left her, he hadn't gone away, he wasn't angry at what she'd done and she was so, so relieved. It felt too good to be true... she felt how his hand gently touched the back of her head and he felt so warm, safe, comforting. A heavy weight lifted and she opened her mouth to tell him how much she missed him, how much she loved him—and then a horrible suspicion came to her and she didn't say anything at all. This couldn't be real. A minute ago, she'd thought this was too good to be true. And in her experience… good things weren't real. So this wasn't real, how could it be? This was another horrible hallucination or trick. It had to be. Cas wouldn't love her, not through this.

"Wait—" she said, stiffening and pulling back. Something wasn't right about this. He looked disillusioned when she pulled away. "Wait. H-how are you even here with me?" She asked, remembering how Cas had told her he had to stay away or he risked endangering her, how he'd said he couldn't stay for long when they'd been in Pennsylvania. Guard raising and suspicions flooding her, she stepped back. "Have you been here with me the whole time?" She looked at him through narrowed eyes. "I thought… you said the war… and… Raphael... or..."

"Yes, I did say those things," he said tiredly but patiently. As if he'd explained it before. Maybe he
had. She had no memory of it. "I've been here with you for almost five days now." Five days? Her eyebrows rose slowly and she didn't know if she believed him or not. "Raphael's vessel was destroyed, which is why, for the moment… we're safe from him."

When he said that, she recalled Raphael turning to salt as she laid on the floor dying, in pain. "Huh. Yeah. I remember now," she said darkly, distracted by feeling that itch again in her veins. She wanted to tear her skin off to make it feel better. She needed some demon blood, and felt herself twitching almost. It was hot in here too. How long had she been sweating like this?

"As far as the war..." Cas trailed off. "I am needed up there. But... I'm needed here, too." He seemed so deeply troubled, but he was looking at her pointedly. "I've been needed."

Momentarily given pause, Alex realized what he meant and forgot about how sweaty she felt. "You mean me," she said.

She saw how his muscles worked in his jawline. "Yes."

Guilt and shame washed over her in bucketfuls under his soulful gaze. He seemed to silently be pleading with her—for what? What did he want from her? Why was he even here? Was it a guilt thing? Did he feel bad for being MIA for so long? Or maybe this was him trying to be a good little guardian angel. Either way, she was torn between being amazed that he would do this, stay with her, and between being angry as hell that he had waited so long to get his ass to her in the first place. Everything was jumbled in her mind and she wasn't sure how to feel or what to do. All she knew was that she was angry and hurt and needed a hit of demon blood soon or she'd go nuts. Or die, maybe.

"I feel so sick," she said, pushing a hand against her churning stomach, forgetting what they'd been talking about a minute ago. Those couple bites of sandwich were heavy like lead in her stomach and she wanted to puke them up. Everything throbbed in continuous pain, she felt dirty and sweaty and cold but hot all at once, wracked by horrible shooting aches in her veins. Had she ever felt as bad as she did right now? Hard to say. "How long will it be like this?" She asked, needing it to be over now. She had a high pain tolerance but this was a lot. A feeling of panic was fighting to overtake her, because this was hell, dead or not, and she didn't want it.

He shook his head slightly, guessing. "A few more days, at least."

A few more days of this? Panic and fear and fright gripped her tightly. "I can't," she said, her voice rising with alarm even as she backed up, an unconscious reaction to the need to run away from everything inside of herself. "I can't." He made to follow her, opening his mouth to speak but she just shook her head even harder, feeling almost like she couldn't breathe. "Cas, you don't understand," she said angrily, trying to make him see: "I can't do this." She needed more demon blood or she was going to keel over dead, how dare they take away her choice to do whatever the fuck she wanted? How dare he stand by and let her go through this shit?! How could he let her writhe around in pain and hallucinate her worst fears and greatest traumas and be so blasé about it? He didn't understand how hard this was or how bad she needed just a little, just a few drops—

"You can do this," Castiel said heavily, obviously worn out emotionally but trying to sound like he knew what he was saying. "And I'll be here with you."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" she snapped, shaking in a cold sweat as she glared at him. She clamped her teeth together to keep them from chattering.

His expression showed mild hurt. "I thought—"
"Oh who cares, Cas," she ranted thoughtlessly, driven to anger by her insane need for a fix. "You know what—you should go up there and fight your little war, leave the girl with the demon blood habit out of it. Don't worry yourself on my account, we all know where that always gets you." She meant it as an insult but abruptly she thought of all the ways he'd been hurt and compromised by trying to protect her and suddenly her anger was overwhelming, heavy bitter sorrow and she wanted to weep under the weight. What had she done?! She loved him and she'd subjected him to this? "You should hate me," she said, filled with surprise and self-loathing, realizing that was the truth. How selfish she was, how pathetic, how lost. She deserved to die. She was a monster. "I should die—why aren't you killing me?" She asked, completely befuddled as to why she was still breathing air.

Her words seemed to devastate and horrify him. "I would never kill you, Alex," he said, coming closer, beseeching her, nothing but anguish and care on his features.

She stepped back in response, baleful and angry with him again, wishing he'd nut up and finish her off. "Well you should," she raged, looking at him in complete anger now, feeling loopy and insane, not herself. "I shouldn't be alive, not like this," she insisted with growing fervor and hysterical emotion. "I—I messed it all up." She didn't know what she'd been through, seen, and done the past year. She didn't want half of it to be real. "This isn't living, my god Cas, this is a disaster, what if I never feel normal ever again?" She shook her head, remembering slicing demons open and enjoying it, getting sadistic, more sadistic than she was comfortable with being. Now, she just wanted Cas to tell her she'd be okay, because she didn't believe she ever would be. And it was a disaster, she felt like internally, she was being yanked back and forth between two opposite spectrums and it was making her dizzy and muddled. For a moment, she felt small and scared because... "What if I always feel like this and never get over it?"

"Alex..." he started but she shook her head, looking around, realizing something.

"There's a demon close by right now, Cas," she said lowly. "I can smell it." She grew quiet suddenly, struck by a stilling thought. "I'm something I'd hunt if I weren't me." Castiel looked at her with fully grieved features and she felt the same... then suddenly was realizing that wait, there was a demon close by. Her mouth went slack in surprise. "Wait..." she looked at the closed panic room door. "Why is there a demon nearby?"

Cas looked less than enthused about her question and its answer. "Bobby is… experimenting on it."

"Experimenting?" Alex asked, then let out a sharp little laugh, imagining a variety of silly scenarios. A little punch drunk from lack of real rest, food and sanity, she chuckled. "Don't experiment too much Bobby or you'll end up like me." She laughed at herself slurringly. "Don't drink the Kool-Aid! Ha, ha-aaa… ahh..." she trailed off, not sure what was so funny. Embarrassed at herself she frowned, looked at the ground. She'd seen so many demons in her day, and her bizarro behavior was currently reminding her of one. "Am I evil?" She asked softly, to no one in particular. Drinking the blood of demons, getting off on violence, craving the next time she could kill a monster… who was she?

"Of course not, Alex," Castiel told her genuinely, giving her a thread of hope to cling to.

"Then what's it make me?" She asked barely above a whisper, desperate for him to tell her something that would alleviate this horrible pain and fear inside.

But he slowly shook his head like he didn't know what to tell her and she was dejected. He didn't know what she was, or maybe couldn't bring himself to tell her. "Human," he answered with harrowed honesty. "I don't think any less of you, Alex." The soft words dismayed her instead of comforting her. You should. Her eyes dropped away guiltily under the intensity of his gaze. She
was utterly mortified, wondered if he were lying to make her feel better. He had to think less of her... because her behavior was insane and terrifying and right now she knew it. "Why did you begin to drink it?" He inquired gently, and she bristled at the very forward question—she wasn't going to tell him that. "Was it because of Lucifer?" His intuition, right on the money, made her grow even more closed off, more suddenly angry.

"Ah, seemed like a good idea at the time, Clarence," she muttered tersely, an offhand reference to the angel from that Christmas movie It's a Wonderful Life. The second she said it, she remembered that's what Meg had called him. Great. Now she was talking like demons, too.

Cas must not have remembered Meg's little nickname for him. "Clarence?" He asked, squinting in confusion.

Alex didn't hear his question. All she could think about was needing something to fill this void, satisfy the need that was making her insane. "I want some now. I'm going crazy," she complained, stressed to the brim, looking for a way to distract herself or make the clambering feelings of need go away. She looked at Cas again and noticed his gorgeous jawline and wide, smooth pink lips she remembered kissing so long ago. Her eyes wandered downward to the collar of his dress shirt, then lower still... she remembered how he looked underneath all those layers; she remembered his smooth warm skin and the way he was so damn sexy without meaning to be. Her mind called up images of him being very naughty and doing things to her that were very un-angelic. She felt a familiar stirring at the thought of him like that. It had been so, so long. Alex decided that she wanted him in the most basic sense, and suddenly that was all she wanted: for him to slam her up against something and screw her until she fainted. The look in her eyes must have changed because his expression flickered with slight confusion. She moved closer to him, slinking almost, full of predatory intent.

"What are you d—" he started.

"Enough bullshit," she whispered gruffly, deciding to take matters into her own hands, "I want you, okay? I need you." She grabbed him and pulled him to her, she reached for his belt and began to unbuckle it with violent, harsh hands.

Cas was taken aback and pulled away when she attempted to kiss him. "Alex, no, not like this—" he protested, stopping her hands. "You're not in your right mind."

"Who cares," she said through gritted teeth, not liking his reaction one bit. He looked at her like he didn't recognize her, but Alex didn't care, she just wanted him to make her feel alive again, she wanted him as close as possible in the dirtiest way, she wanted to scream and make him scream, she wanted to fuck and be fucked. She yanked her wrists back from his gentle hold and ran a hand up his chest across his shirt, let the other one go lower, quite brazenly—he jumped slightly when she grabbed him below the belt.

"Take me, Cas, here and now," she growled, and when he didn't do what she said right away, when he looked like he was going to pull away instead, she got pissed, so pissed she couldn't see straight. "Just put me against this damn wall and fuck me until I can't see straight you bastard!" She screeched—and when he moved away from her, tried to reason with her, she didn't give him the chance. Instead she tried to slap him across the face—he caught her wrist easily and Alex realized she had no idea what she was doing, the words she'd screamed at him suddenly registered and she withered away, mortified with herself, over the temporary bout of insanity. "I'm sorry, I c-can't think straight, I'm not—this isn't me," she apologized in rising panic, getting scared all over again because she literally didn't know how to control herself and her mind kept running circles around itself. "This isn't me."
Castiel nodded slightly, sad again. He let go of her wrist. "I know."

Something about the way he was looking at her, how he didn't seem entirely shocked at her behavior made her stop dead for a second. "H-have I been doing this stuff the whole time?" she asked, filled with dread.

His eyes went downward vaguely in thought. "Essentially."

*Christ.* Alex was taken aback, fearful to know what, exactly, she'd done these past five days. Attacked him, tried to get him to have angry dirty sex with her? Asked him to kill her? He shouldn't have to do this, in fact, she didn't *want* him to. She didn't know why he was sticking with her through this. It was obvious how sad it made him, how hard it was for him. Not for the first time she thought of how low and horrible she must seem to him and she was so afraid he'd never be able to unsee all of this. This was too much. "I don't want you to see me like this, Cas," she told him in aghast honesty, walking away and wrapping her arms around herself in the face of more cold chills. Close to collapse or breakdown or maybe a fit of rage, she shook her head fast, trying to clear her mind of the craziness, trying to hang onto herself. "J-just leave me alone." She didn't want to be alone, in fact, the idea killed her inside, but it would be better than this.

"You shouldn't be alone," Cas said, his voice low and soft behind her. His voice softened yet again, barely audible. "Haven't you been alone long enough?"

His words killed her a little more, slicing her open deeply—yes she had been alone long enough but… she shut her eyes tightly, pained at how caring he sounded and how grieved he sounded over their separation. He was torturing her, he was *torturing* her. For one, she wanted to cling to that care and love she heard in his voice, she wanted to bury herself in it and in him but… he'd been gone *all this time.* Where the hell had he been when she'd needed him? It didn't matter, she forgave him and wanted nothing more than to turn around and go to him. Angry with herself and how ready she was to run to him and be comforted, she forced herself to be terse. "Yeah well you shouldn't have to be the one to babysit me," she muttered gruffly, confused with herself even as she said it. What did she want? She'd pined for him every damn minute of every damn day he'd been gone… so was she really going to be a bitch and push him away now that he was finally here?

"I'm not 'babysitting' you," he said, and she heard the hurt in his voice. "I'm caring for you."

Cynical, she responded to him thoughtlessly. "Like you cared for me this past year?" she accused bitterly. She said the words and they were both shocked by them, rendered silent. Alex opened her mouth to apologize… and no words came out. She couldn't say she was sorry. Because in a way, she didn't think she had anything to apologize for. And she owed herself this selfishness, dammit. She didn't care about some crazy war in Heaven she hadn't seen or been affected by, she just wanted Cas all to herself. Or, she *had.* Now she suddenly didn't know. What she wanted most was some fucking demon blood so her *head* would work right again.

Unaware of her inner craze, Cas looked at her sadly, silently, for a long moment and burdened, Alex just looked down. "Yesterday… when hallucinating…" Cas said falteringly, "you asked me to hold you." Her eyes jumped up to his. He sounded very troubled. "When I did, you *screamed.* You said you could never be touched again, ever, by anyone." His eyes were laden with tortured questions and he stepped a little closer, but kept a very careful, respectful distance. His handsome features were twisted up with emotional agony. "How badly did he hurt you, Alex? I have to know."

His question startled her and caught her off guard, made her defenses surge. "I don't want to *talk* about that," she said sharply. He looked as if his worse fears were confirmed and Alex saw what he was thinking and wanted to tell him *no, it's not as bad as you think.* But she said nothing, just
suddenly gritted her teeth against a blistering headache that came out of nowhere. Her blood pounded loudly in her ears and she screwed her eyes shut, bent forward, making a sound of pain. She felt two gentle hands on either of her arms, helping her stay standing. How horrible that he could love her despite this, how awful that she would let this happen and make him have to go through this with her.

She felt a bout of craziness coming on, of anger and panic and she tried to get rid of him again. "Cas, I'm losing my mind, please," she begged, looking him in the eye desperately. "You can't see me like this, I don't know what I'm gonna say or do, you gotta leave." She gulped down air and wet her lips, deciding to try and play the sympathy card because she needed blood so bad... "Or just, just let me out and I'll be okay. You want me to feel better, right?" She made her saddest eyes at him, trying to get him to break. "Cas, I only need a little. Just a couple sips, Cas, please. Help me."

He shook his head slowly and sadly, not budging or giving in to her. "I am helping you."

She saw red. "No you're not!" She shrieked, all but throwing a tantrum, completely losing all semblance of mental clarity when she realized she was trapped and not going to get any demon blood. "You fucking asshole!" She kicked the chair beside her, then grabbed it and threw it uselessly at the wall with an animalistic sound. "Let me out!" She howled, then took the plastic plate and slammed it into the wall so hard that it shattered, cutting her in the process. "Let me out of here!"

"Alex, please stop," Cas appealed even as she kicked a leg of the turned over desk, trying to break it to use as a weapon. Her hand was bleeding and she didn't seem to notice, she tried to rip the desk apart crazily and uselessly, ignoring him. "If you don't, I have to render you unconscious, and then you hallucinate even worse than before," Cas told her, voice rising slightly. He was trying so, so hard to be reasonable.

"Shut up, shut up! I can't hear myself think!" Alex screeched, her hands on either side of her head. With an abrupt and frustrated cry she collapsed to sit onto the ground, suddenly letting go of the anger and switching to pure grief instead. "I want Dean," she wailed, rocking back and forth in misery. She sounded like a child calling for her mother. "I just want my big brother." She saw her bleeding hand and crumpled anew, began to cry so hard that her shoulders shook. Cas, trying to calm her, knelt down in front of her, tried to reach out to her and reassure her, but she swiped a hand out angrily at him. "Why did he leave me?" She asked, anger growing again exponentially. "Why did you leave me? Why does everyone leave?!" She got to her feet lurchingly, leaving Cas to stand and turn, watch her with that deeply sad, reluctant expression on his face.

"I hate you so much," she said, whirling. Her face was streaked with tears. "You tricked me and I hate you." With a horrible sound of grief and anger, she suddenly lunged at him and tried to shove him but instead fell backwards because he was completely immovable, like a wall. He barely caught her and she venomously protested his hold, kicking and screaming, half out of her mind. It got to be too much. And regretfully, Cas pressed two fingers to her forehead, let her fall into quiet unconsciousness, ending the insanity. As her body went slack, he caught her easily.

The panic room fell into silence once more.

Cas looked at Alex, who was now still and quiet in his arms. He felt heavy in ways that were indescribable. She had been like this for the past five days. In fact... this was improvement. However, watching her go through this was easily the worst form of torture Castiel had ever endured. He carried her limp form to the cot and laid her there with utmost gentleness, sweeping her scattered dark hair back from her face with two fingers. His fingers paused and lingered at her
temple. She was so beautiful. And she seemed so broken. His chest ached in that familiar place and the weight he was carrying pressed down on him all over again. Whatever you face, I will face. A promise he'd made to her roughly a year ago. He hadn't kept that promise, and the sorrow was too much to bear. He knelt beside the cot and took her wounded, bloody hand in his. He let healing energy transfer from himself to her—and the cut was gone, the blood just a memory. But it had still happened. Just like everything else he'd walked with her through these past few days—it had all happened, and he couldn't forget it.

He pulled that hand of hers to his lips and pressed a lingering, conflicted kiss to the back of it. He wished he could heal her of demon blood addiction, but it wasn't that simple. There were things not even he could take away or heal. He let go of her hand, realizing that maybe he shouldn't touch her or kiss her like that. He'd done it without thinking, and now he remembered how she had, several times the past few days, reacted with horror at being touched any small way whatsoever. The knowledge of why destroyed him. He gently laid her hand down to rest across her own stomach and then he stood.

All year long he'd imagined being with her again. He hadn't imagined this. Castiel walked off a few steps, barely able to look at her, because when he looked at her, he thought about everything that had happened to her. While hallucinating, she'd said the name several times over of the man who violated her: Glen. Always begging him to stop, please. Get away. Murder boiled inside of Castiel's veins at the name, the thought of someone touching her and hurting her and how she had been completely on her own and by herself. He should have been there. He leaned a forearm into the wall adjacent and to the left of the cot, bowed his head down, and brought his hand to his forehead. How was he supposed to do this? The pain and dismay was utterly overwhelming to him.

He couldn't even fathom leaving her again, yet knew the time would come when there would be no choice. The war continued in Heaven without him, and Ezekiel spoke to him through what the Winchesters called 'angel radio' daily. At the back of his mind at all times, he heard the whispers of Heaven, the news of the war. But that war wasn't the one he cared about, even though he knew he should. Right now, on earth, he was fighting a different war, a battle to get Alex back from the clutches of this addiction. He was determined to see her through it, even though, emotionally and mentally, he was completely spent and bereft. No wonder Dean had fled from this. Castiel understood now. Watching this was agony, and he was so aware of how helpless he was to take it away from her. All he could do was remain at her side and support her, stay. It didn't seem like enough, what he was doing for her. But it was all he could do.

Over the past few days, she'd proclaimed her hatred of him many times over, then quickly thereafter sobbed that she loved him and then she'd beg him not to leave her. He couldn't forget any of these things. Heartsick, Cas tried not to take any of the more negative and hurtful things Alex had said at face value. She wasn't herself right now, and he knew that. Demon blood was a foul and dangerous substance, highly addictive and lethal to most people. It twisted the mind. It perverted the ability to reason clearly. But he felt deserving of her hatred, no matter how genuine it was or not. How could he not have known this was happening to her? He should have sensed it somehow.

He looked back at the cot, where Alex remained unmoving—she almost looked like she could have been sleeping, like she was peaceful and calm. It was an illusion. Soon she'd begin to mutter and murmur, frown and twitch and whimper as the nightmares began. Sometimes it was a few hours she slept before she began to thrash in hallucinations again, sometimes it was ten minutes. When it got severe, he would wake her, and they would go through the same dance they just had: She wouldn't remember everything, wouldn't know it was him was at first, would try and attack him, she would break down, refuse to eat... and when she got so violent and belligerent that she was in danger of hurting herself, he'd put her back into sleep. The cycle would repeat until the demon blood had finished exiting her system. A few more days, at least. The thought was
The thing he kept wondering was *how this had happened* to her. She refused to tell him. He assumed the addiction had started when she'd gone to Lucifer and drank demon blood in an attempt to save them all. How he wished she would have told him her thoughts and fears, her idea to go to Lucifer. How he wished she would have trusted him with her reckless plan. He could have saved her. A great guilt covered him, one that was constant and never-ending. He'd made so many mistakes and errors and all he was trying to do was fix it, fix her. But he wondered if in the year he'd been gone, she'd become unfixable. What if he'd lost her in the process of trying to save her? What if the Alex he knew and loved was gone?

She'd asked him to *kill* her, and it wasn't the first time. Over the past five days, she'd *demanded* he kill her three times. Each time she'd stunned him with the plea, all he could think of was 2014. That horrible glimpse of a future where he'd done just that—killed her and watched her die in his arms. The anxiety and bad feelings whenever she said those words—"*you should just kill me!*"—was unmanageable and horrible, traumatic at the deepest levels to Castiel. He didn't exactly know why she thought she should be killed, but it seemed that maybe she wanted to die because she felt guilty. Guilty. About the things that had happened to her in the year he'd been gone. She shouldn't feel that way and he wished he knew a way to truly help her through this, it was so frustrating that she felt that way at all. But he knew so little of human emotions… he wasn't sure how to comfort her or soothe her or change her mind. Words and expression didn't come to him with the ease that they did for her and for other humans. He walked across the quiet panic room, his footsteps echoing on the iron floor. The light was dim and cast soft shadows across her still form. He remembered that brief time he'd been all but human. He'd felt so much closer to her. Bound to her forever. Now… he felt like she was someplace far away where he couldn't reach.

Watching her sleeping face, only one thought came to mind: He was the one who had essentially done this to her. He was to blame. All the things he should have done differently ran through his mind and he marveled at what a mess everything had dissolved into. Heaven, earth, all of it was torn apart. All because of that day in 2007 when he'd been assigned to protect a human named Alex Winchester. In hindsight, it seemed that fateful day spelled disaster for both of them—and not just them, but the entire world. Heaven was right to forbid this kind of relationship, because all this love had done was to tear things apart. He'd started a war for her, he'd essentially followed in Lucifer's footsteps for her, he'd ripped paradise asunder and rebelled against everything he'd been created to stand for. All of it in a desperate bid to save her, to find a way for them to be together.

Instead he had cursed her through and through, he had sealed her eternal fate. But he refused to accept it. Not then and not now—she would not be eternally damned on his account. This war he'd started would be won at any cost, he would defeat Raphael and establish new order in Heaven, he would go to the throne room and change the celestial commandments himself, rip it all to shreds if he had to. To fix this. To fix her and what he had done to her. Briefly, he reflected on how far he'd fallen. The things he was willing to do to protect her were unseemly and blasphemous… working with the King of Hell? Ripping God's law up? Lying, keeping secrets, killing his fellow angels? He didn't like to think of these things.

He focused on why the end justified the means, and he truly believed that he wasn't in the wrong for what he was doing and planning to do. Nothing else mattered except fixing what he had broken. Even though he realized now, nearly four years after meeting her, that giving in to this relationship and allowing it had been one of his biggest mistakes, he couldn't walk away from her and couldn't bring himself to regret her. How could he? She gave meaning where there had been none, had created new life in him, had bestowed wonders on him. He loved her in a way that would never end.
Alex suddenly made a soft little sound and distress flitted across her sleeping features for just a moment and she moved slightly, jumping in her sleep. It was starting. Castiel prepared himself for another heartbreaking encounter. He went to her side and knelt there, a hand on either of her arms to protect her from hitting herself. She would begin to thrash soon.

She didn't deserve this. She didn't deserve this.

The phone rang loudly in Bobby Singer's kitchen, twice. "Yeah," Bobby answered tersely. He cradled the oversized cordless phone between his shoulder and dace as he returned to his work at the stove.

"Hey, it's me," came Dean's familiar voice on the other end.

"Well, imagine that," Bobby muttered as he flipped over a fried egg with his free hand. It sizzled and hissed in the pan.

"Yeah, imagine that," Dean said, trying to sound upbeat with a short chuckle. He hesitated, then the worry came through in his voice. "So, uh, any updates? She doing okay?"

Bobby set down the spatula and leaned against the counter with one hand. "Dean—like I told ya last time you called, what, an hour ago? Same. She's fine as she can be given the circumstances. Alive, workin' through it." There was a heavy, stressed out sigh at the other end of the line and Bobby shifted the phone to his other ear. He was a little annoyed. Dean kept calling at the worst possible times. "Just like the other million times you've called, I got nothin' new to add," Bobby said, then softened a little, realizing he shouldn't be so hard on the kid—he just got a little crotchety sometimes when people badgered him. "Look, I know you're worried," he said. "We all are. But either be there or be here, Dean. S'all I'm sayin'."

There was a pause. "That's just it. I shouldn't have left, Bobby," he said, sounding completely guilt-ridden and regretful. "I should be there. This job is taking too long, and Sam could have handled it on his own, anyway."

"Sam could have handled a Lamia on his own...?" Bobby repeated incredulously, using his tone of voice to suggest that Dean had to be shitting him.

Dean gave another frustrated sigh. "Well yeah, no, I guess not but—you know what I mean, Bobby!" The oldest Winchester made an impatient sound and Bobby could just see his angry, confounded expression. Bobby just rolled his eyes at the familiar and slightly disrespectful dramatics. He flipped his egg once more. He liked them cooked well. Burnt, even. "Sorry," Dean said, calmer, refocusing. "That reminds me. Did you find out the best way to kill it?"

"Yup, silver knife blessed by a holy man," Bobby said, and slid his egg off the pan and onto the waiting plate.

"Right, okay," Dean said. He went quiet but said nothing else—like he was done talking but didn't want to hang up.

Bobby paused, listened for three seconds. "Dean...?"

"Yeah?"

Using his best fatherly tone, Bobby was patient and kind, but firm. "You boys take care of the Lamia and then you call me. And I'll call you if anything changes with Alex. I haven't forgotten how to dial out, in case you're worried."
Another short pause. "Yeah, all right. Thanks Bobby." And he hung up.

Bobby hung up too, tossing the cordless phone down with a sigh. Things just always had a way of going bad to worse around these parts. In Bobby's basement, currently, two problems: One, Alex Winchester, demon blood junkie. Two, a crossroads demon he'd lured and kidnapped and trapped. All within fifty feet of each other. Not exactly the best roommates, if you asked him. But Bobby had been in the middle of this little project before the Winchesters and their angel had shown up without warning and dumped Alex into his basement. See, having lent out his soul last year to Crowley, he was pretty pissed when the good-for-nothing jackass refused to give it back. Bobby'd tried to summon Crowley last year after Stull Cemetery and force the demon into giving the damn thing back but Crowley's Hellhound had sort of thrown a wrench into the mix.

That's why Bobby'd wrangled that specific crossroads demon after months of work and research—he had the gal's original bones, the ones that belonged to the human the demon was inhabiting. Bobby was testing a theory he'd heard about… experimenting, if you wanted to call it that. And Crowley would have quite the fun surprise waiting for him in just a few days, if Bobby's experiments proved successful.

However, Alex's presence had thrown him off a bit, rendering Bobby distracted and worried. Her unexpected arrival and the news that she was addicted to demon's blood came as a real shock. He hadn't laid eyes on her in a year and the last time he'd seen her she'd been bad off, grieving Sam's death. Then she'd disappeared completely. So seeing her again and like this was a tough pill to swallow. Maybe those damn twins were more alike than he'd thought. Speaking of Sam…

There was definitely something off about him. Bobby had known it all along but when Sam came up into his living room five days ago without warning and said "hey, uh, Alex needs to use the panic room to detox off of demon blood if that's okay with you. And by the way, have you heard of any hunts in the area?" Well, Bobby had wondered if the kid were joking with him when he'd asked that so unconcernedly. But apparently, whatever brought him back had left him out of touch with emotions. Sam had no tact anymore—he was goal-oriented and cold, unaffected by most things. Just… robotic. But maybe that's what Hell did to a guy. Bobby wouldn't know. He'd never been.

But Dean, who had been to Hell and back, was still kinds of mad about how Bobby had known about Sam being back all year. He hadn't said anything about it five days ago, but Bobby knew it. When Lisa and Ben had come to stay here a couple months ago after the whole djinn fiasco, Bobby'd told Dean that Sam being alive wasn't news to him. Suffice to say, Dean hadn't been thrilled to hear it. Maybe it was wrong of him, but Bobby hadn't said a word about Sam popping back up from the dead. It had been done in hopes to keep Dean safe from the urge to dive back into the hunting life with his brother. All the good it did, huh? Here Dean was again, caught up in the same old mess of monsters and demons.

And monsters lately, it was like they were on steroids or had lost their maps home. Good example, Sam and Dean were currently hunting a Lamia—those were never supposed to leave Greece, ever, and Bobby had never heard of one being stateside, but there was one in Wisconsin of all places. And Rufus, one of Bobby's hunting buddies, had just tracked and killed an Okami in Iowa. Those were supposed to only be found in Japan. It was sort of like the underbelly of the monster world was getting restless and stir-crazy. Cabin fever, maybe. Not good, any way you sliced it.

A loud shriek from downstairs sounded and Bobby glanced up, stilling for a minute. Damn, kid. He heard her sometimes, screeching and hollering and knocking stuff around. Always followed by Cas's quiet, deep tones. Bobby looked in on Alex and Cas that first day after the brothers left and seen Alex sitting huddled on the floor in the middle of the room, hugging her knees, crying and begging Cas to "get me some, please, I thought you loved me, I need it!" Cas, crouched in front of
her. He'd consoled her by touching the side of her head, he'd said something Bobby couldn't quite catch, and Alex had looked at him angrily then stood up—he stood too—she'd walked away then suddenly whirled and tried to attack the angel. Tried being the operative word. Cas had seemed only saddened at her lunacy and as she'd shouted obscenities, he'd touched her forehead and let her fall limp into unconsciousness. He'd caught her and looked at Bobby sadly. Seemed like that was the holding pattern they were in down there.

Bobby had peeked in on them a few times and was taking food down every day but mostly he tried to stay scarce. It was hard as hell to see her like that, damn half out of her mind. Bobby hadn't asked Dean and Dean hadn't said anything, but Bobby had been pretty damn surprised that Dean had just left Cas with Alex. Maybe it was wrong of Bobby, but he'd assumed that it must have been because Dean couldn't handle the thought of watching Alex go through the withdrawals. Watching Sam detox had been tough enough. And Bobby would never say this out loud, but he was pretty sure he knew which twin was Dean's favorite. That's why he was so damn surprised that Dean had gone with Sam and left Alex behind. The whole thing either said a lot about how much Dean trusted Cas, or how desperate he was to escape having to watch his sister go through hell.

Should be a few more days, Bobby thought, and Alex would come to her senses, come back to herself. It was a shame she'd gotten hooked, and a mystery... but he knew firsthand that she tended to go a little berserk when she lost people she loved. When Dean had died... well. That had been a can of worms, to say the least. She'd been angry and vengeful and so grieved, but had never really talked much about it. Had just thrown herself into hunting, working, and doing things. He remembered that time he'd found her, the gun, in the shed. She'd been thinking about it, taking her own life, and he'd known it, put that to an end real quick. He still wondered... what if he'd been too late? Well, he hadn't been.

The way Dean and Cas were acting now, Bobby felt like there was something they weren't telling him about her, or what had happened to her. Surely there couldn't be something worse than that sweet girl getting hooked on demon blood. He hoped not. He was just glad she hadn't put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger that past year of being alone. He knew firsthand that the idea was pretty damn appealing on some days. This life they all lived was a great and terrible burden, and sometimes dying sounded like the best option.

But dying would have to wait a little longer. He still had things to do. Bobby ate his fried egg as he got back to his research. He pulled out his stack of world maps and laid out the one of Scotland. He smiled a little to himself because if this plan he was brewing up worked... Crowley was going to crap his kilt.

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**Four Days Later**

When she woke up that time, she could feel that things were different. Better. Normal, maybe.
What day was this? She couldn't remember, but... she suddenly realized that oh... she wasn't laying on the cot. She was being held by Cas, who sat on the floor. Her head was settled into the crook of his neck and her knees were close to her chest, one of his arms supported her back, the other one looped through the bend of her knees. It was so warm and safe here, and she didn't move at all for fear of ruining the moment, for fear of losing this. As she continued to come out of the stupor of heavy sleep, Alex began to recall how she'd fallen asleep on him...

*She was sitting against the panic room wall and he came to sit beside her. His arms resting over his knees... she'd shown him how to sit like that, and she remembered. Alex glanced at him sidelong, wanting to look at him... but he was already looking at her and her eyes darted away. She resumed staring at the ground between her knees. They hadn't said much that day because she*
was feeling clear-headed and as a result was wading through the swamp of remembering everything she’d said and done the past two days. It was all completely mortifying and had her feeling disgusted with herself. The rest of her days here were a jumble of hallucinations and screaming and the maddening desire for demon blood. That desire was fading, but so was she. Exhausted wasn’t even close to how she felt. The need for sleep and rest was what she was thinking about now, but she resisted it, stubborn and prideful and also too ashamed to let herself have what she needed.

Beside her, Cas was quiet and strong, like he had been for all the past few days that she could remember. It would have been better if he were angry with her and giving her rude looks, if he were telling her how awful she was but... he wasn’t.

Bad wasn’t the best word to describe how she felt about what she’d put him through here in the panic room. Try miserable, awful, ashamed. It felt like forever that they’d been stuck in here together, and she knew he was worn thin by it just as much as she was, just not physically. He’d held her down when she was trying to stab herself with a pen, then she’d tried to stab him, too. He’d let her try and beat him up several times—then healed her broken fists sadly. He’d listened to her ranting and raving about how much she hated him for what he’d done to her, he’d apologized for leaving, she’d cried about what 'you made me do.' A despicable and effective use of passive aggressiveness on her part. She’d been trying to make him feel as bad as she did, and now she wanted to blame the demon blood for making her say that stuff. But maybe it was her saying those things to him. Maybe it was her playing the victim card. She hoped not and didn’t know anymore. She was totally taxed and spent, drained of everything but all she could think was that he didn't deserve this, not even for a second. How he stayed here with her in this psychotic break was beyond her.

"I'm so tired of this, aren't you?" She asked him softly. Her voice rasped a little because of how much she’d shouted herself hoarse the past week. She felt so guilty that he was here babysitting her, nursing her back to health. He was an all-powerful, important angel and he was here holding her hair while she puked. Well, not literally.

"It doesn't matter how I feel," he answered her in his low, steady voice.

Alex looked at him sidelong, out of defenses. "Doesn't it?"

He met her gaze and said nothing. Did he really feel that way? That what he felt didn’t matter? Crumpling, she bowed her head into a waiting hand. When he turned toward her a little and touched her arm gently, she was even more grieved and pulled away, uncomfortable receiving affection from him because of how she had treated him. "Why are you doing this?" She asked him in a voice thick with wavering emotion. "I don't deserve this... your kindness." She raised her head and looked at him with teary eyes. What she’d done the past few days was bad enough: badgering him, cussing him out, trying to hurt him, telling him she hated him. But how could he even look at her? How did he still obviously care about her? What was wrong with him? Any normal person would have left by now, right? But he wasn’t a normal person, was he. He was Castiel. And he was an angel.

"Don't say that," he told her, pleading with her on some level. "You're not worthless like you keep saying you are."

Did she keep saying that? She couldn’t remember. What she did remember was how much simpler things were in the past, during the apocalypse. Ironic as hell that the end of the world had seemed better than this. This was just... continuation of the darkness and uncertainty. Unable to withhold her thoughts and feelings from him, she reached out to him emotionally for reassurance and a line
of hope to hang on to. "I just wanna go back to the way things were before," she told him, struggling not to lose control over her strained emotional state, asking him for a miracle or something... she didn't know. She was so tired and emotionally ragged, and maybe Cas saw that, because he didn't address her comment.

"You need rest," he told her gently. "Let me take you to the cot again."

"No," she said a bit sullenly, looking at it with a dirty side-eye. "It's lumpy and smells like old peanuts."

Castiel paused, a little confused at her complaint. Then he looked at her from the edge of her eyes. "Uh... well, I'm not lumpy," he said, and she looked at him in sharp surprise. "And I don't think I smell like... old peanuts." She almost smiled at his unwitting, oddly-timed joke. It was a light moment in the midst of the darkness and it made her remember with full clarity how much she loved him. Then she remembered how they had fallen apart, and it was the biggest tragedy she could fathom. Yet here he was, looking at her and silently asking her to come to him and let him hold her.

And she didn't give herself time to talk herself out of it or tell herself that she didn't deserve that. She needed him and for now, she silenced her inner protests. Nodding faintly, she went to him readily, circling her arms around his neck as he lifted her easily, settling her there comfortably in his arms. Their gazes locked and her arms froze there around his neck. They were close, a breaths distance away, and the way his full, dark eyes held hers, for a minute, she thought he was going to kiss her. Her heart jumped in expectant hope and great horror alike, she was scared of that for reasons she couldn't name. Then his eyes lowered away from hers and he bowed his head away completely, and the moment was gone.

Maybe that part of their relationship would die out, maybe that part of it was ruined... how would he ever want her again? After this? Alex laid her head onto him and so many memories of brighter days with him came over her that so did the predictable tears. She shook with restrained emotion and he held her tighter. Tiredness kept rolling over her. She heard herself making horrible, exhausted crying noises and it wasn't long before she all but passed out from emotional, mental, and physical fatigue. Cas didn't let her go for ever a second.

She felt worlds different now as she continued to stir to wakefulness—she felt refreshed almost, clear-headed again for the first time in what felt like forever. And when she lifted her head up off of Cas's shoulder, she found herself looking into his waiting eyes. "Hello," he said softly. A single word of greeting that she felt him say—that's how close she rested against him.

"Hi," she returned, feeling mildly shy. Was he really here with her? Had he really stayed all this time? It felt like a dream in the best of ways... and for a minute she thought of nothing of real depth. Just looked at Cas and saw him for maybe the first time in days, really saw him. The howling madness of the demon blood was gone and Castiel was so much more beautiful than she remembered... those tired but somehow boyish features, the scruff of stubble across his jawline, his brilliant azure eyes... and thinking about how good he looked made her abruptly realize she must look pretty terrible. How long had it been since she'd showered, anyway...? Her hair felt gross, her skin was clammy.

Cas was studying her closely and he seemed a little hopeful, he didn't appear concerned with her worries about greasy hair. "How are you feeling?"

Huh, good question. She forgot about her personal hygiene for a minute and instead thought about how she was feeling, taking a mental inventory, giving herself a little time to really consider it. "I'm feeling..." her eyebrows rose fractionally in pleasant, relieved surprise as she realized she really did
feel okay again, "like me again, I think." She felt calm, not antsy and desperate. Even-keeled. All right. Was the nightmare finally over? She sat up slightly then frowned, realizing how stiff and sore her limbs felt. She stretched a little, then made a soft little moan of protest as taut muscles complained. "How long did I sleep?"

"Sixteen hours."

She stopped mid-stretch, eyes going saucer-wide. "Wha…?" That was insanely long. And that entire time, she hadn't had any bad dreams or hallucinations. He smiled softly at her, and she saw that he was relieved. "Does that mean… I'm outta the woods?" she asked, feeling more hopeful than she had been in days and days.

Cas paused, eyes narrowing in thought. "I... don't know what that means. But if it means you're past the worst parts of the detoxification… yes. In fact, I think today is the day you can finally leave this room."

That was the best news she'd ever heard—she almost teared up in happiness. Impulsively she hugged him tightly around the neck—she didn't notice how surprised he was by the sudden action. She didn't see how his face showed utter astounded relief at her genuine reaction and the way she was reaching out to him. She was just grinning with her eyes screwed shut. Thank god, the it was all over, finally. Alex made a soft little sound that was half-laugh, half-whimper. She was so, so relieved that this could finally end. And then, flashes of what had happened flitted across her mind without warning and her brief respite into happiness faded. Yeah, it was over but… the things she'd said and done… she pulled back from Cas, suddenly hesitant and contrite.

Not looking him the eye, she cleared her throat and began to stand up on sore, stiff legs. He stood easily, like he wasn't affected at all by sitting on one place for sixteen hours straight. His hands were around her wrists gently, guiding her upwards to stand, and she tried not to look affected by his touch, tried to be all business. "Cas, I need a shower more than anything," she said, pulling her arms back to herself and attempting to be lighthearted, or at least sound that way. Then she realized. "All my clothes are..." she trailed off. They were in her car. Which had been impounded or something. She couldn't remember.

Cas saw her look of distress and instead of echoing the sentiment, he got another small smile on his face, like he knew something. "There's something you should see," he told her, then touched the back of her arm with utmost care, like he was afraid to touch her at all.

Suddenly, they were outside in the early morning light, in the salvage yard. Alex blinked against the abrupt brightness, confused.

"Dean told me you lost everything last week," Cas explained, then indicated that she should to her left. She looked, then saw what he wanted to show her. Her heart clenched in surprise, her stomach flip flopped. It was like seeing an old familiar friend. Parked there on the gravel, her jet black Mustang, just like she remembered it. "It's not much, but—" Cas started uncertainly when she was slack-jawed and silent.

"No, it's... everything," she said, overcome with surprise, touched at how he'd somehow gone and gotten this for her. It wasn't just a car. It was so much more, and for a minute she forgot about all her self-loathing and was overwhelmed with gladness and good feelings... because this car was hers and she hadn't lost it like she thought she had, hadn't lost it like she lost everything else. "This dumb car," she breathed as she went over, touched the rearview mirror, looked her over carefully while Cas stood back and watched. This two-ton combination of metal and rubber and leather had been her home the year she'd been alone, it had been her project, her obsession... the thing she'd poured all her frustrations into, especially the first couple months before... before the demon
blood. This had kept her sane, this stupid car.

"When I first saw her, she was this sad, sad rusted hunk of junk," Alex said softly, looking over the sleek black hood, remembering. She'd refinished that, repainted it. A labor of love. "She had no tires, a broken windshield, no engine… half the body was rusted or sun-bleached. But I saw what she could be. The first few months, this is all I did. Worked on this car. Hours and hours." She paused, looking up at Cas, who was watching quietly, his hands in his trench coat pockets. His expression was mild, and he seemed glad to see her reaction. He was so thoughtful and kind, and she realized it all over again, felt bad because of it. "Thanks Cas," she said, not sure how she could ever make any of this up to him at all. "This means a lot." She paused, awkwardly trying to tell him not just the car meant a lot. "Everything you've done. Means a lot."

She cleared her throat and turned, went to the back of the car, opened the trunk and found her duffel bag. Then she darkened. She remembered there being a flask in there, and she didn't want Cas to think she was trying to get to it… "I already removed it from your things," he said, guessing her thoughts and surprising her. He came to stand beside the trunk.

Alex was impressed but also a little unsure. "When did you get so intuitive?" she asked.

His eyes trailed downward grimly. "Commanding a war has taught me many things," he said. He seemed very grown up and mature and burdened to her in that moment, and she wondered what else war had taught him. She worried about him briefly, but her greasy hair and general feeling of I'm gross ended up dominating her thoughts.

She grabbed her bag out of the trunk and closed it behind with a familiar metallic thunk. "I'll uh, I'll go get showered," she said, and turned toward the house.

Cas followed. "I'll come with you."

Alex stopped and turned, looked at him sort of strangely. "With me?" She asked, not sure about that. "I… I kinda need some privacy, Cas." Wait. She knew why he wanted to follow her. A little mortified, she looked down, feeling chastened. "I'm not gonna... jump out the window or anything or run off to the closest demon dive."

"I just want to make sure you're all right," he said, then, obviously thinking hard, thought he knew why she was resisting the idea. "If you're worried about me seeing you unclothed... I already have."

Her eyes shot up to his and she was a little embarrassed. "Uh…" Alex shut her agape mouth and pressed it into a thin line, looked to the side. "I know that. I remember." And she did. They had been so comfortable in those last few days before the world had gone to crap, so intimate and now… she couldn't. "Cas, just… I need some space, okay? Just because you've… seen me unclothed before doesn't mean…" she wasn't sure how to tell him she was just not okay with being seen naked, at all, by anyone right now. "I'm not… it's not okay right now."

He grew startled, then understanding, then deeply unsettled. "Yes, of course, I didn't even think…" he seemed unsure of what to say. "I didn't mean…"

This was so uncomfortable. Cheeks warming, Alex shrugged, shook her head, tried to downplay everything. "No, it's fine. I'm fine," she said, scratching the back of her neck absently and not looking at him. "I'll be fine."

Castiel's worried expression didn't waver. "Let me take you there," he said, and reached out for her.
"No, I can wa—" too late. They were standing in front of the upstairs bathroom door. "—alk." He withdrew his hand from her and stood back, indicating that he was going to remain right there. Alex looked at him long and hard, then mumbled something about being out in a few minutes. She proceeded to shut herself in there and immediately turned the shower on then set her bag down onto the sink.

She looked at herself in the mirror and was shocked at her appearance. She looked utterly disgusting—her hair especially was greasy and limp, her skin looked grimy from sweating so much, her—wait. She touched her fingertips to her upper chest, confused and slightly panicked because it was missing. Where was her penny necklace? It was gone, why was it gone? She searched with frantic fingers around under her tank top straps and then looked down her shirt, as if it might be lurking around in her clothes somewhere. Oh no no no she couldn't have lost it, that penny was what Cas gave her a year ago, the only thing he'd had in his pocket and he'd given it to her where was it!?

And then she remembered in disconnected flashes, ripping it off and throwing it at him, shouting horrible things at him, telling him to take it back, she didn't want it. Oh my god. She slowly covered her mouth with her hand, horrified at herself. The meaning wasn't lost on her.

Castiel stood there outside the bathroom, listening to the water run. He heard her moving around in the shower and listened closely. She seemed all right, but he needed to be sure. About ten minutes passed and then he heard boots clomping up the steps, alerting him to a new presence. Bobby came around the corner. "How she doin'?" he asked conversationally. "Better," Cas said, nodding faintly. "Much better. In fact, I think she's completely through it."

There was visible relief on the hunter's face. "That's real good news." Bobby smiled under his beard and clapped Castiel on the shoulder, squeezed. "You did good, Cas, hangin' in like you did. Earned some major points with me."

Castiel paused, not understanding. "What sort of 'points'?" He questioned, confused about why Bobby was talking about some kind of number system right now. "Are they redeemable for something?"

Bobby looked taken aback and amused, a little befuddled. "You, uh, really need to work on your jargon, kid," he told Cas.

Ah, so that had been slang for something. Cas decided he should ask Alex later about what Bobby had meant. But for now, he had something else he was wondering about. "How did it go with the bone burning?" He asked. Cas had gathered what Bobby had been doing over the past week, had even discussed it with the man a few times when he'd brought food down for Alex.

Bobby nodded, smiled. "Worked like a charm."

The shower stopped in the bathroom and Cas glanced that way before refocusing on Bobby. "You seem pleased," he observed.

Bobby shrugged modestly. "You would be too if you'd figure out a way to back the guy who's holdin' your soul over your head into a corner."

Castiel frowned a little. "Crowley?" He asked, suddenly guarded.

"Yup," Bobby said, oblivious to Cas's internal reaction of nervousness. "I came into some very interesting information recently. I've got it narrowed down, actually, think I know where the
bastard's bones are buried." The hunter suddenly seemed to get an idea. "Hey—you doin' anything this afternoon?"

Not liking the sounds of this, Cas tried not to show it. "…why?"

"Could use a hand," Bobby replied nonchalantly.

"Burnin' Crowley's bones?" Castiel asked, putting two and two together. He couldn't let that happen, he was secretly working with Crowley to open Purgatory and use the souls therein to gain enough power to defeat Raphael once and for all. As bad as it was, Cas, for now, had to protect Crowley's life if there were a threat against it. And worse still, he couldn't risk telling anyone his secret, either.

"Not exactly," Bobby said, grinning lopsidedly, feeling good about whatever plan he was thinking of. He didn't notice Cas's look of slight alarm. "But I'm gonna threaten to do that if he won't hand my soul back over."

Cas realized he needed to be very, very careful here and how he chose to proceed. "That seems risky," he commented vaguely.

"Well you got any other ideas on how to get the dad-blasted thing back?" Bobby asked.

Cas answered honestly. "Uh… no."

The bathroom door opened slightly to reveal Alex, who peeked her head through the cracked doorway. Her hair was dripping wet and they could see that she was wrapped in a towel. "We'll do it, Bobby," she said.

"Ah," Bobby commented, a little uncertain as to how he should react to her appearance, but she looked completely stoic and unaffected. "Hey, kiddo. How long you been there?"

"Long enough," she said evenly, stating that she'd heard the conversation. "We'll do whatever you need, Bobby."

Castiel looked more than a little bit reluctant about Alex volunteering them for the job. "Alex, I'm not sure…" he started.

"It's just digging up a grave, right?" she asked, glancing his way but not really looking at him.

"Doesn't this feel a mite too soon for you to be out there in the field again?" Bobby asked, concerned. "You need your rest, you need to get yourself back in shape for it."

Alex looked at Bobby blankly. "I've done a lot more with a lot less gas in my tank and you know it," she said tiredly. Another use of jargon Cas wasn't entirely clear on. "Bobby, I'm fine and I need to get out of here and do something. Just give me a few minutes to get dressed." She shut the door and with it, closed off any further opportunities for either man to argue.

Castiel frowned at the shut door, perturbed. Bobby just chuckled in resignation, seeing Cas's reaction and empathizing. "Trust me, that girl wants somethin'… too bad if you're resistant to the idea." The man turned to walk back where he'd come from, spoke as he got further away. "We'll make sure and feed her before I send you off to where Crowley's got his bones laid up."

"But why would she want to do this?" Castiel asked, making Bobby stop and turn mid-step. Cas was confused and looked to Bobby for an answer. Shouldn't she want to rest and continue to recuperate? Shouldn't she want to stay here and not become involved in more danger?
Bobby didn't seem confused, in fact, it seemed to make sense to him. "Have you met her family?" He asked. "Gluttons for punishment," he stated factually, then became mildly pensive. "The only thing they know how to do is to keep goin'." He smiled tightly, wan. "I'll get some supplies rustled up for you two. I hear Scotland's nice this time of year."

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**About An Hour Later**

**Canisbay, Scotland**

A small white abbey was nestled on the top of a gentle green hill that overlooked a vast moor—on that plain a proud old stone castle sat beside a great lake, and beyond, great rolling verdant mountains marched in the distance. The sky was overcast and gray, the chilly air was thick with moisture. It was probably about six or seven in the evening—the light was soft, even, and waning. It was beautiful, it was serene and picturesque... and Alex wasn't paying a damn bit of attention to it. She was up to her waist in dirt, shovel in hand. She wore jeans, a flannel button up with a cargo jacket, and a foul expression.

Back in South Dakota, Bobby had given them a layout of his plan as he made Alex eat a can of beans, then they'd gotten some supplies together, including an international cell phone that Bobby was gonna use in this little plan of his. They would get the call in probably twenty minutes or so. She and Cas were just a few inches away from hitting the coffin where Crowley—or, Fergus McLeod—was resting in peace. Not for much longer, motherfucker. There weren't many demons she hated as much as him, because of how he'd strung her along and made her believe she was Lucifer kryptonite. She still hadn't told anyone that it was him who'd fed her that pack of lies. It didn't really matter, nothing they could do about it now.

Adjacent to the tiny church, the old graveyard was small and fenced in by a waist-height stacked stone wall. Weathered gray headstones scattered across the sloping hill. Behind Alex, shoveling dirt right with her, Cas was silent. They were back to back and the air between them was tense and oddly uncomfortable. She hadn't said much to Cas. Ever since realizing she'd thrown the penny he'd given her at him, she was too mortified and shaken up to say much—that plus everything else she knew she'd done made her want to withdraw. It was easier than facing the music. So she didn't say pretty much anything except short, clipped, necessary things. When she'd overheard Bobby talking about this little errand, she'd leapt at the chance to do something useful. Maybe to make up for the shit she'd put Cas and Bobby and her brothers through with the demon blood addiction, she didn't know. She just needed to do something meaningful. She stuck her shovel down into the earth and kicked down on the lip of the shovel, then grunted and sent dirt flying out onto the grass outside of the hole they were digging.

"Are you sure you don't need to stop?" Castiel asked.

"I'm fine," she said in growing irritation—this was like the tenth time he'd asked and his concern was grating her raw nerves. "Stop asking." And she was fine. Tired, yeah, physically not her best, but it felt good, somehow, to be punishing her body for what it had done to her the past week.

She heard Castiel sigh heavily, then heard him stop digging. "I wish you would let me do this my way."

"What, magically?" She asked sort of rudely. "No hard work involved?" She scoffed and sent another shovelful of dirt flying, not pausing for a second. "No. Sometimes breaking your own back's a good thing."

"By what logic would breaking your own back be a good thing?" He asked peevishly, and she heard that he was angry with her, or frustrated.
"It's just a saying, Cas," she retorted, sending another sloppy shovelful of dirt out of the grave. She sort of wanted to fight. She sort of wanted him to be angry at her and tell her off. His care and worry made no sense.

But he didn't fire back another angry question or retort like she wanted. There was a short wounded silence, which was worse, and she stopped digging, looked down at her booted feet, feeling remorse settle on her shoulders. "Why are you angry with me?" He asked her quietly.

She couldn't find a mean reply in herself at the soft question. Only endless guilt. "I'm not angry with you," she admitted. "I'm angry with me," she said, gritting her teeth and smashing the shovel down into dirt with renewed vigor, digging out a huge clump of dirt with passion, trying to busy herself. "The things I did, what you saw..." she stuck the shovel into earth again with more force than necessary.

There was a gentle, appealing hand on her shoulder. "You have nothing to be ashamed of," Cas told her, and Alex's bitter rage reared its ugly head again and she pulled away from his touch, too disturbed with herself to accept it.

"Like hell I don't," she snapped, still not turning to look at him. "Don't patronize me."

"Alex..." he appealed.

She whirled angrily. "Just help me dig this grave up and—" she saw his hand sweep over the ground beneath their feet and a pile of yellowed bones appeared at his feet. "Cas!" Alex all but shouted, throwing her shovel down petulantly.

He looked at her plainly. "It's about to rain." Thunder rumbled lazily, as if on command, and Cas turned to look over his shoulder. Behind him, she could literally see the rain coming across the moor, sweeping toward them.

"Oh," she said, deflating, not sure what the fuck her problem was.

Cas took the huge step out of the grave and extended his hand down to her to help her out. "We should go inside," he said, choosing, again, to overlook her behavior.

Alex looked up at him, reserved, then looked at his hand... and refused the help, pointedly got out of the grave herself without much grace. She walked ahead of him, not looking back. What the hell am I doing right now? She wondered, even as the rain suddenly swept over her. It was heavy, thick and loud rain, and she was soaked immediately. She turned and looked back at Cas, who was watching her through the haze of rain, his arms hanging at his sides. He hadn't moved from the graveside. His hair was wet now and stuck to his head, plastered against his forehead. He looked alone and sad and maybe, she realized, she was trying to push him away because she couldn't handle the thought of losing him again. It would hurt too much. It would kill her. You love him, why are you being an asshole? Because it was easier than what she really felt, and she was a coward who couldn't deal with the emotional pain or the dread that she was as unlovable as she felt deep down. She turned, unable to bear the sight of him looking at her like that. She continued toward the church, not running. There was no point; she was already utterly soaked. Had they really come all this way just to fall apart? Was she really going to be such a bitch and spurn his attempts to be tender and kind?

He shouldn't have chosen her, that was the thing she couldn't stop thinking. And now things were too fucked up to repair and it was her fault. Things changed, people changed, end of story. Maybe the universe was trying to tell them they didn't belong together anymore. She got to the side of the church and the door there opened without issue. Huh, they didn't lock their churches in this part of
the world? She glanced behind her—Cas was following, but at a hesitant distance. Her heart clenched in pain but she didn't wait for him. She went inside, trying to be alone, trying to distance herself from the pain, being an absolute child about her emotions. The old wood floor creaked underneath her work boots, rainwater dripped down from her clothes and hair.

The church was small and cozy and had a high, arched ceiling. She was in the back of the sanctuary, where hand-carved wooden pews lined either side of the aisle. A crucifix was centered above the humble wooden pulpit, and angel imagery decorated the wall on either side of the cross. Behind her, she heard soft footsteps and turned slightly, not able to get over her guilty, ashamed behavior or demeanor. Cas was dry—magically—and touched her shoulder wordlessly. Suddenly she was dry, too.

There was a long, uncertain pain. "Thanks," she said wearily. Her voice echoed softly and she couldn't meet his gaze. Just tell him. And say you're sorry. And find a way to fix this. She considered it for a minute, needed to do those things more than anything else… but the thought of being hurt again was too much. I can't.

She turned and wandered up the aisle, looking up at the angel imagery with resignation. Tried not to feel Cas's presence behind her. Really, this was ridiculous. She'd spent the entire year wishing he'd be there, now he was and she was acting like this? Alex didn't understand herself in the least and when she reached the front row of pews, she sank down to sit there quietly and pressed her hands in between her knees then bowed her head. It might have looked to anyone else like she was praying. But she was mourning.

About thirty seconds passed and then she heard him walk up the aisle. She shut her eyes as he came closer. Was he finally going to berate her and tell her he couldn't handle it anymore, that he didn't love her like he thought he did? The things she'd hallucinated… Cas, over and over, telling her how disappointed he was, how angry, how upset with her choices… replayed in her mind. It was hard to forget those things. And sometimes hard to figure out which things were real or not.

The pew creaked next to her under his weight as he sat beside her and her heart, beating fast, caught when his arm brushed against hers. He was staring ahead of himself into middle distance, deep in thought. A long moment passed and she thought they were just going to sit there in silence, and then without warning, he spoke, breaking the utter silence of the empty church. "I know you're angry because I was gone," he said softly, and his voice echoed like hers had. "I'm angry with myself, too." Their gazes met at the same moment—his harrowed and deeply grieved, hers guarded and unsure and growing increasingly pained. He looked down. "I know it's worthless, but… I did try to tell you. Twice. Where I was." She saw how his jaw clenched. "The first message I gave to Balthazar was… I told him to tell you of the war in Heaven and how I couldn't leave. That I couldn't come see you again until I defeated Raphael. That it wasn't safe, that I didn't know how long it would be. I told him to tell you how sorry I was that I was torn away. That I didn't choose or intend it. And I asked him… to ask you… to wait for me. If you would."

Her chest literally ached at the heaviness in his voice, the realization that he was mourning this mess just as much as she was. If only Balthazar had done what Cas had asked. Cas shook his head slowly, somberly. "I thought he died delivering that message. Instead I found out, just a few days ago, that he faked his own death and deserted me for his own selfish reasons. It's… what I believe you might call a tragedy, the way these things played out."

Her defenses were crumbling down at his honesty, at the anguish in his voice, at the feeling of him next to her. She stared down at the wooden floor tensely as Cas continued. "Six months passed and I didn't even know it," he told her, and he sounded utterly broken. "And when I did realize… I sent Rachel to you. I told her to tell you that time had passed for me without my even realizing. That I
still hadn't won the war. That I hadn't forgotten you." He paused even as her eyes shut. This was everything she needed to hear but it was so intense and hurt her on levels she didn't even understand. Cas's pause was heavy and his voice grew softer. "I was so afraid you would think that… that I had forgotten you," he told her, and when she opened her eyes, a huge tear dripped down onto the floor. She could feel Cas looking at her with worry and she tried to keep her features still and calm. After another pause, Cas continued, braving ahead. "When Rachel returned, she told me she saw you. That she delivered the message. That you told her you were waiting for me." He shook his head and looked down, anger passing over his features. "She lied about all of it."

"Why would she do that?" Alex asked, not understanding why some random angel would sabotage them like that. It hurt her, she felt disillusioned… like, what did I do to you, Rachel?

Cas seemed to be wrestling with the same question. "She thought she was doing what was right. At least, that was her claim." His voice darkened a little, but it was incredible sadness that prevailed in his tone. "I still don't know if I believe her."

It was such a cruel joke fate played on them… each had believed the wrong thing all year. It wasn't fair. Alex bowed her head, overwrought. "You're crying," Cas observed softly and sadly, shifting a little to face her a little more, leaning to her as if he was going to try and hold her. A huge silent tear ran down her cheek and she turned away, hiding behind the shield of her hair.

Cas seemed confused, as well as afraid to push her at all, and he retreated, studying her in concern. "This whole year, I… believed you knew where I was," he said, still trying to convince her or comfort her, she didn't know. She wiped her cheek, cursing her weak emotions. "I believed that you were with Dean. That you were waiting for me." It felt like an accusation and she was stung by it, even though she knew that he was trying to explain himself to her. She should have waited and known he would be back. Instead she'd acted like she had a death wish. He was gathering courage to ask something, and she dreaded what it would be. "How did it happen, Alex? The demon blood." Her eyes shot to his. "Please," he asked. "Tell me."

She owed him that much, didn't she? After he'd gone through the horrors of it with her? Alex took in a deep breath and stared off at the pulpit. For a long moment she said nothing. Just say it. Get it over with. Stop being a pussy. "It was an accident," she confessed softly, remembering. "I first drank it… because of Lucifer. A whole friggin' gallon." How awful that night had been, and how mortifying a mistake she'd made. It haunted her. "And then, a month or so into living alone, I started noticing I was being followed. Watched. It was demons." She didn't see, but Cas's expression wavered perceptibly. "And so I lured one, trapped him. Tried to get him to tell me why I was being followed. He got outta the trap, we fought, I beat his face until it was dripping blood. He got the upper hand for a minute. It just… dripped down into my mouth. I can't tell you how strong that one little drop made me feel." She swallowed deeply, looked down, working her hands anxiously together. "I tried not to. But the demons kept coming. And…" she repeated herself, out of any other way to say it: "I tried not to. But it did save my life a couple times. Made me strong enough to take down enemies I couldn't take otherwise." She scoffed at herself, cynical and self-deprecating. "And the weird thing is, the demons, I still don't know why they were tracking me. I killed so many of them, like… I dunno, maybe twenty? Thirty?" She let out a heavy breath and put her forehead into her hand. "God."

Cas was silent, digesting, seeming to be off in his own world of guilt. "I've tried to keep you safe," he said, and he sounded numb, almost. "And I destroyed you in the process."

Alex looked at him with an intense frown. "I'm not destroyed," she said immediately, emphatically. She wavered. "Don't say I'm destroyed." She stood up, trying to escape this conversation and the knowledge that Cas thought she was beyond repair, too. Cas stood too, behind her, and gently
touched either of her arms, said her name... and it was too much. She yanked away and turned to
look at him through pained features. "No—Cas. Stop." He seemed startled at her reaction, then hurt
by it. "What are we doing?" She asked him, and she really did want to know. All the sadness she
carried was spilling out of her to the tune of hopelessness. "This is a mess. We can't do this," she
said, shaking her head and struggling against herself. "I'm bad for you, case in point, this whole last
week." She smashed her lips together for a second, blinking away stinging eyes. She was trying so
hard to be brave, to do the right thing. To be grown up about this, but she was confused as hell and
didn't even know what was going on, not really. Only that she thought they were screwed, over,
and done. "When you first kissed me, all that time ago. You warned me that we shouldn't. You
were right. The only thing here for us is pain."

Castiel looked thunderstruck. "...How can you say that?" He asked, voice soft in disbelief, and if
her heart hadn't been broken before, it was now. It was easy to see how blindsided Cas was by her
confusion and her urges to pull away and run. So that's why she was so startled when he appealed
to her with an almost uncharacteristic surge of conviction. "You once told me that we were not a
mistake," he said, stepping closer, taking her gently by either arm to emphasize his meaning—his
expression pleaded with her to still feel that way. "Do you remember that?"

She looked up into his eyes, and her throat choked her with emotion as memories consumed her.
"Yes," she replied, barely a whisper. "I remember."

Utterly devastated, Cas searched her gaze. "Then why do you seem to believe the opposite now?"

A question she had no clue how to answer. "It's... complicated," she said, then shook her head,
threw her hands up uselessly, wishing someone could help her understand what was going on. "I
don't know."

"Is this about... what happened to you?" He asked, trying so hard to understand. His question filled
her instantly with fear and regret, shame, anxiety and memories of what Glen had done. "I know
that you feel guilty, that you think it's your fault," he said, trying to be careful, but also not able to
keep himself from addressing it—she knew half of her crazed ranting in the panic room had been
Glen-centric. "It wasn't your fault, how could it have been?" He asked her, clearly pained at the
thought that she felt that way and simultaneously trying to understand and speak to her jumbled
feelings on the matter. "I don't hold it against you—how could I?" he asked softly and intensely.

Her eyes were gazing at the floor. Her voice was soft, low, trembling. "You don't know what
happened."

"Then tell me," he asked, desperate and gentle and trying to understand.

And Alex knew that if she didn't tell him, if she kept lugging around this heavy weight on her own,
it would kill her. She should tell this to Cas. Even though she wanted to keep it to herself and keep
beating herself up over it, if she was gonna tell anyone about what happened... it wouldn't be Dean.
It wouldn't be Bobby. It wouldn't be Sam. It would be Cas. So she dug deep for strength, and told
him everything. But it wasn't easy. "Glen was... I thought he was an okay guy. He seemed... nice
enough." Long pause to bite the insides of her mouth. This was going to be harder than she thought.
Cas looked like he was filled with impossible dread. But Alex kept going. "I knew him and his
sister a few years back when we were teenagers. Ran into them a few months into this past year.
Started hunting with them. He, uh, he flirted with me a lot, I knew he liked me. But, he liked all
girls, so... I dunno. But he kept saying I was different. Made me think..." she trailed off, feeling
insanely stupid. Her cheeks were burning and she looked down at her feet. She felt sick, telling Cas
this. "He... he kissed me once. I thought you were gone and I... started thinking... I dunno. That I
needed to move on." Her voice broke in shame. "I didn't even like him that much," she glanced up
at Cas, waiting to see utter shock and repulsion on his face. But all she saw was heartbroken sadness.

This was the hardest part and she didn't know if she could muddle through. But she tried. "And… what, last week? He and I were alone and… he started… fixing me up cuz I got hurt and…" she struggled to keep speaking, "touching me and… I let it happen." That was the source of her greatest shame, right there. She remembered how he'd kissed her stomach and touched her sides and followed her to the window and kissed her neck and felt her up. And how it had felt good. That was the worst part of all to her. That she could have liked it. Especially now, knowing that Glen was nothing more than a psychopathic rapist. "I wanted it on some level," Alex said, still not able to look Castiel in the eye. "And he wasn't you. And I thought about how he wasn't you, like, and it got to be too much and I couldn't go through with it. And I changed my mind and said no." She grew quiet, chilled. "And he wouldn't stop."

She raised her eyes to look at Cas, who was utterly horrified: he touched her arm, trying to comfort her or support her, maybe show her that he was there. He seemed afraid to hear more. Alex looked down, ashamed, but soldiered through, stating the facts. Anything to get this over with. "I started to fight back when he… wouldn't let me go. He hit me in the head, hard, to where I couldn't see straight. Threw me down onto the bed, pinned me there." She felt oddly disconnected from those horrible memories as she spoke them aloud. Like those things had happened to some other poor, stupid girl. "I was on my stomach and my head was spinning but I saw car keys, grabbed them... used them as a weapon…" she came out of her semi-trance. "I don't even know how, Cas, but… somehow, I got away before he could…" She couldn't bring herself to say 'rape me.'

Still horrified, Cas looked at her for a long moment, trying to decide something. "So he didn't…" he trailed off, seemingly unable to say the words either.

She shook her head, voice a mere whisper as she ran a hand up and down one of her arms. "No."

"I should never have left you," Cas said, deeply upset. "Even for a second."

Yeah, well… you did. She didn't say that out loud. Instead she wrapped her arms around her own torso and shrugged. "I just… he fooled me, so easily. He lied to my face that whole time and I believed it. I… thought I had better instincts." That wasn't the worst part, or the thing that bothered her the most. And Cas needed to know. "I hate myself for… for ever even considering him. At all, even once." She glanced looking at him, trying really hard to show him, somehow, that she regretted ever thinking what she had about Cas not coming back. That she saw how wrong she'd been. That this wasn't his fault. "I just wanted to feel something. Anything. I…” missed you so much. "I was alone. And I didn't know where you'd gone."

Pain filled his eyes and he seemed completely at a loss. Outside, the rain was letting up.

"I had a lot of time to think the past year," Alex said, and began to walk toward one of the tall, narrow windows slowly. "But I didn't wanna think." She got to the window and stared out of it without seeing much. "Most days, I believed you were dead, Cas." She looked back over her shoulder to where he stood. It was hard to tell him this, because it was utter honesty, and left her naked emotionally. "But the days I believed you were still alive were worse… cuz I thought if you were alive and not here… I thought it meant…” her voice almost gave out. "That you didn't want this anymore."

He didn't even hesitate. "I will always want this," he told her, and came to her without waiting. His words touched her deeply and she felt herself outwardly trying to stifle how much it meant to hear him say that. "Why won't you believe me?" He asked, taking her expression the wrong way. "You believed me once."
"I should have waited for you," was all she could say, wishing she could just hug him and ask him to make everything all right again. "I should have believed you were coming back."

"You had no reason to believe I was." He seemed defeated. "I am so sorry, Alex." He sounded as regretful and sorry as she did and the space between them, even though only a couple feet, seemed endless, infinite, and vast. Impossible to cross.

In Alex's pocket, the phone Bobby had sent with them rang shrilly, loudly, startling her completely. For a second, she didn't even remember why they were there or why there was an unfamiliar phone there in her pocket. When she did, Alex pulled it out and answered, short on choices and remembering she wasn't here in Scotland for kicks. "Hey Bobby," she answered gruffly, eyes watching the floor, darting between her feet and Cas's.

"Showtime," he told her, his voice a little faint on the other end of the line. "Hang on and wait for your cue, all right?"

Alex glanced at Cas. "Yeah." She nodded toward the way out of the church and spoke to him, not Bobby. "We should probably go back out there," she told him, having to be businesslike. Personal matters would have to wait. "It stopped raining," Cas's features distorted just slightly into a frown, but he nodded his resigned understanding and they left the church, headed back to the damp graveyard. Alex kept the phone to her ear. She could hear Bobby chanting in Latin... a familiar summoning ritual. She glanced at Cas, who, once they reached the grave again, looked grim and off in his own thoughts, distracted. Tense. Alex had to turn away partially because Bobby was counting on her. She had to focus on this moment and leave her emotional crap at the door for the time being. Head in the game. A hunter's no use to anyone distracted, Dean always said.

"Well, you look like hammered crap," Bobby's voice said in her ear. But he wasn't speaking to her.

Crowley's familiar voice sounded on the other end of the line. "And you're a vision as always."

There was a pause. "Really, Bobby, a devil's trap? Don't we both know how this game ends?"

"Shuddup. I want—"

Crowley cut him off. "Lemme stop you right there. In fact I'll do the shorthand for you." He began to mock Bobby's voice and accent, which was pretty goofy sounding. "'I want my soul back, idjit!' 'Fraid not. 'But I'm surly and I got a beard. Gimme! Blah, blah, blah. Homespun cornpone insult, witty retort from yours truly. The bottom line is, you get bubkes." Alex could hear Crowley smirking. "Are we done?"

"Just getting started," Bobby replied, steady, his card up his sleeve. "I know it all now. Fergus. You may be king of the dirt bags here but, in life, you were nothing but a two-bit tailor who sold his soul in exchange for an extra three inches below the belt."

"Just trying to hit double digits," Crowley purred. "So, you got a glimpse behind the curtain. And?"

"And... now I know where you're planted," Bobby said. "Say hello to my little friend."

Alex heard the phone being picked up. This was her cue. "Crowley," she greeted in a voice dripping with faux enthusiasm, then added in for effect, "Darling."

Cas was watching with folded arms and a pensive expression, leaned against a nearby headstone.

"Ah," Crowley said, sounding a little bit caught off guard. "My favorite Winchester girl. It's... been a long time. We should get together."
Enjoying the uncertainty in Crowley's voice Alex put on the drama. This was one thing she had gotten good at. Channeling her older brother and putting on overly confident airs even when she was a total mess inside. "Huh, well, I dunno. Maybe when I get back."

"Back?" Crowley asked.

"Yeah... I got bit by the travel bug and I'm about, mm, four thousand miles away right now... standing here in this cute little place called Canisbay. It's in Scotland. You ever been?" The other end of the line was silent and she chuckled, imagining his dumbstruck expression. "I'm trying to picture you in one of those little plaid skirts."

"They're called kilts, darling," Crowley said with growing discomfort, even though he tried to sidestep it with stupid comments. "I had very athletic calves. So what, exactly, are you doing in my neck of the woods, hm?"

"Looking for buried treasure," Alex replied casually. "Think I found some, too. The bones of one Fergus McLeod..."

The phone made a noise like it had shifted away from Crowley's mouth—he was speaking to Bobby now. "This is ridiculous. The whole burning bones thing—it's a myth."

"We could test that theory," Alex offered slyly. Cas again glanced at her, their eyes met for a second. He seemed to dislike this entire thing.

"I know an employee of yours who would disagree," Bobby put in on the other end.

There was another pause and it was pretty clear how trapped Crowley was feeling. "...Ah. That's where she got to."

"You demons," Bobby's said darkly. "You think you're something special. But you're just spirits. Twisted, perverted, evil spirits. But, end of the day, you're nothing but ghosts with an ego. We torch your bones, you go up in flames."

"Hey Crowley, got a light?" Alex asked, feeling a little power-high and fingering the matchbook in her jacket pocket. "I do."

On the other end of the line, Bobby gave his last chance. "Your bones for my soul. Going once... going twice."

There was a loud thud, then Alex could hear Crowley say "Bollocks," faintly. Had he thrown the phone down?

There was a long pause. "You can go ahead and leave in the part about my legs," Bobby said, and then a few seconds later, "pleasure doing business with you." Had it worked? Was it really that easy?

Crowley sounded absolutely butt-hurt. "Now if you don't mind?"

A couple more beats passed, then there was swishing at the other end of the line, and Bobby's voice was loud in Alex's ear. "He made good on my end. You two watch yourselves, you're about to have company."

"Yeah." She hung up, even as Castiel turned around, hearing a twig snapping. Behind them, Crowley approached, in hand, a big satchel. His expression was foul. The demon paused, seeing Cas, as if he were startled. "What are you doing here, harpsichord?" He asked, seeming a shade
angrier. Cas's stony face darkened even as Crowley looked at Alex with utter contempt. "The nerve of you, the both of you."

The demon was clearly shaken up, and Alex didn't have to put on a front—she enjoyed it thoroughly, felt the upper hand and taunted him with it. "What, you're the only one who gets to bone others, Crowley?" She asked. Pun intended. Crowley looked thoroughly unamused, like her little joke had defeated his hope in the human race.

"Speaking of bones," he said flatly, looking at the space between Cas and Alex where his bones had been placed. He smiled tightly, clearly wanting to stab either one or both of them in the face. "I believe those are mine." He made to move forward—and suddenly found himself with an angel blade at his neck.

"Not so fast, dickwad," Alex hissed. Crowley and Castiel alike were taken aback at how fast she'd moved—she'd whipped the blade out and had a hand closed like a vice at the back of his neck—the point of the blade pressed softly into the base of Crowley's neck, and he swallowed, wide-eyed. As laid back and controlled as she'd been a few minutes ago, she was furious and close to killing him right then and there. "After what you pulled last year, the shit you started… I don't have many reasons to let you live, do I?" She let a little derisive laugh out before growing fatally serious. "In fact… go ahead and name one."

Cas's hand was on her shoulder to stop her. "Alex—a deal is a deal," he said. Crowley looked at Cas and his expression was unreadable but foul. Cas's voice lowered. "Even when made with this abomination."

Angry that he had a point, Alex considered for a couple more seconds. He gave Bobby his soul, this jackass demon was supposed to get his bones. But after killing so many demons the past year, what was one more? Especially Crowley, the one she was passing off blame to for everything that happened with Lucifer? But Cas was right, and she hated it, but she relented. She pulled the blade away angrily and put it back into her jacket. Crowley plastered a wiseass smile on his face, having the audacity to pull his head back and look down his nose at her cooly. "You mad at me love, or do you just want a taste?" He asked softly, his voice despicable, gruff velvet, his words striking a nerve in her, making her lose her edge. Crowley saw it too, smiled even wider. "I must look so delicious to you right now. Well, pull up a chair and pass the pepper, it's dinner time," he goaded, then looked at her with thinly-veiled disdain. "You're just like your waste-of-space moose brother, aren't you? Nothing but a junkie."

Cas stepped forward, demanding Crowley's attention and simultaneously protecting Alex from Crowley's harsh glare. "Don't speak to her that way," he growled, and Alex didn't see the meaningful look that the two of them exchanged—didn't see how, clearly, there was more going on between them than she knew. It was like they were silently challenging each other.

Crowley gave in, let a sarcastic little comment fly. "Oh how sweet. Standing up for your little whore." The tree Crowley was standing beside was almost shattered in half when Cas slammed the demon into it brutally. Shocked, Crowley was blinking rapidly. "Oy, watch the suit, mate!" He exclaimed, aghast.

Cas held him by the front of his jacket and seethed. "I'm warning you Crowley," he spat.

Something about the angel's words seemed to inspire warning in the demon's expression. "Oh are you?" Crowley asked softly, eyebrows raised tauntingly. "What was it you were saying a minute ago about a deal being a deal?" He looked at Cas with pointed meaning. "Now do me a favor and sod off, Columbo." Cas backed off, but his expression was dark and stormy. He glanced at Alex, who was beside him and already looking at him, slightly worried.
Crowley straightened his jacket, disgruntled. "This entire thing's left me in a foul mood, I'll have you know." He brushed past the angel and went to his bones, which were piled beside the grave now—had Cas done that? Alex didn't know, but he must have. The demon crouched over them and inspected them. "Interesting, isn't it," he said coolly. "I'm not the one with with skeletons in the closet, now am I?" he asked, skull in hand as he turned his head to give them a dark and knowing look. "And to think I've been so nice and kept your little secret for you this whole time. The one about what you two did about, oh, a year ago, was it?" His sour expression softened a little when Cas and Alex glanced at each other in mild worry and confusion. Crowley stuffed his bones down into the satchel, and he was the one in control again, and enjoying it completely. "I've the right mind to go blab to your oldest brother just to spite you after this lovely little reach around, Alex dear." He rose, satchel in hand, gave them a little smile. "What do you think he'd say, hm, Cas? One can only imagine."

Neither of them replied to the demon, who just smiled facetiously. "Now, if you'll excuse me." He turned as if to walk away, then changed his mind, raised a finger, as if he were thinking. "Ah, and… next time you cross me like this—either of you—there'll be hell to pay. Literally." His dark features were chillingly serious.

"Keep an eye on those bones, Crowley," Alex retorted, keeping up the *I'm-the-boss* attitude for show, to try and make it seem like he didn't worry or intimidate her in the least. He did both, but he didn't need to know that. "Would be a shame if you misplaced them."

Crowley just narrowed his eyes and smiled back, every bit as false as she was. "A crying shame," he said snidely. "Cheers." And he disappeared.

The graveyard was silent, and so were Cas and Alex for a long moment. "How does he *always* know *everything*?" Alex asked, staring at the spot where Crowley had been. She was extremely shocked and uncomfortable and wondering if Crowley meant what she thought he did. But how could he know *that*?

Cas seemed similarly troubled and was shaking his head. "I'm not sure." He paused heavily, meeting her faltering gaze with a hesitant look in his eyes. "Perhaps… perhaps we should tell Dean before Crowley does."

Alex shook her head adamantly, almost dying from fear at the thought of that. "No. No." She looked around unseeingingly at the Scottish landscape surrounding them. "Let's just go. Back to Bobby's, okay?" She turned and began to gather their things. "We're done here."

She grabbed the two shovels, the bag of weapons she hadn't needed and she straightened then nodded tensely, giving the darkening Scottish landscape one last look. She felt Cas touch her arm again, and with a jolt they were at Bobby's again, in the basement. That was always so strange, just suddenly being one place then another. She felt Cas looking at her and tried not to think about it. Tried to avoid him, ignore him. She went to Bobby's tool rack and hung the shovels back up where they'd been, her back to Castiel.

He followed her. "Why are you acting this way?" He asked her slowly, and the worry in his voice was utterly decimating. "I don't understand… I thought…" he trailed off and she turned back around to look at him.

"You thought what?" she asked, guarded. Not hostile, not open, not anything.

He seemed vastly confused and approached her slowly. "Alex, I—" he stopped walking and his gaze went upward, he seemed to be listening to something. She followed his gaze with her eyes, saw nothing but dark ceiling "I'm... being summoned," he said heavily, looked back at her. "It
seems that I need to go."

Her face was blank. "Oh," she said. It seemed like the air in the room had lessened. She nodded and looked downward quietly, attempting to save face for the moment. From the second he'd shown back up she'd been afraid of this moment, known it was coming... and she should have been ready for it. But... she wasn't. She could have reacted one of two ways: the first was to show him how deeply his announcement upset her; kiss him, hug him, cry about how much she already missed him. The second was to act like everything was fine and avoid the heartache. Selfish and scared, she chose option two. The thought of more heartbreak was too much, the thought of losing him again or maybe not seeing him again for another year was terrifying.

Cas was wearing his emotions on his sleeves, unlike Alex: It was obvious he didn't want to go and that the thought of leaving her again was emotionally torturous to him... and that made her indifferent exterior even harder to maintain. Alex couldn't look at him, couldn't take in how sad he was. "I... don't know how long I'll be gone," he told her. "Or when I can come back." He paused, softened, stepped a little closer, seeking either to comfort or be comforted, she didn't know. "I truly wish..."

Alex shook her head, pretended everything was okay, spurning his advance, not letting him near her. "It's fine," she said in a forced tone, trying to be unaffected, trying to be fine. "I'll call you if I need you." She made herself look him in the eye and give a tight little smile.

Castiel didn't smile back. Instead, he looked sadder. Resigned and deflated and at a loss. "I... suppose this is goodbye, then," he said. This was awful, and it was beginning to dawn on Alex how awful. She wasn't the only one who had gone through shit this year, and maybe she should try and remember that—but it was too late now. Cas looked down, his features scrunched in anxiousness, his dark eyebrows working toward each other rigidly. "Do you still..." he paused, looked like maybe he wasn't going to finish his question, like maybe he was ashamed of what it was. His voice softened, he looked up at her. "Do you still love me?"

His question was like a brick wall, the look on his face was utter defeat and Alex couldn't breathe for the smallest moment. Oh god. All day she'd been pushing him away and trying to hurt him, fight with him; all week long she'd told him she hated him then thrown what he'd given her in his face—of course he'd doubt she loved him—but hearing him ask it made something snap inside, caused all the things she'd been holding deep within to surge to the surface.

"Yes," she told him with suddenly urgency, realizing her mistake and panicking, trying to reassure him, forgetting her own selfish reservations and stupid need to be in control. "Yes I still love you, how would I ever stop?" She'd been so inside her head she hadn't even thought about how it would seem to him, not really—even more ashamed of herself and how shortsighted she was, how egotistical, she shut her eyes hard. It crashed over her anew, how she'd been making dumb choice after dumb choice and hadn't even given his feelings the thought they deserved. "I'm sorry, I just—what I put you through this week, I'm too embarrassed to even face myself let alone you," she confessed wretchedly.

She heard Cas step closer and she opened her eyes. He seemed so relieved but timid, wanting to reach out to her but hesitating. She knew it was because of Glen, and because of how Alex had been rejecting Cas's touches. But he still chanced it, gently letting his hand rest against her hair at the side of her head. The touch was enough to break her completely. "Don't be embarrassed," he said, and his voice was thick with emotion and comfort. "I love you."

His confession set her to tears. She leaned into his hand and accepted the affection because she needed it so badly, because she missed him so much, and she couldn't run away from this any
more. Pressing her hand over his, she squeezed her eyes shut tightly—and he chanced proximity, came a little closer even as she stepped toward him too, let her forehead drop to rest against the front of his shoulder. "I'm scared," she admitted in a whisper against his trench coat. "So fucking scared."

He drew back just a little, enough to look her in the eyes, and he was so close she could feel his warm breaths hitting against her lips. "Don't be afraid," he told her solemnly, softly, his thumb gently stroking against the hair beside her ear as he held her gaze soulfully. Her heart jumped in response to the touch and the depth in his eyes. His other hand came to cover hers, which was laying against his lapel. Without blinking or looking away, he told her in an soft, certain, steadfast voice: "I will always come back to you. I will always find you." The devotion and love in his voice overwhelmed her completely, she could barely fathom that those things were meant for her.

Overwhelmed with emotions and his closeness, the love in his eyes, she tilted her chin up toward him, forgetting everything but the way everything in her wanted to reach out for him. His eyes searched hers questioningly as his eyebrows knit together anxiously. His eyes dropped to her lips as their noses brushed—his breathing hitched and his fingers slipped into her hair but he was hesitating and nervous, maybe afraid to overstep his bounds. So she closed the distance, showed him it was all right with her if it was all right with him… she brushed her lips against his just barely—and when she invited the kiss, he accepted, moving forward. A soft muffled sound of relief came from the base of Alex's throat as their lips pressed together—it was the sweetest sensation in all of creation—the gentle, tender press of his warm mouth to hers, the unspoken sentiments conveyed through the simple touch. Her hands went to either side of his face—Cas made the quietest little sound of surprise and anxiety—her necklace threaded through her fingers as she almost sobbed at the gentle, careful, heartfelt way he kissed her, held her. His nose pressed into her cheek, his hand cradled the back of her head and it was just like she remembered… only better. She breathed him in, melting into his arms. For a minute, all of her doubts and fears seemed stupid and silly, and instead of thinking about all the things they were up against, she was remembering how strong they were together. How right this was… how wrong she was to have ever believed they shouldn't be together. He was where she belonged, and she remembered now. She remembered. Their foreheads rested against the other when the kiss ended and her eyes stayed closed. She felt him shift slightly and he pressed a lingering kiss to her cheek. Her mouth turned upwards in a helpless little smile.

Alex was herself again, and she knew it. She pulled away a little bit to look at him. His eyes went upward again, and she knew he was being called, but was delaying departure for her sake. "How long will this war last?" She asked. Balthazar had said it could go on forever, essentially. And she got that the war was to prevent the apocalypse from restarting, she understood that Cas was fighting for the right side, but the thought of it never ending scared her.

Cas's attention turned back to her and he shook his head, troubled. "Not much longer… but I don't know. Months? A year? It's... difficult to say. Raphael will fall. I'll make sure of it."
Taking in a deep breath, Alex nodded, accepting this reality. "All right," she said, giving him a soft, genuine, torn smile as she stood a little taller, trying to be brave. This was hard and bittersweet and she was still scared of the unknown future, but she trusted him. Loved him. Believed he could do what he said: win this war and come back to her afterward. And now it was time to put aside her kid stuff and stop being so self-centered. She had to start thinking about him and his needs, too. "I'll be here when it's over," she told him, which is what she knew he needed to hear. "I'll be waiting."

His eyes softened and cleared. "I hope not for long," he said quietly, and took one of her hands in his, squeezing gently, clearly touched and encouraged by her support and pledge to wait. She hoped the same thing—that he wouldn't be gone long—and didn't want him to go at all... but she saw how he kept looking upward with an increasingly worried expression. "I have to go," he told her regretfully, more urgent this time.

She nodded. There seemed to be a million things she wanted to say to him, ask him… but there wasn't time. So she settled for: "Be careful up there, okay?"

He met her gaze, his hand still holding hers. He didn't want to go either, and she could see it plainly. "Call me," he told her in utmost seriousness, his urgency making him speak in something close to desperation. "If you need me in the least, call me. I'll come." He looked upward again, as if bees were circling his head—and Alex knew the calls must be getting more pressing.

"Go, Cas," she urged gently, knowing she couldn't hold onto him right now.

He lowered his head and looked downward, seeming to realize he really did have to go now. Her hand slipped from his as he stepped back, wordless, looking at her with a sad expression. "Goodbye, Alex," he said, seeming to find the words difficult.

That sounded so final. Alex replied with something a little less dire, a sad smile on her face. "See you later, Cas."

His expression softened and he echoed her, seeming to understand. "...See you later." He seemed to like the way that sounded better. And then with the soft sound of wings in flight… he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

If you're wondering about when Cas gave Alex that penny, it hasn't been shown yet, only mentioned. The actual scene where this happens will be shown in a flashback soon.

P.S. I am so sorry this chapter is so stupid long. Calex angst takes up a lot of words apparently.
"I'm not afraid of werewolves or vampires or haunted hotels, I'm afraid of what real human beings do to other real human beings."

- Walter Jon Williams

Answering the call with no enthusiasm, only dark foreboding, Castiel left Heaven's battlefields and descended to earth. There he found himself in a dim warehouse littered with trash. No one seemed to be here, and the angel was confused. Then, behind him, he heard the familiar voice: "Hello, Cas old buddy."

Castiel turned. He was never happy to see this demon, but he greeted him lowly nonetheless. "Crowley." Cas glanced around sharply. Why were they meeting on earth this time instead of Hell? Cas narrowed his eyes at Crowley. "What is this place?"

The King of Hell chuckled, sauntered over, looking up and around the dilapidated place fondly. "Home sweet home. Our new business headquarters, if you will."

Not in the mood for humor, Castiel just glared at his business partner, angry that the demon could even be called that. "What do you want."

"What do I want?" Crowley asked, feigning innocence. "I just wanted to remind you of our little arrangement."

Increasingly irritated, Castiel's face remained hard and unfriendly. "I haven't forgotten. I don't require a reminder from you."

"That so?" The demon asked, by all appearances calm and conversational. "Well. I'd like to know, what, exactly, were you thinking," Crowley said, voice low and smooth… then suddenly he flew into a fit of absolute, loud rage: "When you took Alex Winchester to my sodding homeland and helped her dig up my bloody bones!?" His shout echoed in the huge space.

Growing angry at the demon's audacity and attitude—he wasn't Cas's superior, and when he spoke as if he was, Castiel felt ancient fury boiling in his veins. "I was thinking that I was protecting your bones," he replied hostilely. "I made certain they weren't burned, didn't I?"

Face twisted into an ugly, sarcastic expression, Crowley sneered. "Appreciate it. Truly." He leaned closer and his voice took on a soft, warning tone. "Let me be blunt with you, trench coat. You can't be flitting down to earth and traipsing about with the missus right now; you can't be going 'round for a visit whenever the mood strikes. The more time you spend around littlest Winchester, the more you risk her finding out about the dirty details of our little partnership. And what's more, you can't be making house calls on Dean and Sam, either." Crowley paused, pacing a slow circle around Cas, who was frowning deeply, wondering why Crowley would say this. The demon explained, as if he'd anticipated Cas's confusion: "The Winchesters start asking questions… those questions will require answers. And if they find out about what you and I are doing with Purgatory, mate…" he came to a stop in front of Cas again, expression serious. "They won't stand for it. Mark my words."

Cas hesitated, considering Crowley's statement. He knew it was in what the humans called the moral gray area, what he was doing—partnering with the demon Crowley to find and then open Purgatory, use the souls therein to defeat Raphael… it was a means to an end. Preferable means to an end? No, but it was the only way Castiel knew to stop the apocalypse from restarting. "Alex is
reasonable," Cas said slowly, still in deep thought, "so are her brothers. If I explained it to them—"

"Do you hear yourself mate?" Crowley asked, cutting him off. "These are the Winchesters. Dean, A.K.A. Captain America, Mr. Morality… he hates my kind. Can't say his sister's much fonder of black eyed bastards…" he smiled darkly, "though she did develop a taste for us. Sam's the only one who was in love with one though. That's besides the point. They find out you're working with me, they find out about our little arrangement… cracking open Purgatory… there'll be hell to pay."
Crowley paused, leaned in, eyes narrowed. "Y'see, everyone else made the mistake of underestimating those little plaid-wearing fleabags. Only reason I'm still kicking? I haven't made that mistake." He stood back, and Cas knew he was right—that Dean, especially, would not stand for what Castiel was doing in the dark, in secret. As if reading the angel's mind, Crowley concluded with, "They simply can't find out. It has to stay a secret."

Cas looked at him sharply, his jaw clenching tightly. He felt cornered and, as a result, furious. "I tire of secrets."

"Cry me a river," Crowley commented, disinterested, then a sly smile grew on his face. "You and I both know you've gotten good at keeping them, haven't you?"

Cas said nothing for a long moment. He knew what Crowley was talking about and it both angered him and struck a chord of fear deep down. "How do you know about that?" he asked, attempting to remain stone-faced.

Crowley shrugged mildly, put his hands into his pockets. Seemed pleased with himself. "I have my sources."

Cas let his glare say things he didn't speak aloud for a long moment. Then, done with the encounter and angry at how true everything Crowley had said was, Cas turned to go. "We're done here."

Crowley's soft, pleased chuckle behind him paused him momentarily. "Why do you seem so surprised that this is a torrid little thing you and I've got going, hm? You should have known." Cas turned a little to look at Crowley with hard eyes. The demon just waggled his eyebrows up knowingly. "That's just what you get when you partner with the King of Hell, isn't it?"

Yes. He supposed it was. Wordlessly, Castiel left that place, righteous anger and a feeling of self-loathing coursing in his veins. What exactly was he doing? The right thing, he thought. He hoped. But the notion of purposefully keeping the truth from Alex made him feel wrong. He didn't want to have to lie to her, but Crowley was right. The more time Castiel spent with her, the more the risk of her finding out what he was doing. The more he saw her, the more he would have to lie to her to protect himself to ensure that the plan to open Purgatory wouldn't be derailed.

It felt wrong, wronger than wrong. Both to be away from her (how long had it been, since he'd had to leave her there at Bobby's after Scotland? He didn't even know, time escaped his grasp at the moment)… but however long it had been felt too long. If it were up to Castiel, he never would leave her again. But the war. His duties. The things that chained him to Heaven. As always, those things awaited.

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**Limestone, Illinois**

It was late morning on a pretty day and Dean leaned back against the side of the Impala casually, his phone to his ear and an uncharacteristically relaxed smile on his face. "Yeah and hey—uh, I'm actually not far from you guys right now," he told her. "I'm maybe three hours out, tops."
"Yeah?" Lisa sounded hopeful on the other end of the line. "So, ya think...?"

"Well, there's some stuff I gotta do here first..." he said slowly, sort of playful.

"Of course," she said, sounding hopeful, and Dean's grin grew.

"But I was thinkin' that, uh, I'll wrap up here, and, y'know, make sure I'm not followed..." he wet his lips, smile widening. "I'll have to take side streets, and I'd have to come at night—"

"Will you just shut up and get your ass home?" she interrupted then laughed, and he did too. "I can't wait to see you," she said softly. "This phone thing's getting old."

"Yeah, it is," he agreed. It had been forever since he'd seen her face.

"Well, call us when you're close," she said. "And be careful."

"Course. Bye, Lees." He hung up, smiling to himself helplessly as he thought about her.

"You look excited about something," came a familiar female voice. Dean turned slightly to see his sister walking up, two gas station coffees in hand. She held one out to him and Dean's smile fell a little. "So how's Lisa?" she asked knowingly, not seeming to notice how he deflated a little. He deflated because he felt abruptly guilty about allowing himself some happiness, no matter how small.

It had been two days since Alex had met back up with him and Sam. And she was acting weird as hell. She was acting... fine. She'd brushed off all his hedging questions about the panic room, the demon blood, the... other thing. Instead of being freaked out and upset and withdrawn like he'd expected her to be, she was instead eager to tackle the job they were on right now... which mystified him.

It made no sense to him that she'd just have bounced back to herself so fast. And really, the way she was acting wasn't entirely herself, or at least not the Alex he remembered. She seemed so... businesslike and diffident. Cracking jokes and in seemingly good spirits, not carrying that distant look of tortured thought and deep pensiveness that she always had before. But a couple times he'd caught her looking off into the distance sort of tensely when she thought no one was looking and he'd seen the telltale way she chewed the inside of her mouth and bit her thumbnail—nervous tics she'd displayed all through childhood and adolescence. Things she did when something was bothering her—and things had always bothered her—she was a textbook over-analyzer, and a lot more emotionally sensitive than she let on. But the times the past two days when she caught Dean studying her somber moments, Alex was back to projecting like she was fine, adjusted, cool.

But Dean was pretty damn sure she was none of those things. He'd actually tried to call Cas yesterday to get the angel's take on what had happened in the panic room, but the angel wasn't answering for who know's what reason. Bobby had told Dean over the phone that the panic room had been rough on Alex but Cas had been true to his word and stayed with her the entire time. It was weird... Dean was both intensely thankful for that and completely appalled at himself for leaving Alex to detox alone, and with of all people, Cas. If he were honest with himself... it was one of the more cowardly things he'd ever done, ditching her like that. But he hadn't been able to handle the thought of seeing her going through what he'd watched Sam go through with the demon blood. So he'd run away.

"Dean? Did you hear me?" She asked, looking at him with a anyone home? sort of questioning look on her face.
Right, she'd asked about Lisa. Dean tried to look less emotionally messed up than he felt. "Oh yeah, uh, she's good, she's…" he'd promised to visit Lisa, and now he realized what do I do about Alex? Ditch again? "I was thinking of going for a quick visit, nothing long. See her and Ben after we finish this job." He paused, worried that she'd get that you're leaving? look he dreaded. "If, you know, if you're okay with that."

She looked at him questioningly. "Why wouldn't I be?" She asked, from all appearances and tone, perfectly fine with the idea, disinterested, even. Dean stared, not believing it, not really. She had to be secretly mad at him for ditching her like he had, right? He still felt bad about it, why wouldn't she?

"I, I dunno…" he wracked his brain for the most delicate way to put it. "We just got teamed back up yesterday, Sam's kinda a weirdo lately… you… had things to deal with..." he trailed off, not really wanting to get more specific, not wanting to push her over some fragile ledge.

"You should definitely go see them when you can," she said, seeming totally supportive of the idea, if a little flippant. She leaned against the car beside him, lifted her coffee up, and Dean kept watching her with a dubious expression. "I'm a big girl," she said, grinning easily his way in the face of his concern. "Don't forget it." She blew on the coffee through the little sip-hole, proceeding to look ahead of herself and end the conversation.

But Dean couldn't bring himself to let it go. He held his coffee without drinking any. "It's just… we haven't talked about… what happened."

She glanced his way briefly. "I got through it," she said simply. "Now all three of us are in the panic room alumni club." She raised her coffee cup toward him slightly. "Cheers."

"Cheers?" Dean repeated, watching as she drank some coffee like nothing in the world was wrong at all—she was really gonna dumb it all down to them all being panic room lockup alum? She was gonna play it for humor? Who the hell was she, him? "What, it's all a big joke to you now?" he asked, aghast.

"Come on, lighten up," she said, growing a little sullen at his attitude.

"Sorry, I just don't think it's that funny, joking about the bitch-blood crap," he said, temper flaring at her nonchalant attitude—he didn't think it was funny. He thought it was his own personal hell, the things that had happened to his family.

His sister just gave him a brief, testy glance. Dean took a couple seconds to put his thoughts into words—and calm down, too. He set his coffee down on the Impala's roof as he turned to face her. "Look… it's just…" he didn't know how else to say it and put his hands out, gesturing and showing how he felt at his wit's end. "You seem almost too good, you know?"

Obviously not liking his confrontational stance or the subject matter, she became a little catty. "'Too good'? She repeated. "And that's a bad thing?" She did one of those things she and Sam did like pros—a humorless little laugh and an eye-roll that seemed to indicate she was above the current conversation. She proceeded to talk to him in a clear, sure voice. "Dean. I'm good. For the first time in awhile. I'm off demon blood. I'm with you and Sam again. Even though Sam's… kind of a weirdo, like you said. Either way. Life's a whole lot better for me than it has been in awhile." She tucked a hand into her side, in between her ribs and her other arm, gesturing lazily with her other hand, which still held onto the coffee. "I'm allowed to be happy."

Dean paused, watching her sipping her coffee casually. Was he really way off base here? Was she actually okay? He still didn't buy it, because he'd been around the block a time or two himself. So
he tried again and gently, firmly pried. "Yeah, but... the stuff that happened, that doesn't just go away."

She glanced up at him pointedly over the lid of the coffee, her eyes a shade darker than they had been before. "Especially not when your brother won't stop bringing it up."

He heard how she didn't want to talk about it, and that made him pretty sure there was something to his theory. If she really were over it, she wouldn't care about it either way, wouldn't have a problem talking about it. "I just wanna help," he told her, genuine but guilty. It was a little too late. He couldn't quit thinking he never should have let her leave that night a year ago when Sam died. But he had. And here they were.

Alex smiled obligingly when he said he just wanted to help. "You're real sweet, Doctor Phil... but I don't need the diagnosis." She gestured to the police station across the street where their brother was currently doing some solo sleuthing. "Sam's the one you should be trying to psychoanalyze. Any theories on why he's gone all Mr. Roboto?"

Smooth, changing the subject like that, Al... but he grudgingly went with it and dropped the current subject matter, deciding to try again later. He picked his coffee back up, turned around and put his back to the Impala, leaned there beside her again. He was frustrated... but what else was new? "Not really. I've tried talking to him about it a couple times but he's just... I dunno. Not all there." He sipped at the coffee and thought a little bit. His siblings were both so hard to get a read on right now. "Maybe Hell burned away some parts that we'll never get back."

Alex shook her head, eyes narrowed in thought. "Something about him just doesn't feel right to me."

Something they could both agree on. "Yeah. Same."

She turned her head to look at him sidelong, looking to him for direction. "So what do we do?"

That was a good question. One Dean had kind of been ducking because Sam was different. Emotionally cold, focused on jobs above all else, sort of insensitive to things he'd always been hyperaware of before. Had Hell burned away his capacity to feel? "I dunno," he told his waiting sister. "We... keep going? Hope in time he finds himself again? I really got no clue, honestly." He figured honesty was gonna go further than lying to her face. She digested his opinion with a thoughtful, troubled expression and Dean tried a smile. "Hey, at least we're still us, right?"

Her eyes, the same color as Sam's, crinkled up slightly as a little smile crossed her face. She was looking out ahead of herself, he didn't know at what. "Yeah. At least we're still us."

Only, were they? Dean knew he'd changed the past year... he'd been out of hunting and in the domestic life. He'd been a boyfriend, a welder, a sorta-dad to Ben. It had made him softer for sure, a little rusty where the whole hunting thing was concerned. It had been so long since he'd been the Big Brother that now, suddenly exactly that again, he was overwhelmed by it. And he wasn't the only one who had changed. Alex had been hunting and working and doing who the hell knows what else besides getting a taste for demon blood. Putting herself in danger, that was for sure. Choosing crappy "friends." And now she felt closed off to him, sort of older too. It was ironic... all those years when she'd been mute, he'd been able to take one look at her and know what she was thinking and feeling without any words at all. The day she'd gotten her voice, her independence had really started. And with it had come the gradual distance. Now, he felt like he barely recognized her. Mostly because she wasn't letting him see her. That's what made him the saddest. He would bet a million bucks that she was sad and fighting the kinds of emotional battles he fought every day. But why wouldn't she talk to him about it? It must be a lot worse than he thought, for her to
put the guard up so high like she was.

Maybe he wouldn't go see Lisa. Not yet. Maybe he should stay put. Until he knew for sure that his sister really was all right.

It was quiet between them for a few seconds, but Dean had one more thing he had to ask about. One more thing that he was dying to know, that he'd been sitting on, wondering about, getting all kinds of uncomfortable over. There were all kinds of crazy vibes he was feeling about this, and now was as good a time as any to ask, right? While it was just them, no Sam around. So Dean asked, and watched her carefully, trying to figure out the truth from her reaction. "So… uh, what about Cas?"

He expected her to react, but when all she did was let her eyes go down fractionally in thought, Dean was stumped. Her poker face was a whole helluva lot more unreadable than he remembered it being before. "What about him?"

Dean felt a little on the confounded side at her lack of, well, anything, and fumbled. "You… you two… I dunno, on the rocks, or what?" She looked at him sidelong with faint questioning, contemplative eyes. But she said nothing, forcing him to fill the silence. "Look, I don't even know, last time I saw you two together, really, you were acting like… a couple, back at the graveyard where Sam died. He shows back up last week and you were crying all over him and he looked bummed about something… he offers to take care of you… now he's MIA again and I just… I wanna know what the deal is, okay?"

For a minute, she looked like she was considering telling him. Then she looked ahead of them, across the street, and the moment was lost. "Yeah, how about we talk about that later," she said sort of darkly, nodding toward the police station. "Moose, five o'clock."

Dean followed her gaze and saw Sam's familiar figure crossing the small-town street to them. He had a stack of fliers in hand.

"Hey," Sam greeted as he reached them, all-business as was the usual, lately. "So…" he handed Dean a small stack of missing person fliers. "Six girls in seven days," he explained, "which is more disappearances than this city has seen in over a year. They're all about the same age."

"And cute," Dean remarked offhandedly as he looked through, getting a weird look from Alex and a sort of eye-roll and laugh from Sam. Dean defended himself. "Hey, ice cream comes in lots of flavors, guys."

"Yeah, like my favorite… jailbait," Alex teased, then grabbed the papers from Dean and gave him a pointed, amused look before she began to look over them for herself. "Didn't you just get off the phone with Lisa?"

Dean made a face. "I'm allowed to look," he said lamely.

Sam wasn't interested in their conversation. "So we got half a dozen girls, late teens, a shower away from greatness." He paused as Alex shuffled through the papers and frowned deeply. "Sounds like a profile, right?" Sam supposed. "I mean, what else they got in common?"

"Well they're all brunettes..." Alex said as she reached the last printout. She slapped the stack to Sam's chest and he looked a little surprised, then grabbed onto it.

"Huh, you're right." He frowned a little as he paged back through the fliers. "Interesting."

"That's not enough to go on, really," Dean said, which he knew his siblings already knew, as well.
"But hey, six directions to go here. Pick a number."

"Seven," Sam corrected. "Another call just came in today. Girl named Kristen Swan. Went missing on Wednesday. I say we head to her house, see if we can catch her trail."

Dean nodded agreement and pushed himself up to stand. Fair enough. "Sounds good to me." He said, and headed around for the driver's side as Sam got into the Impala. Dean glanced at his sister, who was already heading back for her own car—which was parked behind the Impala. Another thing that was bugging him—she was driving herself everywhere. She wasn't riding with them like the old days. Attempting a friendly, hopeful tone, Dean tried to change her mind as he opened his door. "Hey, you wanna ride with?" He cracked a casual grin, the kind that was playful, light, and she'd never been able to say no to in the past. "Back seat misses you. We can come back and get the Mustang later?"

She was already opening the door to her car and only glanced up at him briefly to shake her head. "It's okay," she said, her tone nothing but polite and friendly yet slightly brusque. "I'll meet you there." Her door slammed, she was fiddling around with her keys, oblivious to him.

Dean stood at the door of the Impala a little longer than he needed to. Hurt, because yet again, he literally felt her pushing him away.

The Winchesters stood in the Swan home—it was a nice, conservative, boring house. The kind with uninspired watercolors of flowers hanging on the walls, bible verses splashed in swirly script all over everything, and really uptight, pastel decor. Kristen's father, Steve, had let them in readily when they identified themselves as agents.

"I really appreciate the FBI's involvement in my daughter's disappearance," Steve said. He was in his forties and wore khakis, a button down, a sweater vest. He was the definition of vanilla. "Kristen's a good kid," he continued. "A little naive, sure... you try to be a good parent. Girls are hard." He paused, looked at Alex, grimaced slightly like he hadn't thought before he'd spoken. "No offense."

Dean glanced at Alex, who just rolled with it. "None taken," she said, the picture of professionalism—which was apparently her thing these days. Dean forced himself not to dwell on her, for now. They had a job to do and he needed to focus.

"We'd just like to find your daughter," Sam said.

Steve paused, then looked up the staircase, indicating it with a nod. "Last door on the left."

Dean followed his gaze. "Thanks, Steve." He led the way. As the Winchesters climbed up the stairs, Dean gave a quick glance back to the girl's father, who was taking a seat onto the couch, putting his head in his hands. He seemed stressed out. As any good dad would be if that happened to his kid. "Whaddya think he was talking about?" he asked his siblings, quiet enough that only the three of them could hear. *Girls are 'hard'? She was a 'little naive'?*

"Drugs?" Sam suggested as they got to the top of the stairs.

"*Boys*," Alex muttered, earning another little glance from her oldest brother.

They wandered down a painted white hallway lined in more annoyingly perfect paintings of boring flowers, then found the last door on the left. Dean opened it, flipped on the lights…. and they all froze momentarily when they saw the room inside. "Oh it is *so* much worse than drugs," he muttered. Alex had been right when she said boys… sorta.
Kristen's bedroom didn't fit with the rest of the house at all. The walls were painted a deep blood-red and all the furniture was black; cheesy gothic accessories and decor littered the room and its surfaces—among these things, a fake crystal ball with a fang base, a skeleton candelabra with black never-burned candles, and way too many posters that featured pale guys with brooding expressions and inhumanly yellow eyes. The posters proclaimed *Twilight, My Summer of Blood, The Vampire's Dream, Once Bitten*. Kristen's room looked like a gothic teen shrine to...

"Vampires?" Sam snorted.

Dean felt a little skeevd out. "Ah, these aren't vampires, man, these… these are douche bags." Real vampires weren't this pansy or magazine-friendly. What a freaking sham.

Alex shut the bedroom door after they all came into the room, and then jumped back, a little startled—taped to the back of the door was a full-sized cut out of a teen heartthrob 'vampire.' He was giving an intense, sort of murderous stare. "Whoa," she commented, seeming sort of turned off by the entire vibe of the room.

"Well doesn't he just get you all fired up." Dean snorted sarcastically. How could anyone think these guys were hot? "Come on." He rolled his eyes and continued to look around the room and voiced all of their thoughts when he shook his head and uttered a very glib "wow."

Alex walked the length of one of the walls, stopping to stare at the poster for *My Summer of Blood*. "So… Kristen had a little bit of a thing for vampires," she said.

Dean gave a short little laugh and sent her a joking look, momentarily forgetting everything, just joking with his sister like old times. "Crack detective work, Captain Obvious. What gave you that idea?" He got a little smile and eye-roll in return and she shook her head then went back to poking around. He knew what she was thinking: shut up, Dean.

He smiled to himself, but the smile fell a little as he watched her inspecting the top of Kristen's dresser. Some asshole had tried to rape her last week. And Dean had been a hundred miles away, none the wiser. And now here she was, acting like everything was normal, like she had no issues in the world at all.

Sam pulled out a red laptop that had been slightly pushed up and under the pillows on Kristen's bed. "Aha!" he announced, distracting Dean. "Here we go." He carried it over to the little desk by the window and set it down then sat down in front of it. Dean and Alex drifted over and came to stand behind Sam, who was opening up the laptop. "Let's see what we can see," he muttered, and pushed the space bar to wake up the laptop. A fake sounding clip of a scream played as a super close up picture of an intense-looking fake vampire popped up and filled the entire screen. He was brooding, pale, and had eyes shining like gold. All three Winchesters flinched back at the unexpected screensaver. "Th-that's just… uncomfortable," Sam commented, face twisted in revulsion.

"What's he so bummed out about?" Dean asked, making a face. Seriously… why did people dig this crap?

"Make it go away, Sam," Alex muttered, looking at the screen like she had a bad taste in her mouth.

"Yeah, sure," he said, and pressed some keys—a password prompt came up. Sam paused. "Ah… gimme a couple minutes." He tried the password vampires and hit enter. The laptop made the same screaming noise, denying him access.

Great. This could take awhile. Dean picked up a paperback book that was on the desk beside the laptop. *My Summer of Blood*. On the cover, a teenage girl in a white nightgown was asleep on a
bed while a pale-skinned, male vampire stood next to the open window. He was staring down at her, and to Dean, it looked like maybe the scene of a murder five minutes before the crime took place. He waggled the book at Sam—Alex had wandered over to the bookshelf beside the desk. "Look at this. He's watching her sleep. How is that not the creepiest thing ever?"

"I gotta concentrate here, Dean," Sam said, distracted, and typed the password *dracula*. The laptop made a screaming noise again. Nope.

Dean glanced at Alex, who was off in her own world looking through the shelves on the bookcase. The book cover honestly made him think of Cas, who had done the exact same thing—stayed all night and watched his sister sleep that time at the hospital. It had freaked Dean out then, and it freaked him out now. Cas had probably watched her sleep all last week in the panic room, too. Before he could help himself, it popped out of his mouth thoughtlessly. "I bet you think that's cute, huh?" Dean asked Alex, pushing his luck, trying to gauge her reaction, shamelessly goading her. "Old guy who doesn't look old watching a young girl sleep." His sister just gave him a mild what's your problem look, then crouched down at the bookshelf next to the desk and looked through some of the volumes there. So… that told him nothing.

Dean cracked the book open to a random page, grudgingly resigned to not knowing about Cas and Alex for now. He walked off a few steps as he read aloud from it in a cheesy, overly dramatic voice. "'He could hear the blood rushing inside her, almost taste it. He tried desperately to control himself…'" the laptop screamed again as Sam got another guess wrong. "'...Romero knew their love was impossible—'" Dean stopped reading and made a face. "Romero? Really? You believe this crap?" He looked at Alex for support, but she just shrugged and Dean stared at her in disbelief. "Don't tell me you *read* this," he said.

"Honestly, I liked *Once Bitten* better than *My Summer of Blood,*" she said, blasé and concentrating on her search, earning a baffled, *you're kidding* look from Dean. "*What?*" She asked, glancing the look on his face. "I read them a couple years ago when they came out. Don't judge me."

"Too late," he told her. She just rolled her eyes at him. He turned the book over in his hand, read the summary aloud. "'Romero and Tatiana's love was forbidden in every sense… she was the outcast teenage girl suffering from anemia, he was a tormented blood-thirsty vampire from a distant time—once, he had been a world-famous ballroom dancer, now he was dancing the line between loving Tatiana and killing her where she stood'—oh my god, are they serious? This sounds like an actual parody of itself… I mean, this is a national bestseller. How is that possible?"

"Dean, shut up, will you?" Sam said over his shoulder, irritated. "I'm trying to think." The laptop screamed again as he tried and failed *again* to enter the right password.

"Hey check this out," Alex said, standing up. In her hands, a binder labeled 'From My Soul.' Alex gave Dean a meaningful, somewhat mocking look. "*Poems* Kristen wrote," she explained, turning her attention to flipping through the papers that were three-hole punched inside. Alex stopped, frowned, then read aloud from one of them. 'I wish I could be a thing of the night. I wish I could savor love's first bite. I want to be leased from the chains of mediocrity. I want my fanged prince to come set me free.'" She paused, seemingly uncertain and sort of uncomfortable. "*Jesus Christ,* was I this emo as a teenager?" Dean just gave her a look. "Shut up," she muttered, even though he'd said nothing. He tossed the book he'd been holding down and picked up a pillow off the bed that had a fake vampire's face on it. The dude's pinched expression made it look like he was constipated, and Dean chuckled to himself. *Ridiculous.*

The laptop screamed again and Sam made a sound of frustration. "Hey, try, uh—" Dean thought for a second as he set the pillow back down. "Try 'Lautner.'"
"Lautner?" Alex asked, dubious, glancing around the room and seeming to be of a different opinion. "No, Sam, try 'Pattinson.' This chick is team Edward, trust me." Dean's mouth dropped open and his eyebrows shot up. Alex gave him a weird look. "I know what Twilight is, Dean. You'd have to be an alien from another planet not to know. I mean, how do you know about it?"

"You kidding me? It's everywhere, it's a freakin' nightmare," Dean covered lamely. "I bet even Cas know about that stupid franchise," he muttered, not even intending to bring Cas into it—he hadn't thought—and he saw how his sister's face flickered a little, how her jaw tightened, how she looked away from him. A genuine reaction that seemed conflicted. Seeing a window of opportunity, Dean tried to approach her. And then was cut short.

"How many T's are there in 'Pattins-'" Sam began to ask, then stopped mid-word. The laptop dinged pleasantly and Sam got excited. "That's it. We're in! Ha!" He bent over the laptop, typing and clicking. "Okay, let's see… hm."

Dean glanced at Alex, then dropped it, focused on the job. "Well?" he asked, going to stand behind Sam again and lean over his shoulder to look at the laptop screen.

Sam squinted at the social networking website he was on. "Well, her inbox is full, from some guy claiming to be a vampire. 'I can only meet you at night… I don't trust myself with you… the call of your blood is too strong…' blah blah blah, a bunch more crap like that."

Alex set down the binder of poetry and leaned over Sam's other shoulder to look at the message with an intensely studious expression. "Damn," she commented, seeming mildly impressed in a dread-filled way. "So this could be real vampires fishing for victims or just your run-of-the-mill serial killer who knows what the teenage girls are into these days."

"Either option sounds pretty bad," Dean mused aloud, thinking deeply. Alex stood up and retreated into the middle of the room as Dean frowned a little deeper. This just didn't seem likely… vamps using the internet to fish for victims? That seemed like a waste of time when they could just go to a bar or a club and find plenty of idiots to feed on that way. "I'm gonna go with human mouth-breather on this one," Dean said, pretty sure that was a safe bet.

"Hard to tell, but I mean, talk about easy prey," Sam said, turning slightly to look at Dean for a second. "For actual vamps especially." He looked back at the laptop. "These chicks are just throwing themselves at you. All you gotta do is… I dunno. Write bad poetry and talk about how depressed you are." Sam clicked on another message. "Huh. So looks like this guy wanted to meet her at a bar called The Black Rose."

Dean rolled his eyes and stood up at the name of the place. "Gimme a break…"

"Just reporting the news," Sam said, even-keeled. "It's worth checking out, right?"

Dean heaved a thoughtful sigh. Was this even really up their alley? Could be a huge bust lead. He crossed his arms, not sure about it. "I mean, it's probably just your standard-issue perv, right?"

"One way to find out," Alex said from behind them.

Both brothers turned to look at her. "What do you mean?" Dean asked cautiously. Something about the tone in her voice seemed foreboding to him.

She was holding a shirt up against herself that she'd picked up off the dresser. It was dark red and looked low-cut and said I Won't Bite in rhinestones. A pair of fangs was emblazoned underneath the words. "This looks about my size, doesn't it?" She asked in overly innocent tones. A slow smile
grew on her face. "I feel like going out tonight, boys."

Alex got out of the Impala first—the sole of her spiky black knee-high boot hitting the parking lot pavement with a crunch.

"Of all the bad ideas you've ever had, this has to be the worst," Dean complained, getting out a second after her. It was dark outside and the chill of evening hit him as he got out. He slammed his door and gestured to her erratically. He was all kinds of moody and resistant. "I mean, look at yourself, you look like..."

"Kinda the point, Dean," she said, cutting him off and raising an eyebrow at him. She crossed her arms and smirked at him almost. Like she thought he was being funny. She looked like a hooker, honestly. Her knee-high boots were high-heeled, jet black, leather. Fishnet leggings criss-crossed up her legs. She wore a gothy looking choker around her neck. The low-cut, fitted magenta shirt that proclaimed in rhinestones I Won't Bite with fangs was tucked into a black pleather miniskirt that was way too short. A black leather jacket was over all of it, and the only reason she was wearing it was because she had a machete concealed in there. Alex had 'borrowed' the outfit from Kristen's closet. And to top it off, she was wearing makeup for what Dean thought was maybe the second time in her life maybe—and it looked like she hadn't done it completely right, either. Black rimmed her eyes unevenly, thickly. She'd even put on red lip stick. She didn't look like herself, and she didn't seem to care that he was worried about her crazy plan to be the vampire lure. She'd insisted she fit the profile—she got mistaken as a teen girl all the time, was brunette, could play the part of vampire-smitten gothic chick—and Dean had grudgingly agreed in theory, but he was having second thoughts now that they were outside of the bar where Kristen had probably disappeared from.

Sam, getting out much leisurely than the other two, smirked at his brother. "Dean, calm down," he said, cracking an easy grin. "She's the perfect bait."

"Exactly!" Dean exclaimed with rising urgency. "If these are real vamps we're up against, this is all kinds of stupid and dangerous!" He looked at his sister, who was adjusting one of her boots—she had knives hidden down there, he'd watched her strap them on. It seemed like no big deal to her, which was why Dean was getting so shaken up. "This the kinda stunt you pulled the past year?" He demanded. "Risking your life like there's no tomorrow?!"

She made a confused, amused face at him as she straightened, and she didn't rise to his level of anger. "Uh... isn't that what hunting is?" She asked, making a pretty good point and then, of all things, cracking a grin. "You know what, if you have such a huge problem with it, we can maybe find you some eyeliner and an I Heart Vamps shirt, too." She patted him on the face cajolingly, like he was cute but she'd had enough. "I got this, Dean," she said confidently, then glanced over at Sam, who was more in the mindset to actually do the job. "Now you two just stick with the plan and I'll see you inside." She took off toward the entrance to The Black Rose, then wobbled in the high-heeled boots mid-step, almost fell—righted herself and then shot them a dirty look and pointed a finger at them with a jab. "Not a word," she warned, then turned around and resumed walking, more carefully this time.

Yeah right, it was too good an opportunity to pass up. "You suck at walking high heels!" Dean called, and she threw a good-natured middle finger over her shoulder at him. He shook his head. He didn't like this, but mostly, because she'd been in such a bad situation recently and this seemed... sorta like she was pushing the boundaries a little bit. Trying to get skeevy guys to hit on her? Trying to draw the bad guy out using sexuality? His protective instincts told him no way you should let her do this.
"She'll be fine, Dean," Sam said cajolingly, his hands in his pockets as he walked up to stand beside Dean. He was watching his twin walk into the bar but spared Dean a brief glance. "She's got us watching her back." In that moment especially, there was something distinctly un-Sam about Sam.

Dean looked at his brother with a dark, unsure expression. "Right," he said and, drew in a deep breath, turned back to watching their trampy looking sister walk up the side of the building. "Yeah." Two seconds passed, and Alex's dark brown head disappeared into the entrance of The Black Rose. And Dean decided never mind. "Screw this," he muttered, and without a backward glance, took off after his sister. He caught up to her in the dim hallway that led into what looked like a big room ahead. Colored lights flashed and low music thumped there. "Wait up two seconds, Al," he said, catching her by the shoulder lightly.

"I know, I know, but who cares, Al?" He asked, exasperated, then giving a very gothic looking passerby a tight how-ya-doin' smile before turning back to his sister and whispering loudly. "Come on, look, we've been together for a couple days now and I can't keep not saying anything, all right?" Alex looked more and more pissed and Dean was glad. Let her get mad. He wanted to see some real emotion out of her. "You're acting like you're okay but I don't get how the hell you could be okay after everything."

She gave him a bitch-face that could win awards. "Seriously? You pick now to keep pestering me about this?" She crossed her arms and gave him a lot of attitude. "All right. Great. Let's do this now, Dean." She looked mad enough to spit. "I'm fine." She shrugged, pulled a face, put her hands out, like she was saying and that's all there is to that. And then she turned the conversation around on him, became almost accusing. "How are you okay after everything? You've lost your family, your home, you've been to Hell, you've died, Sam died, I ran off on you, now you've gone and ditched Lisa and Ben—"

Indignant, Dean cut her off. "Whoa—I have not ditched them."

She made a face like she was thinking you kidding me right now? A couple with crazy piercings and lots of tattoos walked by, hand in hand, looking at the squabbling siblings curiously. Alex and Dean waited for them to pass and remained silent and sullen. The second the passersby were out of earshot, Alex was talking again. "The point is, insane shit has happened to all of us. Stuff that would send most people howling to the looney bin—"

"Or running to the whiskey shelf, or out for a hit of demon blood," Dean said darkly. Alex definitely reacted to that. She looked rueful and pissy, but she somehow managed to keep her cool.

"Yeah, you're right," she said evenly, clearly working to be patient, to not hit him. "I may have problems. And I may have dealt with some of them in stupid ways. But I dealt. The best I could. Like I said, before you cut me off... we've all been through crazy crap. But we're all okay and we got through it. Same thing now. So let it go."

"Let it go?" Dean repeated incredulously, his temper rising. "None of us are fine, and you know that." He jabbed a hand out to his side, gesturing almost violently. "Have you taken a look at Sam lately? He's not fine!" Dean's anger was making him animated in the worst way. "Have you ever, uh, I don't know, talked to me? I'm not fine and I haven't been for my whole goddamn life!" Dean looked at Alex accusingly. "And you're not fine, either!" He insisted gruffly, wet his lips, tried to get his very baleful sister to try and break through, talk to him. "What, it's all just over now? The shitty year you had, what you did, what happened to you? Call me crazy but I don't exactly believe you right now!"
Alex just met his gaze. "Look at me." She blinked once, shrugged again. "I'm fine. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna go do my job." She turned to go, he grabbed her shoulder, didn't let her.

"Al—!"

She yanked away, eyes flashing. "Dude! Stop!" Her shoulders heaved from sudden breathless anger. "Get the fuck out of the past! Stop bringing it up, okay?"

"I just know you can't keep this stuff inside forever, Alex!" Dean protested with rising desperate earnestness.

"Oh, like you came a hundred percent clean about Hell?" She fired back. "Dean I'm not dumb. You're still holding on to so much of that crap. You only told Sam and me a drop in the bucket, don't insult my intelligence. So why do I have to tell you all about my hell if you won't tell me about yours?" She crossed her arms tightly.

Again, Dean was blindsided by how she was misinterpreting his concern… that, and he was so deeply saddened at her word choice. Calling it her hell. He hurt for her, and he would take that pain in an instant. "I care about you, I'm just trying to help," he implored, wishing he could show her how he literally lived for her and Sam, to a certain point. How he'd do anything for them. How he just wanted to help both of them and make it better.

Instead of a glare or a snide comment, Alex softened, however reluctantly. She looked tired. "I know, Dean. I do." Her jaw clenched. Then she looked at him through a pinched expression and in a strained voice, asked him to stop trying to help. "But I need you to back off right now." She shrugged, mildly defeated, and wouldn't look at him again. "You and I were always so close, but… I've been on my own for a year. Things are different."

She was right, and it broke his heart because she was pretty much saying she didn't want to be close to him right now. And moments like this were rare for him, but he swallowed his pride and hurt over the whole thing. Made it about her instead of about him. Tried to reassure her. "I'm still your big brother. And I'm always gonna be here for you, understand?"

Alex seemed annoyed. "I know, I know," she muttered, extremely uncomfortable and ready to stop the conversation. She jerked her thumb to the side, toward the interior of the bar. "I'm gonna go start canvassing now."

She turned to go.

Dean watched her leave, sort of wishing he hadn't had that conversation at all. It hadn't gone how he wanted at all. He'd pushed her away even further. He moved a hand down over his mouth and chin briefly, gave a short expulsion of exasperated breath. Alex was right. There were things that haunted him that he had never told anyone. He was barely holding it together. What the fuck else was new, he reflected cynically. One thing was for sure… he needed a damn drink.

The Black Rose was a bar club hybrid, a clearly gothic hangout. The atmosphere was dark, dim, and a bunch of really emo looking people milled around. The bar itself was centered in the room, not up against a wall. It provided a pretty good way of scoping out the whole place while not drawing too much attention. Dean took a sip of his beer, watchful of his sister, who was currently weaving her way through the crowd across from him, trying to draw out their vampire perp. They were looking for a guy who was trying to look Twilight, and honestly, most of the guys here looked sort of pop-culture vampy. Black leather getups, spiky detailing on shirt sleeves and shoulders, piercings, emo haircuts, some of them wore makeup or had black painted nails.
Needless to say, Dean and Sam definitely stuck out, sitting at the bar in their typical plaid getup.

Pop culture had gotten a lot wrong about vampires, and Dean was chagrinned, to say the least. Real vampires could go out in the sunlight (even though it apparently wasn't their preference), didn't give a shit about crucifixes, garlic, wooden stakes, or coffins. They didn't turn people by biting them, they had to feed their blood to a human directly to turn them. The only way to kill them was chopping off their heads. And their fangs only came out when they were ready to feed. In short, it made identifying vampires difficult. They looked like normal human beings and there wasn't a quick, easy way to ID them.

"So you're sure?" Sam asked, off in his own little world, on the phone. "A hundred percent? Huh. Yeah, interesting. All right. Yeah. Talk later." Sam ended the call and pocketed his phone, turned toward Dean. "So, sounds like we're dealing with vamps for sure. Samuel says this is the fourth town he's heard of. Same pattern. Kids go missing, blood bank van gets jumped. Guess what? Blood bank was robbed here in Limestone just last night. Saw it in the paper earlier. What do you think?"

Dean wasn't exactly excited to hear they were looking for real, actual vamps. "Just friggin' great," he muttered, watching Alex even closer. Sam followed his gaze, then, typical Sam, he scoffed, implying that Dean was being overly dramatic.

"What's the big deal, Dean? She's a hunter. A good one."

"Yeah but I don't like using her as bait, okay?" Dean asked, then gave Sam a pointed look. "And you shouldn't either."

"Maybe you should have more faith in her abilities," Sam said factually.

Dean glanced at him peevishly. "Maybe you should shut up."

Sam smiled briefly. "Same old Dean."

Not entirely sure how to take his brother, Dean was quiet. "Yeah." He tried to force himself to relax, then tried to strike up a conversation with Sam. "Hey, this isn't all bad," he said, gesturing at Sam's beer. "We haven't had a beer together in forever."

Sam wasn't paying attention. He gestured with a faint thrust of his chin toward the area across from the bar. "Check it out."

Dean followed his gaze. Alex was over there, talking to a guy in his late teens who was decked out in dark leather, eyeliner, and he seemed pretty into Alex—grinning, posturing flirtily, eyeing her. He leaned close, whispered something in her ear—and Alex made a face like she had never heard anything so stupid. She pulled back, wiping the look off her face with sort of startling ease, appearing to be enjoying herself… she made a 'come here' motion with her finger… grabbed the kid's chin in a hand, pulled him closer… then her other hand shot forward and yanked fake plastic fangs out of the kid's mouth. She flicked them into the kid's face. Poor dweeb was blinking, shocked, and Alex was giving him a clearly false smile and an eye roll and moving on.

Sam chuckled. "Okay. Not our guy." He returned to his beer, casually leaning on the bar. "Check it out."

The kid Alex had just un-fanged followed her like a puppy dog, apparently trying to appeal to her—Dean faintly caught the words 'babe, come on!' over the music. Dean was tensed, half standing, ready to go over there and kick some ass if he needed to.

Sam glanced at him sidelong. "Relax, Dean, wouldya? Kid's like a hundred pounds. She could
break him in half while she had a hand tied behind her back." He took a swig of his beer, not concerned.

Dean didn't sit down. Alex turned around to face the kid. She must have said something really disturbing or scary, because when she finished saying whatever she had to say the kid drew back, wide-eyed, and left, hurrying straight out of the bar. Dean relaxed a little, chuckled, and caught his sister's gaze across the bar. She gave him a little smirk, then continued to wander through the crowd. Dean felt his smile fade a little. He still didn't believe she could just be fine. But she sure was acting like it.

He sighed, restless. "What was that kid wearing fangs for, anyway?" Dean asked, scoffing—did chicks really go for that crap?

About twenty minutes went by, Alex milling through and talking to guys, lurking around and getting approached by creep after creep. She shook her head no after each one, glancing at Sam and Dean. None of them fit the bill. About four beers in, Dean was getting frustrated and bored, a little distracted. Sam, as usual, seemed tireless and ultra-focused. "Dude, this lead is a bust," Dean muttered, swiveling his head to look at the dance floor to his left. That's where all the drunk people were. And hey, someone who looked relatively normal. In a sea of black and dark colors, one girl caught his eye—she was turned the opposite way and he couldn't see her face, but he didn't need to. She was blonde and wore an eye-catching little red dress that hugged every curve and barely covered her very shapely ass. The little red number had long sleeves and was cut to reveal almost her entire back—which, by the way, looked impressively strong. The girl could dance too, her hips were like magic, and Dean turned more, smiling without realizing it, appreciating the distraction. Some people just had that it factor when it came to dancing, exuded sexuality and magnetism without even trying at all. This chick definitely had it and was making the stupid gothy trance music a little more tolerable. And then she turned a little, tossing her head back, and Dean's stomach dropped out from under him when he recognized her. No… fucking… way. His face fell and he reacted without thinking, got out of his seat, and dragged her off the dance floor and into an empty adjacent lounge room.

"The hell are you doing here?!!" He demanded roughly, shoving her up against the wall. "You following me and my family, huh?" Jamie Ward stared back at him, seeming a thousand-percent shocked to see him and unsure of how to answer his questions. And that's when he realized she was very, very drunk—she reeked of vodka and her eyes were dull, her expression wasn't very coherent. And then he took in how bad she looked—her lip was busted, there was a huge red bruise across one side of her forehead, a little cut on her cheek, she had dark circles underneath her eyes—and genuine surprise made Dean's voice go a little softer. "What happened to you?"

She seemed to get a little of her clarity back. "A whole lot of shit," she slurred acidly, face twisting into a mean expression. "Now let go of me." She tried to twist away, but he only tightened his hands on her arms.

"Not until you tell me why you're here," he said darkly, not trusting her for one second.

She let out a disgusted huff and rolled her eyes, her head lolling around as she conducted herself drunkenly. "A job; what's it to you?" Dean glared at her and she rolled her eyes, getting exasperated and annoyed. "Serial killer, vampires, I don't know."

"You're working this job." Dean looked at her like she was nuts, because he was pretty sure she was. "With who?"

She chuckled—sounding like she was high off her ass when she did, too. "Me, myself and I."
Was she for real right now? Dean looked at her in growing confusion. "Okay… so you're doing this hunt… by yourself... drunk out of your mind? What, you got a death wish?"

Her stupid grin fell and Jamie's features darkened with anger. "I said let go," she said, and when he didn't… well, he paid for it. He wasn't quite sure of how she did it, but her foot or maybe her leg kicked him hard in the back of the knee and when his leg gave out in response, she slammed the heel of her hand into the side of his head and then grabbed his jacket shoulders and half-shoved, half-flung him away from her—he tripped over the edge of the low lounge table and fell backwards, barely catching himself on his hands. And Jamie looked down at him, seething, fists clenched at her sides. Dean held his aching jaw where she'd hit him—freaking hard too—remembering, suddenly, that she was a witch. And realizing he had pissed her off.

She took a step closer and Dean raised a hand defensively. "Whoa, whoa, don't put any of your witch-bitch mojo on me!"

She stopped short and made a face like oh my god are you joking right now. "You know, just for that, I should," she said, then raised her hand at him, wiggled her fingers, then suddenly shoved her hand at him. He cringed and threw an arm in front of his face, trying to duck her magic—then nothing happened. She was laughing crazily. He looked up at her, freaked out—had she turned him into something? She was holding her arms over her stomach, laughing maniacally. "Haaa, ha ha ha, you should have seen your face!" she chortled slurringly.

Christ, she was hammered. "How much did you drink?" He asked incredulously, not sure if he was safe or not.

"Pssh." She scoffed, a little uncoordinated, stumbling back a little as she held up a lecturing finger. He stood up slow and careful, watching her hawkishly. "And also, I'm not following you, I'm not following anything, mmkay? I'm here for a job, that's it." And she was gonna get herself killed, going about it like this. Dean looked at her uncertainly. She appeared to be disturbed, thinking of something, and she looked downward, her eyebrows knitting together a little. "Your, uh, your sister here with you?"

Suspicious of her and not really seeing the point in arguing over it, Dean looked at her balefully. "Yeah, nice story," he said flatly, then stepped closer to her, intimidating her by staring down—he
was taller than her and a whole helluva lot bigger. And witch or not, he wasn't scared anymore. Pretty girl or not, he didn't care. "Stay away from my family, you hear me?" And without another word, he brushed past her roughly, letting his shoulder knock into hers.

Jamie watched Dean go, genuine hurt filling her features.

While Dean was busy picking a needless fight with Jamie, Alex, unaware that Dean had disappeared at all, was approached by a tall, dark-haired guy in leather who looked at her with intense eyes. He was pale and looked at her with great interest, getting right up in her personal space. "You look like the kind of girl who belongs to the night," he said to her, his voice low and suggestive. He leaned close, and she made herself stay still. His voice was soft and low. "I could show you things you couldn't imagine…" wow. That was the best I-wish-I-were-a-vampire pickup line she'd heard all night. In fact, as he drew back to look at her again, she realized there was something about this guy that seemed legit. This was the first guy she really thought actually might be a vampire.

"What kinds of things?" she asked, cautious, but playing it like she was intrigued.

He didn't blink, and his eyes bored into hers. "Things of eternity."

She would have rolled her eyes, but instead Alex looked down, attempting to look demure, then cast her eyes to the side, checking to see that her brothers still had eyes on her. Dean wasn't there anymore—huh—but Sam gave her a subtle nod. Alex looked back at the guy. "Show me."

He cast around mysterious glances. "I can't show you here."

"Where can you?"

"Let's go out back." He held out his hand to her, indicating he take it. "Come with me." She didn't really want to at all, but she did. And the second she did, she realized they had their guy. His skin was cold, lifeless. Real vampire. He began to lead her toward the back exit and Alex looked back at Sam, who trailed them through the crowd. She quickly and discreetly made the signal Dean had invented for vampire—two fingers in a peace sign, facing inward toward herself, then she hooked them into the hair, imitating a vampire bite. Sam nodded understanding. They'd get this guy alone and use him to find the nest. Vampires always traveled in packs.

Briefly, Alex thought about how wrong it felt to be holding anyone's hand but Cas's, thought of how warm and solid and comforting Castiel's hands were. She missed them. She missed him. Don't think about that. The vampire led her down some stairs, through a shadier portion of the club. He kept looking behind them, even though Sam was shadowing at a safe distance. "We're being followed," he said, then abruptly pushed her through the back exit. "Quickly!"

She stumbled out into the night air and down into the back alley. She looked behind herself for the guy… and, nothing. Empty doorway. She looked around—how could he have just disappeared? "Hello?" She asked, self-aware and careful, looking around her environment closely. "Weird vampire guy?"

Behind her, a soft, new male voice. "Well hello. You're pretty."

She turned around fast, seeing a guy she didn't recognize and who had seemingly dropped out of the sky, out of nowhere. He was shorter than her, compact, and had long, wild hair that fell in curls to his shoulders. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, but he dressed young, like he thought he was cool—with a distressed leather jacket, some pagan necklaces, some skeleton rings on his thick
fingers. He had a goofy expression on his face, looked sort of like a doofus, honestly. "Uh… thank you?" Alex asked, skeptical.

He grinned at her coyly, overly friendly. "Where's your boyfriend?"

"What boyfriend?" She asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

"Pretty boy," the man explained, still grinning. "You were arguing with him a little while ago? I want him." The man giggled—actually giggled. He wanted Dean?

Officially weirded out, Alex backed up a step, her red flags raising, because something about this was off. "Uh, sorry, I don't think he swings that way. Now if you'll excuse me… I have someplace less creepy to be." She turned to walk away—and then felt herself being grabbed and yanked backwards, hard, then thrown with superhuman strength.

She went flying through the air and landed painfully on her back on a dumpster lid where she rolled sideways off of it and fell further down into a pile of trash bags. Disoriented and confused and wondering where the hell Sam was, Alex tried to get up, managing to get her foot on the ground… then fell over when the heel of her boot made her wobble and stumble. "Sam!" Alex called, trying to get help, reaching in the general direction of her machete—but before she could get it, the curly-haired guy grabbed her by her jacket and slammed her up against the dumpster and punched her in the face, stunning her. "Ahh—" she groaned, barely able to see from the insanely strong hit—it almost seemed superhuman, the force of his fist against her face—wait… was he? She wondered that even as her attacker opened his mouth and pointed fangs descended down over his human teeth—and realizing what was happening, Alex struggled with renewed strength to get away to no avail even as he bit his own wrist and let blood flow out., Holding her down, despite her protests and struggle, he smeared her mouth with his rancid blood.

The second it touched her tongue, it was all over. Her blood ran cold and hot, screaming in pain as the change happened—weakened and disoriented, she fell backwards into the pile of trash bags when he let her go. Her mind was spinning and bursting and nothing made any sense at all, her blood seemed to be having seizures inside her veins. Nearby, she saw a very tall young man holding a sword thing. He just stood there, he had longish hair and was… watching, curiously, almost smiling. Why would he smile? Who was that? Alex blinked against bleary eyes when the vampire was suddenly in her face again.

"Now. Your first assignment, sweetheart. Be a good little girl for me. Your boyfriend. Turn him." He grabbed her hand in his and let blood drip into her palm. He held her gaze in his eyes. She couldn't look away for a second. His words seemed to bore into her, seemed to be her own thoughts. "Take this blood… and turn him." He grabbed her chin and reiterated. "Look at me. Turn him. I compel you." The serious look fell away and again, he giggled. "After you do that, come see me, pretty girl. I have plans for you."

"Hey!" Came a loud voice, and the guy with the sword suddenly ran forward and made to attack.

The vampire jumped back, grinning maniacally and dodging a swipe from the blade aimed for him. He jumped onto the side of the building, began to climb it like a spider, getting away easily. Dazed, Alex looked up at the guy who had just run up. She recognized him, she thought... "I don't feel… good…" she said to him. Everything was getting really hazy and confusing. And then a new man burst out of a door nearby—he was dressed like this tall one, in plaid, jeans, and a cargo jacket, but he was shorter, had close-cut hair. Didn't she know him, too? He looked around frantically, and when he saw her, he came running. Then she realized that he was the one. The one she was supposed to turn. And she stood clumsily, remembering her task and only her task. She had to obey. She remembered the eyes boring into hers. Turn him. I compel you.
The newcomer ran up to her and grabbed her shoulders. His voice was gruff and loud and she could barely understand him, because all the noises in the world seemed to be plugging up her ears. "Are... okay?! What... do to... you?! Lex?!" His words were clipped and echoing weirdly.

She stared at his mouth. Turn him. She took the handful of blood that she was holding onto, and did as she had been commanded. Grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him forward even as she shoved the blood into his mouth with every ounce of strength she possessed. He was shocked and he sputtered, falling backwards. And she remembered nothing else, as the world went dark around her.

Sirens suddenly blared, loud as hell, cars, horns—she heard everything and her eyes snapped open, she clapped her hands over her ears because it hurt. Beside her, a familiar grumbling voice. "Oh my god, what is that sound?!" Dean asked, sitting up and holding his head in both hands. As Alex's blurred vision returned and she tried to focus, she realized she and Dean had both been thrown down on the bed like sacks of flour. Why was everything so loud?!

Sam's voice sounded someplace nearby. "What sound, Dean?"

Alex pushed herself up and grabbed her head. A lamp crashed to the floor someplace nearby as Dean stumbled into it clumsily. He turned and caught sight of her even as she saw him, too. She couldn't see right; everything was painfully bright, but she could tell that he looked horrible—pale, eyes rimmed in red. And there was blood all over his mouth and chin. The hell? Maybe she looked the same, because his face registered horror when he looked at her. "Alex—uhhh, what—" he paused, suddenly distracted, setting his sights angrily on one of the motel room walls, "the hell IS—THAT—NOISE?!!" He pounded on the wall angrily. "Keep it down, dammit!" he shouted, then put his face in his hands. Alex and Dean both recoiled in unison when Sam switched on the other lamp that hadn't been smashed yet.

Dean squinted and held a hand out even as Alex ducked her head down and covered her eyes with an arm. "Sam, please, please shut that off, it's blinding!" Dean complained, rubbing an eye with his hand uselessly.

Sam complied, and mercifully, the room went dark. Alex tried to stand up—her vision was doubling and the world was spinning and every noise was deafening. She stumbled, feeling like she was suffering from impossibly low blood sugar or seasickness. Her ears ached, there were a million screeching sounds in her head, a steady sound of a hammer hitting against a tin roof, Sam's footsteps were like thunder; she heard a million things at once: a lightbulb buzzing someplace nearby, voices in the room next door, mice feet scampering across a floor, even Sam's breathing sounded like tornado winds. "Christ, Sam, stop making all that racket!" She accused, clapping her hands over her ears uselessly.

"I'm not doing anything!" Sam protested.

"What the hell happened?!" she demanded, teeth gritted against all the noise. Her oldest brother, similarly tortured, had his hands on his ears, was grunting as if he had a headache.

"You don't remember?" Sam asked, seeming mildly confused. "You both got turned." He paused, then clarified. "Into... vampires."

Alex and Dean both looked at Sam in unison, seemingly both noticing at the same time. They could hear their brother's heart beating steady and strong. Thump thump. Thump thump. And at the same moment, Alex realized. She wanted to taste what was pumping through his veins. She wanted his blood. Oh shit. Shock made her feel faint, light-headed.
Dean seemed to be having a similar conundrum, staring at his brother in shocked, leery pain, hands falling slowly away from his ears. Sam looked at both of them a little warily, made calm down gestures with his hands. "Guys... you should sit down..."

"You sit down!" Dean retorted, fiery, then sat on the edge of one of the beds and cradled his head in his hand. "How'd this happen, Sam?"

"Vamps got the jump on Alex. Then she turned you, Dean." Sam explained, matter-of-fact, even as Alex gaped, shocked, not remembering that at all. "I wasn't quick enough to save you guys. I'm sorry." A passing freight train made Alex and Dean double over, Dean groaning and letting his head fall toward his knees, Alex trying to cover her head with her arms and knocking into the little column in the middle of the room as she lurched back, her head clanging with too many noises.

"Of all the ways to die, damn, to go out like this..." Dean grumbled, "My head's like a frickin' hellscape!"

Sam looked at him like he was nuts. But Alex got what he meant. Every sound was amplified and echoing, like being in a cave but with the volume at a hundred million thousand. Speaking of...

"What is that fucking sound?!" Alex asked, going insane and frantically trying to identify the loud, mechanical banging sound. She would kill someone if that noise didn't stop.

Dean got up, seeming to know what was making the sound. "It's that..."

"What's what?" Sam asked, getting more and more confused.

Dean roughly grabbed and ripped the little bedside clock off the wall, making sparks shoot out as the power cord severed from the clock. Both Dean and Alex recoiled at the burst of brightness and Dean dropped the clock onto the floor, staring in dismay, seeming to have an epiphany. "Shit. Shit. This is bad. This is... I can't..." he looked at Sam blank and horrified all at once. He swallowed, looked at Alex dread. And Alex knew what he was thinking, her face fell. But... she wasn't a vampire. She couldn't be, and Dean couldn't be one, either. This was just a bad high or something. Dean turned to Sam. "Sam y-you gotta kill us," he said, voice soft with horror. "Both of us."

Sam cocked his head to the side, like he hadn't heard right. "What?" He scoffed. "No. Look, Samuel's on his way, I called him on the way over here. He's close, just a couple hours out. He said to make sure neither of you fed. Guys, we'll figure this out."

"How?!!" Dean demanded, approaching Sam with sudden anger. While Alex was in silent shock, Dean was in full-on freakout mode. "What the hell is to figure out?! Look at us!" He suddenly became accusatory, staring at Sam oddly. "Why aren't you freaked out?"

"Of course I am!" Sam said indignantly. And then Alex realized why Dean asked Sam that.

"Really?" Dean asked. "Cuz I can hear your heartbeat, and it's pretty damned steady." She could hear it, too, in fact, it was the only sound she could focus on. Thump thump. Thump thump. This wasn't a bad trip or a dream. This was really happening. Her mouth watered almost, at the thought of blood. She was so hungry for it. But I just got over a blood addiction, she thought ruefully.

Sam faltered at Dean's accusation. "That's cuz I'm... I'm trying to remain calm," he said, not leaving time to question the matter further. He grew intense, like he was trying to act the part of concerned brother now. "Dean, look—Samuel will know what to do!"

Dean scoffed. "C'mon, man, we're... we're monsters. This is not a problem that you spit-ball. We gotta deal with this before I—we—hurt somebody." He finally turned his attention to Alex. His
wan face and pained features grew sad and guilty, filled with despair. "I'm sorry, kiddo," he said softly. "This is my fault. I was busy picking a fight and took my eyes off you for one minute and..." he gave a short little lame attempt at a laugh. "Worst timing ever, huh?"

"A fight?" she asked, filled with pain—her head ached so badly. Who would he be fighting with and why?

Dean looked rueful and dark, glanced away. "Never mind." He groaned suddenly and put his head in his hands. This was a nightmare. It didn't feel real. Alex moaned as an ambulance passed somewhere nearby. Everything hurt so much. She let her head go into a hand.

"How's it feel?" Sam asked, studying Dean closely.

"Now?" Dean asked, irritable. "Now you wanna talk about my feelings?"

"No, I mean... physically."

Getting more and more pissed, Dean let Sam know. "How do you think it feels? Not good!" He brushed past Sam.

"Where you goin'?" Sam asked, getting a very evil eye and ugly-toned retort from Dean.

"Bathroom, okay? News flash, Mr. Wizard: vampires pee!" He slammed the door with gusto behind himself and Sam sighed, crossed his arms, then turned to look at Alex.

*Thump thump. Thump thump.* His heart was pounding so steadily and all she could think about was how she could now smell his blood. "So, what about you?" He asked, prompting her to say "huh?" He reiterated his earlier question. "How's it feel?"

Irked at his questions and all the sounds and lights and echoing and the new, heady smell of warm blood filling her nostrils, Alex made a face and stalked away from him and over to the window, trying really hard to fight this. "What is this, the Discovery Channel?!" She snapped.

"I'm just curious."

"You should be worried," she muttered, gripping the windowsill and leaning against it heavily, her voice too low for him to hear. "Old Sam would be worried." Outside, the street lamps in the dark were like little acidic dots, and she shut her eyes against the pain that they drilled into her head.

"What's that?" He asked, not catching her words. His stupid voice was pissing her off even more.

She whirled around. "I said it feels really great!" She yelled. "Fan-fucking-tastic! Two thumbs way, way up!" Glaring at him, she abruptly winced at the little wall-light that was behind his shoulder. It was so damn bright.

Sam looked annoyed at her reaction. "Geez, forget I asked."

"Just turn off that fucking light!" There were some shoes beside a duffel bag near her feet and Alex grabbed a shoe and with a shout of rage she threw it at the light. It shattered and the room sank into total darkness. She sighed in moderate relief, only slightly soothed. The sounds. The *sounds.*

"...How am I supposed to see?" Sam complained. But Alex was suddenly falling forward slightly, she had to turn and throw a hand out to the wall to catch herself from falling down. She could feel, in her mouth, a new sensation—over her teeth, fangs were creeping out and down. Horrified at the feeling, the cold sensation in her veins, the utter lack of life in her body and the overwhelming
she realized how desperate she was for human blood, how Dean was right. They both had to die. She sank down to sit on the floor, despairing completely while trying not to think about how good Sam's blood smelled, how much she wanted it. In silence, she sat there and fought her instincts, tried mind over matter. Tried not to accept this, tried not to think about anything real. But of course, reality was all she could think about.

Dean was right. She was not okay. Not about anything, not really. But she really wasn't okay now.

A few minutes passed. Sam stumbled around in the kitchenette, grumbling about something or another. Eyes filling with scared tears that she allowed in the dark where no one could see, Alex was so utterly ashamed and confused and covered her face with her cold hands. Why had this happened? Why couldn't she remember being turned? Why was Sam so different, so heartless? Why why why?

A single thought kept pounding through her head like a nail driving through splintered wood: she couldn't face Castiel ever again. She couldn't bear to let him see her like this… a bloodthirsty monster. Well. Hadn't he already? The jumbled memories of the panic room and how faithful he'd been to stay at her side flooded her mind. She hung her head, completely miserable and defeated, wanting someone to just tell her it'd be okay, even though she knew it never would be ever again. It was over. A strange, numbing thought. All of it. This was a startling, sad way for it to end. But, Castiel. Razor sharp fangs begged for blood in her mouth and she fought away even more tears as the reality sank in anew.

She never wanted anyone to see her like this, least of all Cas. Let him remember her as they'd been together last: her, brave and sending him off to battle, despite great trepidation. Him, giving her a kiss that had been as beautiful and warm as a sunrise. That seemed a better ending than him seeing her like this: a monster and a disease. She could write him a letter, explain what had happened to him there. Have Sam give it to him. A siren outside blared and Alex clenched her hands on either side of her disastrous, clamoring head. Thump thump. Thump thump. She could smell Sam, she knew exactly where he was without even looking. Her more clear thoughts began to fade as she focused on that.

So many sounds here were harrowing her mind as Sam's steady heartbeat maddened her to insanity, made her fangs beg for blood. If she didn't feed, she felt like she would die. The idea of blood became the only thing she could think about. She could just take a little bit… Sam wouldn't mind, would he? He was a big guy, he didn't need all that gorgeous, delicious lifeblood, he could share some… she looked up, her eyes working insanely well in the dark. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up a little, and she could see how his forearms were covered in huge, blood-fat veins… they called to her. Told her to drink. And she began to forget everything except that call.

Alex stood up slowly and intently, watching him with new, razor-focus as she contemplated him, then realized that was the weapons duffel bag beside her feet... Sam was looking at the bathroom door and not paying Alex any mind—the water was running in there and had been for awhile. Sam sighed, went to the bathroom door. Knocked on it twice, impatient. "Dean." No answer, and he opened the door then seemed surprised. "The hell? Aw come on Dean!" He exclaimed, then turned, crossed the room, grabbed his jacket off the bed.

"I gotta go look for hi—" he never finished the sentence. Alex hit him in the face with a crowbar she'd gotten out of the weapon bag. He was totally unprepared for the attack, stunned to the point of near-unconsciousness. He fell backwards onto the bed and she was swooping in like a hungry tiger, grabbing his wrist and bringing his arm to her mouth. Her fangs sank into his skin and hot blood burst into her mouth even as Sam cried out in pain and surprise.
Dean, not exactly clear-minded in the slightest, didn't think it through. He'd stood there at the bathroom mirror, felt his fangs coming in. And realized this is it. The end of his fucking life. And he wasn't gonna have many more chances to say goodbye or do what needed to be done. Not thinking straight, he'd ducked out the motel bathroom window, gotten into his car, and driven at fatal speeds under the cover of deep night to the place that had been his home for a year. Now, he stood in the dark room just inside the open window he'd broken in through. Watched Lisa sleep in the bed they used to share. She looked beautiful, even through his bleary, profane eyesight—tan, healthy, dark-haired, delicate-featured. So alive. She wore a very tight, skimpy lace camisole. Her neck looked so gorgeous and soft, her décolletage was inviting—he watched how she breathed steadily. He could hear her heart beating even from the distance he stood at, he could smell the intoxicating balm of her blood and he wanted it. A dog abruptly began to bark and Lisa stirred, opened her eyes, then she sat up, startled and afraid at the sight of him, for a minute not knowing who he was. And then she recognized him, even in the darkness.

"Dean!" She exclaimed, surprised, relieved, relaxing a little.

"Hey," he said, trying to sound like himself. But so impossibly sad because of why he was here.

She reached over and turned on her nightstand lamp and it blinded Dean, who looked away, eyes aching at the sudden, impossible burst of light. "Hey," she returned, rubbing an eye sleepily. "I... wasn't expecting you for a couple of days."

"Yeah, yeah…" Dean tried to act normal, but he was squinting and he could hear her heart beating and everything felt wrong. "I wanted to see you." He sat down on the bed, near her feet, because he was afraid of being too close. Of what he might do to her if he lost control.

Lisa, unaware of the reality but picking up on the fact that something was wrong, looked at him carefully. "What's up? Are you okay?"

"Listen…" Dean started slowly, not sure how to explain any of it or how to tell her goodbye.

"What's going on?" She asked, getting very concerned and edging closer. Her heartbeat was picking up a little, he could hear the blood rushing inside of her. Concentrating was almost impossible, and in his mouth, the fangs craved release from where they currently rested, hidden in his gums.

"It, it doesn't matter," he said. He didn't want to tell her the truth. It was too horrible. He just wanted her to know he appreciated everything they'd had. He just wanted her to know he appreciated her. "But I need you to know… you and Ben… just, uh... thanks. Okay? For everything." Every time he tried to look at her, the lamp blinded him. His head pounded.

Lisa slid out from under the cover and moved even closer to him—he could see how she was wearing pretty much nothing, he could smell her blood even more strongly, her heartbeat was louder. "Dean, you're scaring me," she whispered, trying to lean closer to him.

Dean got up abruptly, filled with filthy thoughts involving sex and blood and screams—all hers. "I… I gotta go..." he said with rising urgency, realizing this had been a bad idea. She was not safe from him—he was dangerous.

At his declaration, she stood, confused and riled up. "No, you can't just show up here like this and —"

"Believe me, I wish it was different," he said, cutting her off. Barely able to concentrate at her closing proximity.
"Just stop, and explain to me what's going on out there!" She asked, upset.

Miserable and regretting his decision to come here, Dean shook his head, barely able to meet her gaze. "Lisa, I can't bring this crap home to you."

"You're... you're talking about your work?" she asked, soft, confused. His eyes traveled her. She was so innocent, so ripe for the plucking, so unaware of the things his condition, his disease, was compelling him to do to her...

Resolve heightened because of how alarmed he felt, Dean shook his head, backed up a little from her. "I'm talking about my life. It's ugly... and it's violent... and I'm gonna die—soon."

Very upset now, Lisa stepped closer, beseechingly. "Just tell me. Just tell me what the hell is going on..." she asked, taking hold of his arms and staring into his eyes with vast amounts of concern.

He stared down at her, frozen, fighting his urges, trying not to hear the delicious heartbeat in her veins, trying not to inhale that gorgeous aroma of lifeblood. It was entirely irresistible. He snapped, grabbing her hard and shoving her against the wall that was beside them. She gasped, shocked at his actions, staring at him with wide eyes. As their eyes held, her concern faded, she seemed entranced at him and almost interested—her bosom was heaving as her pulse skyrocketed, he stared at the little curve where her neck and shoulder met—he wanted to taste her there, he wanted to dive into her veins with his fangs, sample her blood. He felt himself giving in, called forward by the song of her pulse, his mouth drawn to the maddening perfection of her neck... Dean, stop his inner voice told him, and he realized what he was doing—he remembered himself and with all the self-control he possessed, he yanked himself away, horrified even as his fangs descended in his mouth, ready to puncture her. He turned away from her and lurched forward a couple steps, pained and in torment, realizing if he didn't leave now, he would probably kill her.

"Dean?" Lisa asked behind him, voice high with panic. She wasn't entranced anymore, and Dean was confused.

"I gotta go," he said, and completely shaken, he fled into the hallway, covering his mouth with his hand, disoriented, his vision blurred. He had to get away from her. He had to get away from everyone.

One door down, Ben emerged—the light coming from his bedroom was bright as the fucking sun and Dean recoiled even as Ben wandered out, rubbing his eyes. "Dean...?" He asked, confused and half-aware, but when he saw it was Dean, he smiled, came forward to greet him.

"Ben, just stay there," Dean commanded, squinting, almost doubled over as he held out a warning hand.

"I thought I heard you—" Ben started, getting too close—Dean could smell his blood and the light behind the kid was inconceivable and Dean panicked, lost his mind.

"I said stay back!" he shouted, shoving Ben aside too hard, where he collided with the other side of the hall. And Dean saw that through what seemed another person's eyes. The callous way he knocked the small kid aside was reminiscent of what his dad had done to him. To his sister. He was just like his father, but even worse now.

And with that thought, Dean tore out of the house, panicking and full of stark fear. I'm a monster. I have to die. Someone has to kill me. I have to die. Someone has to kill me. There was no way he could hold off on drinking someone much longer. The desire was too intense and he was barely holding onto his mind at this point. He pulled out his phone, groaning as he stumbled back to the
Impala—the screen was acid-bright and he could barely look at it. Still, he scrolled through, trying to find someone who would kill him sight unseen. And then, he saw the name Jamie Ward. He'd kept her number, and maybe this was why. Beggars couldn't be choosers. Dean hit call and leaned heavily against the Impala, half out of his mind with lunacy, bloodlust, and horror.

She picked up, and there was some swishing. "What?" she asked, pissy. She sounded half-asleep, still drunk.

"Where the hell are you?" Dean asked, gruff and barely able to concentrate on forming words.

She moaned softly, like she wasn't fully awake, like he was really inconveniencing her at the moment. "Still at the bar. Why are you calling me?"

He didn't explain. Just barked out an order. "Stay there and don't do anything stupid, I need you to do something for me." And he hung up without a word, got in his car, and drove like a absolute madman, alternating between nearly wrecking and nearly running off the road. When he parked crookedly in The Black Rose parking lot, he saw Jamie's Tahoe parked off by itself and he grabbed his machete out of the trunk, stumbling over to the SUV. He could hear all the noises of the city and smell people nearby and he was getting really, really worried that he couldn't hold off much longer. Jamie was asleep in the front seat of her car, her head awkwardly resting on her shoulder. "Still at the bar. Why are you calling me?"

She didn't open her car door or roll down the window. Just spoke through the window. He could barely hear her. "Seriously?" She asked, somewhere between drunk and hung over. "You here to bitch at me more?" Unhappy and groggy, she hunkered down into her seat even more, apparently ready to go back to sleep. "Fuck off before I shoot you," she muttered.

"A gun won't work," Dean said, then indicated his weapon. "You'll need my machete."

That got her attention, woke her up. "Wait… what?" She paused, looked around sort of mistrustfully, then slowly got out of her car, shutting the door behind her. She looked at him carefully and took in the blood along his collar, the red-rimmed eyes, the pale color cast. She was surprised, the bitchy look left her face. "What's wrong with you?" She asked. "You look terrible. Are you sick?"

He shoved the weapon at her with a shaking hand, realizing he could hear her heartbeat, too, and it was making his mouth water. "Chop my head off," he said urgently, "Just do it, make it snappy, before I hurt anyone." She looked at him like he was speaking an alien language, like she didn't know what the hell he was talking about. "I got turned!" He said loudly, then pulled up his upper lip, showing her his new fangs for emphasis. She recoiled, genuinely surprised and finally a little wary.

"You, uh, you might wanna see your orthodontist about that," she said, backing up a little—against the side of her SUV.

Annoyed, Dean was losing his cool, fast. "I don't got time for the comedy club, now do it!" He grabbed her tightly for emphasis, only meaning to scare her into action—but she did nothing, just stared up into his eyes.

In that moment, Dean remembered that some vampires had the ability to compel—put their victims into a trance of sedated and compliant behavior. And when Jamie just let him stand there, pushed up against her intimately—her chest heaving alluringly, her mouth open as she breathed, her eyes
locked on his—he realized that had to be what was happening, why Lisa had let him just shove her against a wall, too.

Dean's breathing was quickening, fast... he could hear the blood rushing inside her, almost taste it. Her ice-blue eyes stared up into his and her heart beat was the most maddening call in the entire universe, he saw her sleeve had fallen down a little to reveal the soft round shape of her shoulder. Her other shoulder was tattooed, he remembered faintly, but this shoulder? The bare skin looked warm, inviting, flushed with blood. He tried desperately to control himself, tried to tell her how he was a monster, what was wrong with him: "I wanna drink your blood, understand?" He asked softly, losing his edge of alarm in place of desire. He was looking at her and finding her so intoxicating, so delicious, so ready for the taking. Beautiful. "Taste you... feel your heartbeat in my mouth... sink my teeth down deep into that soft little neck of yours..." the words kept coming and he didn't even think he was saying them, but she smiled a little, eyes glazed over and not clear, as if she were drunk or high on what he was saying.

Dean's clarity was falling away in favor of bloodlust—he didn't even know who she was or care. "You smell so damn good—" he said and leaned in, letting his hand graze the bare skin of her shoulder where blood flowed beneath. He couldn't help himself. He had to have her blood, now. He pulled her sleeve down further, grasping her shoulder and pulling it to him as she made a soft sound of surprise—not protest. He bent down, pressed his nose to her skin, inhaled deeply—opened his mouth, his fangs descending, begging to pierce through the silken skin and harvest hearty red lifefluid. And the second one of those fangs touched her skin, she snapped out of her trance, said "hey!" and shoved him away before he could break the skin. Following his stumble, she arced her elbow up and crashed it into his face, stunning him, then grabbed his collar and cracked her fist into his face repeatedly—she hit like an MMA champion, he thought faintly as she beat his face in. She let go when he was good and woozy, and he collapsed down onto his back next to his machete, which had already clattered down uselessly.

Dean looked up at the fierce blonde woman in the red party dress who had just broken his nose, he was pretty sure. "Biting is rude," she said, upset and a little surprised, shaking out her fist a little, grimacing.

He groaned, maybe at the pun or maybe at the physical pain, at the noise clanging around in his head, maybe at the horrible realization that he'd almost just fed on her. The things he'd said to her struck him, the way he'd almost bitten her crashed over him and he despaired at himself. "I told you, you got to kill me," he said, miserable and past hope.

She dropped the jokes and relented. Crouched beside him, keeping her knees together tightly. She looked at the machete, then him. Briefly, she had no guard up at all, and he felt like he was looking at someone else entirely. "I'm sorry, Dean." She meant it, and it was obvious, and she seemed genuine, almost vulnerable. Like she identified with him or something. He could smell her blood still, and it was clouding his mind.

Dean reminded himself that he didn't like her, that she was a witch, that he didn't associate freely with her kind. "I don't need anyone feeling sorry for me," he said gruffly, trying not to get cold feet. He needed to die. He was thisclose to killing. "Now pick up that damn machete and end this now please."

A little chagrinned, she shook her head. "You know, I appreciate you using your manners, finally, but—"

He grabbed her wrists angrily, suddenly, yanking her down, almost knocking her over as he pulled himself up, getting in her face. "Enough with the jokes, James!" Dean exclaimed, barely able to
tolerate the insane need to taste her. Her small wrists in his big hands pulsed with blood and life and he let go as if stung, laid there propped up on an elbow beneath her—she'd fallen over him, was pushing herself away from him with her hands. "I want blood, understand?! I want your blood. I'll kill people, I'll kill you!" She seemed to believe him, genuine fear flickered across her eyes, and Dean swallowed painfully, because this was such a shitty ending to his story. This was the opposite of who he was supposed to be. He was supposed to save people, not hurt them. Jamie looked down at the machete, slowly reached down and closed her fingers around the handle, looked back at Dean with unsure eyes.

He braced himself for the kill, wished he hadn't gone to see Lisa. He should have stayed with Sam and Alex, the ones he owed more to than he ever would to Lisa, loved a million times more than anyone else in the world. Shoulda, woulda, coulda. Story of his life. Just another failure to add to the never-ending list. Too late for regrets. He'd done what he'd done. He hardened his face and voice, raised his chin, faced it like a man. "Now do your damn job and gank me," he told her commandingly, not letting her see his inner conflict. "You gotta put me down. I'm a monster."

There was a long pause, and she looked at him with an unreadable expression, searching his eyes with hers. "I dunno about that, Dean," she said, then softly touched the side of his face with a warm hand, soft fingertips. He looked at her questioningly. Even as he was opening his mouth to ask her what the hell she was talking about, she uttered a single word: "Somnus."

And with that word, Dean Winchester's world went black as the night.
"It doesn't matter what you are. It only matters what you do."
- Sam Winchester

Alex became aware slowly as she came out of the darkness of unconsciousness.

Momentarily disoriented and not remembering what had happened, she could feel how she sat in a wooden chair with her hands behind her. Ropes were tied around her waist and arms tightly—the hell? She strained at them instinctually, even before her eyes had opened fully. And then she remembered attacking Sam, feeding on him—and him getting the crowbar away from her. Ah. He must have knocked her out. Coming to quickly, feeling a new sort of calm and strength as she woke, Alex realized that she felt… good. Sam's blood, although she hadn't gotten a lot, made her feel totally different. Alive again, but in a new way. A better way. That's what her first thought was, but then quickly after it, she recoiled internally, horrified at her own thought process. Alive in a better way? She'd been turned into a vampire and just fed on her own brother! Distinctly, her two mindsets warred against the other: her familiar humanity which was slipping away as her newfound vampiric state of being fought for dominance.

The constant barrage of noises hadn't stopped—she heard heartbeats and traffic and lightbulbs and electricity—but the sounds weren't as completely jarring and deafening as before; she felt like she could almost separate them from her senses, somehow—she wasn't sure how to process it at all. And then Alex realized… there were two human heartbeats in the room with her now, not just one. She raised her lolling chin off her chest, and saw that a pair of black booted feet were in front of her. She frowned. That wasn't Sam. She looked up slowly.

A tall, imposing man with a shining bald head and thick eyebrows was looking down at her, his arms folded. "There you are," he greeted leisurely, smiling just barely—he looked distinctly calm and in control, self-assured. She didn't like it. "Morning, sunshine."

Alex stared at the man guardedly. She'd met him just the once, and he hadn't left the best impression then, either. "Samuel..." she greeted cautiously. His heartbeat was steady, loud, strong. Samuel Campbell: her maternal grandfather—her mother's father. She didn't know much about him except he was a hunter and had died in the seventies… yet was somehow inexplicably alive again since about a year ago, just like Sam was.

"'Grandpa' would be fine, too," he suggested. And even though his tone was friendly and pleasant enough, there was an unpleasant glint of calculating and superiority behind his eyes. Alex felt another twinge of dislike.

She pulled a little against the ropes that held her down again, realizing that she almost felt strong enough to snap the ropes completely. But instead of testing that theory, she decided to bide her time. She raised her chin, narrowed her eyes, then adopted a guarded and snide tone. "So what is this? Family reunion?"

Samuel's little smile never left his face, resulting in an expression that seemed to imply Alex was stupid. "Your brother didn't tell you I was on my way?" He glanced to the side, Alex followed his gaze. She'd already known he was there—Sam's heartbeat and scent was familiar, locked inside of her somehow—but it wasn't until she laid eyes on him that she reacted with genuine care. Saw what she had done. Sort of sullen and in a new shirt, Sam had his arms crossed. On one of those arms, a large bandage. The place where she'd bitten him. He stared at her sort of balefully from near the
"I'm here to help," Samuel explained.

Yeah, whatever. He was a little too late—Alex—the real Alex, not the corrupted vampire-version of Alex, saw her brother, saw what she'd done, and was deeply horrified at herself, realizing all over again that she was a monster. She saw how the faintest bit of blood had seeped through his bandage. Her mouth watered a little—and then her eyes teared up as she realized how she truly couldn't fight this, that it was suddenly who she was, and she was powerless to change it. She wasn't human anymore. "Sorry," Alex muttered to her twin, then bowed her head down, kept her voice gruff, shoved her tears away angrily. "You, uh, you okay?"

Sam shrugged, pushing himself up to stand, arms still crossed. He seemed unable to give two shits about anything either way—he took a couple steps toward her. "Yeah. Fine." He paused and cracked a cynical, straight-faced joke. "My shirt's ruined." She looked at him at that point, confused—Sam shouldn't be wisecracking at a time like this, should he? Who was this guy? He narrowed his eyes at her, like he was trying to figure something out. "How do you feel?" He questioned. In the past, Sam would have asked that out of genuine care and concern. But today, he seemed to ask it out of a scholarly interest—there was no empathy in his eyes.

Hurt because it was clear he didn't really care and she didn't know why, Alex resorted to defensive sarcasm. "Dead inside," she quipped sullenly, peevishly staring past Samuel and at the empty bed behind him. Then, Alex realized someone was missing. Worry surged forth. "Where's Dean?"

Samuel glanced at Sam, who looked down, smiled derisively, appearing to be mildly annoyed. "On his way back right now."

Well that was cryptic. Whatever, Sam. Everything he was doing was pissing her off more and more, but it didn't really matter anymore. It was too late to fix the broken relationship or figure out what had changed. And honestly, she didn't even want to. She didn't like Sam anymore and was bitter at how he'd let her think, that whole damn year, that he was dead—he seemed to have no remorse about how it had torn her up. It was like he didn't care at all.

She was done trying to understand. She was done with everything, like it or not. After all, this was probably her last day on earth. She and Dean couldn't stay the way they were… she knew that, below her in-shock state of mind. They were menaces. Monsters. That word kept coming to mind. And monsters had to be put down.

Unbidden, she thought of her heart—no, not the flesh and blood thing that was in her chest—the fierce, gentle angel in the trench coat. She would have one final request before Sam or Samuel ended her existence: That they allow her to write him a goodbye letter in private, then see that he got it. She couldn't say goodbye in person; she couldn't stand the thought of letting him see her like this. Selfishly maybe, she couldn't bear to think of him seeing her like this. That, and she was so afraid she'd lay eyes on him and want to drink him…

Samuel was dragging a chair up, setting it across from the one Alex sat tied into. His heartbeat was loud and annoying. Swallowing her emotionally raw thoughts, Alex raised her chin again, projecting a cool, somewhat hostile demeanor toward the balding grandfather who she didn't know from a hole in the wall. "So you here to kill us or what, 'Grandpa'?" She asked, snide.

Samuel didn't seem to like her rude tone, but instead of glowing, he just smiled a little more, calm and composed. "That dad of yours didn't teach you to respect your elders, huh?" He asked conversationally, setting the chair to face back-first toward her. His casual insult surprised Alex. He took a seat across from her, sat on his chair backwards, like he was totally at ease… and she
didn't like his know-it-all attitude or the cool way he stared at her. "Figures," he said mildly, clasping his hands together over the back of the chair. "Anyway, I can't say what your future is, per say, but Dean might still have one."

Alex looked at him shrewdly and despite her growing insolent feelings toward him, decided to ignore his fighting words and be the bigger person. "What do you mean?"

Samuel held up a leather-bound book that looked old as hell. "This here's my grandfather's journal. There's a cure in here."

"A cure?" Sam and Alex chorused. Samuel shot Sam, in particular, a strange look.

"A cure for what?" Alex asked urgently, feeling a sense of hope where she'd had none before.

"The journal says the cure'll turn a newborn vampire back to a human," Samuel explained, and Alex gaped. There was a way out of this? The second she thought that, Samuel stomped her hope down unintentionally. "But, thing is… the vampire can't have fed. And Sam here says you already have."

Expression falling and shoulders slowly lowering down into a slump, Alex averted her gaze. Samuel sounded sort of haughty about that last part. She had barely been able to think, she'd needed blood so bad. Same old song and dance, huh? Once an addict, always an addict. Alex was so disappointed in herself. But she also realized that for now, the need was sated—a small mercy. She wasn't insane with bloodlust... even though both Sam and Samuel's blood was loud and distracting, she was okay. She hoped Dean had somehow managed to hold off better than she had. What if he'd fed, too? Then the cure wouldn't work. Alex almost scoffed at that point, because she had no clue if some hokey old cure from some obscure old journal would actually work. She had no idea if Samuel was actually a good hunter or reliable resource—Sam said he was, but Sam was full of shit lately.

"You tried this cure out before?" Alex asked, looking at Samuel closely. Hoping that maybe he'd say yes and at least Dean could escape this nightmare.

"Haven't had occasion," Samuel said, a little grim now.

Alex looked down and clenched her jaw tightly. Well, at least Dean had a some small shot in hell. That was better than what she had going for her. "So basically, I'm fucked," she surmised.

Samuel was disapproving at her choice of words. "You should really mind your tongue a little better, young lady," he said.

Whipping her head up, Alex stared at her grandfather challengingly. Just what she needed. Some bullshit male relative who had no right to say a damn thing to her coming in here and acting like he could just tell her what to do. No—she didn't think so. "I'll say what I want," she retorted, daring him to say something else to her, daring him to try and tell her what to do again.

Instead, he just drew back slightly, looked mildly thoughtful. "Huh."

"What?" Alex asked in a short, hostile tone.

Samuel looked at her coolly, taking his time to reply. "No respect for authority, mouth like a trash can, think you know everything..." he shook his head a little bit, seeming to be looking down on her. "You're more like your father than I thought you'd be."

Taken aback and bristling, Alex blinked once. "The hell is your problem?" Clenching her fists, the
ropes strained against her stiffened arms and she let her expression twist into something ugly and hostile. "You want my respect, you earn it, old man," she spat. "And don't you mention my dad to me ever again."

Yet again, Samuel's face was even-keeled and he seemed to almost enjoy how he'd so obviously goaded her. "I can see that this is an argument that's gonna go south, fast," he said neutrally, but that small, superior smile never left his face. "Let's quit while we're ahead."

Disliking him more and more, Alex gritted her teeth. He was the most patronizing, infuriating… "Who put this guy in charge anyway, huh Sam?" Alex asked angrily, sharply looking at her twin. Then realized she had another important question. "And what the hell are you guys gonna do with me if there's no cure, huh?" She was breathless, getting mad, getting real warmed up to the idea of drinking one or both of the men at this point. And realizing that—how the thought of tearing into her own flesh and blood family struck her as appealing—her more human mind fought for dominance, she was startled into sudden fear at herself and her thoughts. Her heart hurt, she thought of Castiel again and her eyes stung once more. She wanted him to be there so bad, to make everything okay; but she also never wanted him to come again, because she was a monster and she couldn't have him see her like this.

The two men looked at each other wordlessly when she asked what they were going to do with her if there was no cure. There was an abrupt knocking at the door. Sam's arms uncrossed. "That must be her." Momentarily distracted, Alex looked at her already-moving twin with a confused frown. Who must be who?

Samuel stood too and followed Sam to the door. Alex couldn't see from where she was, no matter how much she craned her head. Then she heard a familiar female voice and she went still, shocked. "Special delivery. He's passed out in the back of the dark green Tahoe parked on the west side of the building." Alex heard the sound of keys jingling like they'd been tossed and caught, heard Sam say thanks. Heard two pairs of heavy footsteps leaving the motel room. Heard high-heels clicking toward her. Smelled new blood.

Alex already knew who it was before she saw Jamie, but still. When Jamie slowly, hesitantly walked to stand in front of Alex, it was like a punch in the gut to see the familiar face—mostly because it reminded Alex of Glen, reminded her of what had happened. She swallowed, suddenly nerve-wracked. And then was confused, because Jamie was wearing a worried expression and a little red dress with a plunging neckline and long sleeves. Not her normal jeans and screen-printed t-shirt combo—was she hunting in that dress and heels combo? There was nowhere to hide a weapon, anywhere.

"You're all dressed up," Alex noted guardedly, trying to figure it out and play it cool. "What's the occasion?"

Jamie looked down at herself, like she'd forgotten what she was wearing, then she tried to laugh at herself. All that came out was a lifeless, single chuckle. "Being stupid, I don't know," she said, trying for a conversational tone. But Alex could tell Jamie was off. Distracted. Depressed, even. Jamie was taking in Alex's appearance with a note of confused, faltering amusement. "What's with your trashy outfit?"

"What, you don't like it?" Alex asked, matching Jamie's sort of joking, careful tone. Not unpleasantly, Alex squinted at her friend, forcing herself to ignore the never ending thump thump, thump thump. "What the hell are you doing here, anyway?"

Jamie sighed as if she had no idea and tossed a tired hand up. "Long story, but uh… ran into Dean and he was trying to get me to kill him, so…” she gave a wan, tight attempt at a smile, "interesting
"Dean asked you to kill him," Alex repeated, her stomach flipping unpleasantly at the news. Without saying goodbye to her? Dean wouldn't do that… would he?

Jamie nodded, grim and hard-faced. "Yeah. Seemed pretty desperate," she turned the chair Samuel had been sitting in to face Alex, sat down slowly. "Also, tried to eat me, so..."

Alex's eyebrows raised a little. "Huh," she commented, appraising Jamie closely. "Awkward." The blonde looked sort of awful—tangled hair, bruised forehead, busted lip, dark under-eye circles. Her eyes were bloodshot, and something about her demeanor was different than normal. It looked like she'd been in a lot of fights lately. Maybe because she was now on her own—Alex had killed Jamie's only remaining living relative, to her knowledge. A pit of guilt settled in her stomach but Alex cleared her throat, forcing herself not to feel that way. "You okay?" Alex asked, trying not to sound as bad as she felt. She hadn't even called Jamie to check on her since… since what happened. She hadn't given it much thought at all, had decided to just cut ties, because that was easier. Now, she regretted that decision and felt like a shit friend.

Jamie seemed to be uncomfortable at the question, shrugging and brushing it aside. "Yeah, who cares," she said, downplaying herself, acting like it was no big deal. She eyed Alex's ropes with a frown. "Are you?"

Alex looked down at herself, chuckled darkly. "A little tied up at the moment. Also, a vampire. So… not great." Remorseful, Alex again cleared her throat, figuring she owed Jamie a little bit of an apology. Wondered if Jamie had any clue that she was sitting across from her brother's murderer. "I'm sorry I didn't call you to tell you what happened or whatever. Dean tossed my phone and I just kinda... I dunno. I've been distracted."

"No, it's fine," Jamie said with a valiant effort to sound nonplussed. Looking at Alex kind of sadly now, her eyes rested on Alex's mouth and chin. Alex realized both must have been still covered in blood, and her human mind was embarrassed, her new vampire senses were proud. And she was left in the middle not knowing how to feel. There was a long silence, then Jamie looked Alex in the eye. "Dean, uh, didn't say you got turned, too."

"Sounds like." Alex pushed that sad thought away and set Jamie with an intensely questioning gaze. "Why didn't you kill Dean if he asked you to, anyway? You saw what he was, right?"

Jamie made a face like she was thinking trust me, I saw… "Yeah. I definitely but… I couldn't. Figured it should be a family decision, I dunno." Jamie looked at Alex with renewed sadness. "Hold still." She quickly leaned in and wiped Alex's chin off for her, not getting too close, seeming to understand that the closer she got, the more it would bother Alex. Jamie's heart beat was so loud
and the sound of her blood was rushed noisily in Alex's ears. She tried not to hear it or think about it.

"Thanks," Alex said, depressed, glancing at how the washcloth came away bright red with Sam's blood. Blood. The sight of it made her a little hungrier for some, made her remember all over again what a monster she was. "Back up, would you?" She asked Jamie quietly, voice trembling. "Your blood's noisy as hell," Alex complained, looking down, unable to look her friend in the eye.

Jamie did, stood back. "You know, I still haven't forgotten Ypsilanti," she said after a minute. "How you saved my ass back there. Lemme, uh, make some calls and check some spell books. See if I can figure anything out." She nodded toward the door. "My phone's out in the car." She made to leave, but Alex stopped her with five words—a sudden confession she blurted out.

"Jamie. I killed your brother."

Immediately, Jamie's heart rate skipped, then doubled. She stopped in her tracks and looked at Alex with a gaping, horrified expression. Alex stared at her own knees. "You knew that had to be me, right?" she asked guiltily. She was gonna die soon anyway, might as well face this oddly shameful situation. "When you found him dead there, me gone and not answering the phone—you had to know, put two and two together… figure out it was me, right?" She looked up at Jamie, who was clearly upset and surprised.

It was weird, it was stupid, being so messed up about killing the asshole who'd tried to hurt her—he'd deserved it and Alex really felt justified, but at the same time, she felt horrible because that was her friend's brother. And Alex had been fool enough to believe Glen was her friend, too. That he was trustworthy. There was a lot of deep shame surrounding the entire thing in Alex's mind. A lot of pain she didn't want to face.

Jamie looked down, her expression deeply troubled and conflicted—not angry or indignant or murderous. "Look," she said in a strained voice, "I don't know what he did to you but I'm... it's..." she couldn't seem to find a way to explain herself. "Dean and I talked, the day it happened and he... he sort of alluded to it being pretty bad and I just..." her jaw clenched tightly, she looked at Alex in the eye, and for the first time Alex had ever seen, there were tears were in Jamie's eyes. "I'm sorry," she said, and when she blinked, an ashamed tear ran out onto her cheek. "So sorry. I gotta help you somehow, okay?" Alex was shocked that Jamie seemed to already know, understand, and accept what Glen had done. "I had no idea he could... be that way." Jamie swallowed her emotion, hardened her face, wiped her cheek decisively. Set her chin, nodded just once, seemingly unable to think about it any longer, even at all. "I'll look in my spell books. See what I can see." She cleared her throat, became the Jamie Alex was used to: matter-of-fact, focused, and a little grim. "We don't need to talk about this ever again. In fact, I'd prefer it if we didn't."

Alex nodded, because she could definitely agree to that. "Yeah. Okay. Good."

Without another word, Jamie left even as Sam and Samuel returned and carried Dean in, dumping him into a bed. He seemed to be unconscious. Alex craned her neck, a new reason to be upset distracting her from the other one. What had happened to him? Had he fed? Was he okay? Sam smacked his face repeatedly even as Samuel stood back, arms crossed. "Wake up, Dean," Sam commanded, and when Dean stirred and protested, sat up, Sam immediately demanded to know: "Did you feed?"

"Outta my face, your blood is so freakin' loud!" Dean commanded, surly and pushing Sam away, hard—then catching sight of Alex, whose chair faced the bed. "Why's she tied up?" he asked, looking at Sam balefully for an explanation.
"Because she decided to *attack* me," Sam answered shortly. "Now did you feed or not?"

Dean said nothing, just set his jaw and seemed to be really pissy, glaring in Sam's general direction, then Samuel's. "Answer the question, Dean," Samuel said sternly.

Dean batted an invisible something away in annoyance. "You can relax, I didn't *drink* anyone."

Samuel let out a tense breath. "Thank God *one* of you's strong enough to withstand the temptation."

Alex looked at her grandfather sharply, not appreciating the comment.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Then, understanding, slowly he looked at his sister, his expression falling with the beginnings of dread. "Al?"

Uncomfortable under his stare, Alex looked down. "Yeah," she confirmed. "I'm sorry." And she was, at least in part. Her body wasn't sorry, but her mind was. And anyway, it was too late. A little sullen, her eyes darted back up to her brother. "Where'd you go, anyway? Why'd you just leave?"

"She said you tried to eat her," Alex said, fishing for the truth by reading Dean's expression… which was immediately a hundred percent guilty.

"I was under the influence, okay? Still am." He glanced at Sam and Samuel, who must have been pretty appealing at that point to him. Alex was feeling hungry again, too. Dean seemed pissed and desperate all at once. "Shoulda known she wouldn't have the balls to gank me," he grumbled, then shut his eyes and winced as an ambulance wailed past somewhere nearby. "This is a nightmare. We gotta go, quick." He turned to Samuel. "How we gonna do this? I can't watch you kill her. I can't. You gotta do me first." He was pointedly not even looking at Alex—all she could see was his profile, his jaw working hard. She recognized it. And seeing him that upset always got her upset, too.

Samuel looked at Dean for a moment, then walked forward. "Okay…" he said slowly, pausing for effect. "Or… I can just turn you back."

Dean faltered slightly, as if he hadn't heard right. "What?"

"I didn't drive all this way to kill you, Dean—I'm here to *save* you."

Suspicious, Dean looked his grandfather over closely. "How?"

Samuel sauntered over to the table where he'd set his journal down. "I have a cure," he said, opening up the journal and tapping a bookmarked page with his finger. Dean, frowning judiciously, went to look. "It's an old Campbell recipe, kind of like the soup. No one's tried it since God knows. What I hear… this stuff is a bad trip."

Dean looked up from the old, yellowed page of the journal, looking uncertain of what to believe. "You tried it before?" he asked, and it was possible to hear how he was allowing himself to hope.

"No," Samuel said. "But the cure is good according to these pages, and nothing in here's ever led me astray before." He leaned forward over the table, hands on its surface. "But you gotta hold off—a lot of this is on you. You drink, you're done, the cure won't work. I'm talking one drop of human blood—"
"Wait," Dean cut him off gruffly, suddenly frowning deeply again. "Wait." He looked at Alex, who was silent and watchful. "She drank Sam. So that means what?"

Samuel straightened slowly. "I dunno what to tell you. It says this only works if the newborn vamp hasn't already fed."

Dean obviously didn't like that. "No—no. If there's a way to save me there sure as hell has to be a way to save her! Who says this cure won't work on a full-on vamp? Huh? I mean, you don't even know if the cure works at all, right? You seen it with your own eyes, 'grandpa'?

Samuel paused, reaffirmed what they all already knew by now. "I haven't."

"Okay, all right," Dean said, agitated and cagey. "Here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna try for this cure and hope like hell it'll get my sister un-vamped. What do we need to make this happen?"

"Your fighting spirit's admirable, son," Samuel said, but he didn't sound like he meant the words. "Trickiest thing on the list's blood of the fang that turned ya."

That gave Dean pause. He didn't seem to know what to do with that information. But Alex did. "I don't remember the guy who did it, but I have his scent," Alex said, and suddenly three sets of eyes were on her.

"You have his what?" Sam asked, seeming to be confused and a little grossed out. Alex just gave him a silent and brief fuck off glare.

"Okay, you tell me where he is, I can get it," Dean said, looking ready to go, now.

"You're gonna walk right into the nest?" Samuel asked dubiously.

"Well, I'm one of them, aren't I?" Dean asked. "So all I gotta do is get in there, get the guy alone, and shoot him with so much dead man's blood that he'll think he's rushing a fraternity."

"I should come with you," Sam said.

Dean immediately made a face. "No. Dude, you reek. You're like a walking hamburger. I gotta do this solo."

"How?" Alex asked. "You won't know which vampire it is, Dean. And even if you knew who it was, you're anemic. Those vamps get the drop on you, you're dead. I barely drank any and I feel... well, pretty good now." She decided to test her earlier theory and began to use all of her strength to strain against the ropes. "Good enough to do this." The bonds holding her snapped against her new superhuman strength, and as she stood up, Sam and Samuel both looked shocked. She heard how Samuel's heartbeat picked up in anxiety and she smirked a little, looking at him darkly. He was nervous she was going to hurt him or drink him. "Relax," Alex said, decided to play with him a little bit. "I don't drink old people."

Dean looked grim about taking her along, but made no arguments. "Get your machete."

She crossed the room, under Samuel's watchful gaze, and reclaimed her weapon that Sam had taken from her whenever he'd knocked her unconscious.

"Okay, as good as this sounds..." Sam hesitated, "we haven't been able to find the nest yet, how will you?"

"Didn't you hear me?" Alex asked, stashing the serrated machete inside her jacket. "I can smell the
guy. The nest is two miles east of town."

Dean looked at his sister, nodded quickly, then glanced at his brother and grandfather. "We'll be back," he said.

"Dean." Samuel pulled out a large, safety-capped syringe filled with blood. "Might need this. Dead man's blood. Now, there's enough there to drop a linebacker, and then some." Dean hesitated, obviously suffering from bloodlust... then took the syringe of what was poison to vampires. Samuel looked at him intensely. "Good luck, son."

Wordlessly, Dean stashed the syringe in his pocket and tightened his jaw. Looked at his sister, jerked his head toward the door. Silently, she took his cue, and brother and sister headed out.

The second they were gone, the second the door shut behind them, Samuel rounded on Sam, who had started gathering things and packing up. "What the hell's wrong with you, Sam?"

Pausing, Sam looked up as if he had no idea what his grandfather was asking. "Whaddya mean?"

"You knew about the cure."

Sam's face showed mild confusion. "What?" He scoffed, as if the idea were preposterous. "No I didn't."

"We talked about it months ago," Samuel reminded him.

"Not me," Sam said, his tone a little too hard and insistent. He resumed shoving things into his duffel bag. "Must've been Christian or something."

Samuel knew what he remembered and didn't hide his doubtful expression. "Huh. That's strange, cuz if you had known, it'd be almost like you let them get turned," he said, accusing without saying the words outright. "Get a man on the inside? Help us find that alpha vamp we've been looking for?" Samuel watched his grandson closely, trying to read between the lines. "Only something went a little wrong with that plan, didn't it? When sis got bitey." He looked at Sam's bandaged arm for effect.

Sam stopped, looking at his grandfather as if he were perplexed and offended. "You serious? You think I'd do something like that, risk my own brother and sister?" Sam paused for effect, looking at Samuel with revulsion. "What's wrong with you?"

To Samuel, Sam's reaction seemed pretty damning and he didn't back off. Just kept staring at his grandson, waiting for the kid to crack. Sam looked mildly uncomfortable under his grandfather's unflinching stare. "Look, I'm just relieved there's a cure, okay?" he asked, trying to act the part of concerned brother.

"For Dean," Samuel reminded. Strange. In Samuel's day, family stuck together... Sam didn't seem to subscribe to that belief, almost seemed to detest his siblings. "Son, your sister's prospects aren't good. I don't see her living through the night." Samuel paused, expecting just a flicker of something from Sam. But he saw nothing. So he tried to clarify. "Mostly because we'll have to finish her off if the cure doesn't work. Which... I'm pretty sure it won't." Again, he waited to see Sam's reaction. There was none.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Sam said, then gestured vaguely, as if he were suggesting that they leave. The only thing he seemed to be feeling was eagerness to depart. "We should probably try and go find the nest, I don't care if the two of them are vampires now. They're gonna need backup." It was like Sam was trying to say and do the right thing, but not for reasons
Samuel understood.

Samuel wasn't sure what to make of Sam's behavior. His grandson was already halfway out the door and Samuel followed grudgingly. Sam was hiding something, and Samuel knew it. Wasn't sure what. After all, he hadn't even met Sam until roughly a year ago… when they'd been resurrected from death and run into each other during a hunt. Sam was reliable, efficient, sharp-witted. But also sort of disturbing with how detached and cold his personality was. He was the opposite of his siblings—Dean and Alexandra were obviously spitfires and they seemed to have much more emotional sides than their brother Sam did. Dean's fierce loyalty and obvious deep sensitivity made Samuel think of his beloved daughter Mary… Dean truly was his mother's son. But the only thing Samuel could see when he looked at his granddaughter was John Winchester. The man who'd stolen his daughter away. The man Samuel Campbell had never approved of in the slightest.

Sam and Samuel exited the west side of the building, back out toward where that blonde young woman, Jamie Sam had said was her name, was still parked. The red dress was highly impractical, especially since she was allegedly a hunter. She had the back of her vehicle open and stood there intently studying a little volume under the light from a nearby streetlamp. She glanced up at Sam and Samuel. "Going somewhere?" she asked in mild curiosity. Dean and Alex must have exited the other side of the building.

"Yeah," Sam said. "Thanks for your help." He never stopped walking. He kept heading for Samuel's black van. Samuel, however, paused to look over Jamie's stash. In the back of her car, a relatively neat assortment of weapons and tools of the trade. He saw several spell books—huh, interesting—and some herbs tied loosely, hanging as if to dry. Not a hunter's most normal accouterments. She held a small leather-bound book in her hand. It looked distinctly witchy from the pagan symbols he could make out etched along the spine and cover. She didn't see how he studied the book.

"Where are Dean and Alex?" she asked, craning her neck slightly as if she expected to see them following behind Samuel. Worry. He heard worry there in her voice, although it was very carefully disguised and almost impossible to catch.

"Went to the vamp nest," Samuel explained. "They need blood from the fang that turned them for the cure to work."

Jamie paused, her expression sharp. "Right." She seemed very cautious and slow to believe. "Alex said the cure would only work on Dean?"

Samuel didn't know how Jamie knew the Winchesters, but he could see that her concern was genuine—and mostly about Alexandra. "That's probably true. We'll see," he replied. He held out a hand, smiling tightly, figuring it was time for formal introductions. "Samuel Campbell. I'm their grandfather."

She looked at him without hiding the fact that she was sizing him up. She stuck her hand out and shook his briefly. "Right. Jamie. Ward."

He smiled a little more at her. "You kinda remind me of my daughter," he said. Really, anyone in their twenties with a pretty face and blonde hair reminded him of Mary.

"…Okay." Jamie's expression showed uncertainty, but she made no reply to his sudden, out-of-place observation. She indicated the small, leather-bound book she had brought in with her. "Look. I think I might have found a spell to fix Alex."
Samuel paused. He decided to test his theory. "You a witch?"

Her ice-blue eyes darted to his and narrowed just slightly. "We gonna have a problem if I am?"

Samuel smiled slightly. "If you can be useful, I don't care what you are."

She didn't smile in return. She seemed to be a very serious person, but not in the way Sam was. He saw how much pain she was trying to hide. What was that? Vulnerability? Jamie opened up the book, which seemed to be a journal not too unlike Samuel's—handwritten pages, little sketches of things, pagan looking designs and spells jotted down across the tanned pages. "Okay, the spell I remember hearing about… apparently witches don't cast it anymore because, historically, it kills the witch who does the spell," she said, looking at a clipping pasted in. It had writing in a language Samuel didn't recognize, and an odd illustration of two circles overlapping each other. "I think because the disease transfers over to the caster, or like the life forces switch—there's not a lot of information on the spell, but I think it works. So, if the cure doesn't work for her… we can try this."

Samuel paused, frowning. "You willing to risk your life over this?" He paused, getting a sudden idea. And Samuel Campbell was a straightforward man… so, he asked, not hesitating. "You two… together or something?" When he got a surprised look from her, he shrugged mildly. "Hey, I'm from a different time, but we had lesbians back then."

Jamie's face registered a completely floored expression. "Uh... no. We're not a couple." She seemed so surprised that she reacted with humor, she cracked a little bit of an awkward grin and looked down, chuckled just once, seeming to find the idea ridiculous. She was pretty, he thought, and she reminded him even more of Mary than before. Jamie composed herself, explained why she was willing to risk her life, without saying anything in specific. "Let's just say I owe Alex. Big time." She was telling the truth, Samuel thought. She seemed a little guilty about something. "And if I died casting the spell, saving her… hey, at least it would be on my terms. At least it would be for something important." She said all that with a straight face and a tone of voice that gave away nothing, but...

Samuel fixed her with a very curious look and didn't bother being anything but blunt. "Almost seems like, to me, you wanna die."

Mild surprise flashed across her guarded eyes, then he saw no other tells. "Interesting theory," she commented, not giving away anything else.

Samuel glanced toward the van, where Sam was waiting, arms crossed, expression impatient. "We're gonna go meet the kids over at the vamp nest," Samuel said, turning his attention back to Jamie. He was always looking for new people to add to his team, and this girl—who obviously hunted alone, was looking for something or someone to latch onto… he wanted to audition her. See if she was any good. "They might need backup if things get rough. You in?"

She crossed her arms, looked over at Sam with a tense expression, considering, then back at Samuel. She seemed as guarded as before, but he saw, before she agreed, that she was going to. "Sure." She shrugged and raised an eyebrow just slightly. "All dressed up, I need someplace to go." She tossed down her spell book in favor of picking up a fierce looking machete.

Under the cover of night, Dean and Alex made their way across town in tense silence. Their footsteps were hurried, carrying them to a portion of town that was a lot seedier and more run down. "You smell that?" Dean asked, abruptly pausing to contemplate the scent. They stood across the street from a series of buildings. In the shadows of an overhang, they were invisible to anyone...
who had eyes on the street.

Alex nodded, eyeing the ramshackle building that was sandwiched between an old bank and a condemned apartment building. "Yeah. This is definitely the place." She paused, the reality of it coming over her again. "I can't believe I can smell vampires." It was sort of cool and horrifying at the same time.

"Yeah. Trippy." Dean glanced at his sister sidelong. He seemed really grim, ultra-focused—and he was still having a lot more problems with his new condition than Alex was. Lights and sounds were bothering him a lot more than they were her. She guessed because she'd had blood.

"All right," Dean said, getting his game face on. "Stay close to me, all right?" His tone took on the familiar this-is-how-it's-gonna-be tone she was so used to. "You point out the dude who turned us, we pump him full of dead man's blood, slice him open, steal some of his juice back, then we blow this joint. Things get hairy, you got your machete, I got mine. You still remember how to use yours?"

She scoffed, not sure if he were serious or not. "Do you? I'm the one who's been hunting most of the year." He shook his head and groaned as, nearby, a train rumbled by on the tracks, brakes squeaking. Alex heard it too, but it didn't demolish her eardrums like it would have earlier. Dean started off toward the building, but before he'd even gotten a step, Alex stopped him with her arm. "Dean, there's a lot of vampires in there," she said. She could smell them. At least twenty. "What if they figure out something's up or we can't slice open the leader without a captive audience?"

Dean, on edge and vaguely sick looking, shrugged. He needed blood, bad. "We'll make it up as we go."

"Don't you ever get tired of doing that?" Alex asked, but she sounded sort of fond, not complaining like she'd meant to.

Dean smiled at her tightly, shrugging. "You know me." They crossed the street together, found that the iron door into the warehouse was unlocked. Dean reached for the handle, but Alex's soft voice cut him off.

"Dean." He looked back at her, waited. She was contemplative, a little upset. "If this cure doesn't work…"

He didn't let her finish. He didn't let her do the whole I'm-dying-and-I-know-it speech. "It'll work. Come on." And he gave her no choice but to follow.

She followed wordlessly into the dim warehouse. It was a disaster—ripped plastic tarps, junk and trash scattered in a tight hallway. Ahead, there seemed to be a bigger room, and that's where Dean was quietly heading. It was silent in here. No heartbeats around, no humans. It was oddly calming, because the humans were so distracting. Alex felt more focused here. More aware. And then, she smelled it, right before he appeared. Out of nowhere, a tall, pale guy with dark hair appeared, stepping out from a side room. Dean and Alex reacted in unison by jumping back—he was a vampire, they could smell it—and they mutually kept their cool, waiting to see what he'd do. And when all he did was say a very bored, "Sup," Dean took the lead, trying to play it cool. Alex stood behind him and slightly to the side, basically semi-hiding behind his shoulder. That guy looked familiar. Hadn't she met him before?

"Hey," Dean said, nervous. She could hear it. "We're, uh…"

"The couple Boris turned outside the bar, right?" The vampire had a lazy smile on his face. "Said
to look out for you."

"Y-yeah," Dean replied, attempting a pleasant, nothing-wrong-here smile, glancing at Alex just briefly. "That's… that's us.

"I'm Robert," the guy said, and his eyes slid to Alex, he smirked. "Remember me, sweetheart? 'You look like the kind of girl who belongs to the night…'?" He asked, grinning lopsidedly. Alex frowned, that weird sense of déjà vu hitting her again. Robert saw her confusion. "No? Ah. Anyway, glad you guys made it. Follow me."

The siblings exchanged a tense glance, complied. "So, you must be starving," Robert said, leading them through a doorway and into what felt like a walk-in cooler. Inside, there were blood bags—the ones that had been stolen from the blood bank. Dean hesitated, obviously unhappy with this new temptation, especially when Robert grabbed a bag and indicated that Dean should take it.

"I'm okay," Dean said. Robert looked at him with a mild frown. Dean fumbled for a cover. "I killed so many people on the way over here, so…"

Robert's eyebrows rose, as if that surprised him. Then, beside Dean, Alex moved forward. "I didn't kill a bunch of people," she said, and grabbed the blood bag, much to Dean's dismay. "I'll take some."

She knew Dean wanted to know what the hell she was doing from the way he was looking at her. And also that he really, really wanted some, too.

"Help yourself," Robert said, grinning as she slurped copious amounts down. This was a strategic move, she told herself, this would make her even stronger if a fight popped up or something. "And hey, new guy…” Robert looked at Dean. "Company line is we, we don't just kill people anymore…” a smile grew on the vampire's face, "but you gotta tell me what that's like."

"Yeah." Dean returned the smile… inside, he was probably chopping this guy's head off with his machete. But outwardly, he just nodded, held the smile. "Yeah, first chance I get, I'll… I'll show you myself."

"Sweet," Robert said, pleased.

Dean looked at his sister, who had just downed a full bag of blood like it was nothing. Practically salivating and yet similarly reviled, Dean watched Alex cast the bag aside and wipe blood away from the corner of her mouth. She was both guilty and relieved. "Tastes just like Capri Sun," she said, and Dean gave her a look only oldest siblings knew how to give.

"Come on. I'll introduce you to everyone," Robert said, not paying attention. He exited the room, indicating that they follow.

Dean caught Alex by the arm as she made to follow. "You crazy?" he demanded in a whisper.

She yanked her arm back from him, replied in an intense whisper of her own. "I'm all in at this point Dean and besides, it'll make me stronger. Just might help me save your ass."

Ahead, Robert turned back a little toward them. "Lover's quarrel?" He snorted. "Hurry it up."

"Why do they think we're dating?" Dean grumbled, following Robert and Alex further into the warehouse, then through a hole in the wall, down some old stairs. They seemed to be in a different building now. Possibly the bank they'd seen. More vampires lurked around the foot of the stairs. Alex could smell the vampire who had turned her even more strongly… but he wasn't one of these.
"Ah, some of your new bunkmates, man," Robert said, looking back at Dean with a jaunty smile and indicating the sullen young men. All of them were handsome, Alex realized. Really, really handsome. Was there something to that? Alex wondered. "They're recruiters," Robert said, then looked at Dean. "Just like you."

"Recruiters?" Dean asked.

"Yeah," Robert said, and stopped, fixed Dean with a smile. "Big man'll explain. I'm guessing your girlfriend here's gonna be a recruiter too, once she's compliant." Compliant? He smiled at Alex, eyed her in a way that seemed predatory and intentional, creepy. "You ever do any writing, sweetheart?"

Robert made to step a little closer, then Dean's arm shot out in front of Alex. "Hands off, man," he said, paused, seeming unsure of what to say next. "She's… uh, mine."

Alex looked at Dean sidelong. Really? He shrugged a little, like, what else was I gonna do? She refrained from making a face. Not the first time Dean had claimed to be her boyfriend to get a guy to back off, actually. But he always did it so needlessly. Robert appraised Dean, stepped back, nodded. "Right, sorry." He looked around, then kept on leading them further in. "This way."

They came into the main lobby of what used to be a very nice bank. No longer well-kept, the place had fallen into disarray. Trash and dirt, dust and cobwebs had taken over. It was nearly three stories high, with a large vaulted stained-glass ceiling above. An old desk was at the floor level, and at it sat a young teenage girl with dark brown hair. Kristen. The girl they'd been looking for. She was somber and pale, sitting in front of a laptop. Behind her, a guy with long curly hair leaned over her. He had a hand on her, and a chilling little smile on his face. Immediately, Alex recognized his scent. He was the one who had turned herself and Dean. She nudged Dean with her elbow even as Robert led them closer. Dean got her meaning, nodded subtly.

"Hey Boris," Robert said to the curly haired vampire. "Found the new converts."

Boris glanced up at the newcomers, pleased. "Be with you in a minute," he said, smiling slyly, then returning his attention to Kristen. He dictated to her, and she typed as he spoke "Put: 'Your skin is the black velvet of the night.'" He chuckled. "Stupid bitch'll eat that up, she'll be dying to meet."

Boris leaned in and took a long sniff of Kristen's hair. She recoiled and Alex's more human side was filled with anger. This vampire, for whatever reason, was preying on impressionable young girls. And she couldn't wait to chop his fucking head off. She looked behind herself, assessing the situation. There were more vampires nearby—a couple of tough looking male vampires. If an all-out fight broke out, Dean was gonna need her help. And then, Alex noticed the cages on the side of the room. Young teenage girls, similar in looks to Kristen, filled the cages. There were six of them, and they were vampires. A few of them were sucking down blood from bags, through tubes. A few were laying on the floor as if bored or tired.

Boris chuckled, petting Kristen still. "Go get yourself some blood, sweetheart. Then march that little ass right back here, okay?"

She obeyed immediately, obviously afraid, and looked at Alex with an intense expression—it was a mixture of fear, hatred, pity, and apathy. Boris slowly swaggered out from behind the desk as Robert led Kristen away to go get blood. "Ah. My newest family members," Boris said, grinning at Dean and Alex. His eyes rested on Alex a little longer. "Sweetheart, into the cage."

"What?" Dean asked, even as a young, male vampire with gauged ears and a bald-shaven head man-handled Alex away from him, and toward a cage that had three other girls in it. Dean
protested. "Hey— whoa, she's not going in there!"

Boris confronted him, held a hand to his chest, blocked him from following. "Relax, loverboy. It's just for a little while. Until we got her nice and tame." Alex shook her head faintly, telling Dean to relax. Not yet. She let herself be put into the cage, resigned herself to spectate. Glanced around at the girls she was sharing a cage with. They were all so young. They couldn't have been more than sixteen years old. Why was this happening? What was Boris's end goal? She turned to look out through the metal bars of the cage, gripping a cold rod in each hand as she watched her weakened brother out there with Boris.

"Glad you're here," Boris was saying. "Wondered if maybe that tall hunter chopped off one or both of your pretty little heads."

Dean didn't seem to have his normal confidence about him. "Nah. We got away." He faltered, seemed to rethink himself, realize he needed to play dumb. "Sorry, what's a 'hunter'?"

"You'll see if he finds us." Boris leaned close to Dean, an almost impish expression on his face. "You'll see him inside out." Boris laughed, entertained at the idea. "You eaten?"

"Yeah," Dean said, barely able to conceal his total contempt, glancing at Alex, who tried to silently tell him to stay strong, be cool.

"Good. You'll need your strength." Boris saw how Dean had looked at her and sauntered over toward her, eyeing her with great appraising interest.

"For?" Dean asked loudly, trying to get Boris's attention back.

Boris turned, slightly flabbergasted. "Robert didn't tell you?" He snorted, a little miffed, forgetting his fascination with Alex. "Figures." Without warning, Boris crossed the space between himself and Dean, got in his face, smiling eerily. "Say. How old do I look?"

Dean looked like he was having a hard time not balking. "Thirty-three?"

Boris grinned. "You've off… by about… six centuries?" He chuckled, backing up dramatically, spreading his arms wide to indicate the room that was full of their kind. "And these are the best days in the last six hundred years to be a vampire. Dracula? Anne Rice? Please. These stupid little brats are so horny they've reinvented us as Prince Charming with a Volvo. They…” he pointed straight at Alex. "All the naive little girls who believe the crap society pedals about our kind… they want a promise ring with fangs, so I give it to 'em. You— you go out and you get them, and you bring 'em home to me."

"S-so what's with the cages?" Dean asked. Alex could almost hear what he was thinking, cuz it's what she was wondering, too. How the hell were they gonna get her out of the cage she was locked inside of currently?

"Oh, that's just, y'know… till they're obedient," Boris said, smiling easily. "Eventually these girls will go out, and they'll fetch me boys like you, and around and around we go…”

"What the hell for?" Alex asked tartly, speaking to him for the first time.

Boris turned to look at her slowly. "For the grand scheme! For the coming day of victory!" He paused, a chilling note of certainty in his voice "You'll see."

Dean swallowed, tried to act like he thought that was cool. "Gotta say, I'm impressed. This whole system, it's… it's all you?"
Boris laughed, as if the thought were preposterous. "Oh no, no, no, no…. I just… implement, y'know? Make sure you all fall in line." He pointed to the ceiling with reverence. "It's his… our father's…"

Dean followed his gaze, confused, and Alex did too. All she saw was stained glass. "Your father's?" Dean asked.

Boris contemplated Dean. "Aren't you the curious one?"

"Oh, you don't know the half of it," Dean said.

Leaning in closer, seriously violating some personal space issues, Boris eyed Dean closely. Uncomfortably. "In due time." Boris's voice lowered to a whisper. "You… you want the private tour, don't you?"

Dean managed a smile through his revulsion. "Thought you'd never ask."

Boris stepped away, beckoned Dean on with a hand, turned his back on him. He began to walk the other way, and Dean seemed to decide it was now or never—the only vampires nearby were caged. And there was still that one bald guy, but he must not have worried to much about it—Dean reached into his pocket and took out the syringe of dead man's blood, uncapped it. He raised it, creeping up on Boris silently, ready to plunge the needle in—but then one drop leaked out and hit the floor. The single drop was loud, like fanfare. With superhuman speed, Boris turned, cutting off Dean's attack by grabbing his arm and ducking under it, suddenly positioning himself behind Dean to twist his arm behind his back, put Dean into a solid chokehold.

Useless and in a cage, Alex watched and shook the bars that held her back. "Dean!"

"You playing games with me, boy?!" Boris demanded—and Dean, weakened because he hadn't fed, dropped the syringe when Boris squeezed his arm hard enough to break it. Boris began chuckling lowly against Dean's neck, triumphant, and Alex wanted to break the fucking bars that were holding her back—and then suddenly, something changed. She felt it. They all felt it. Boris looked upward, as if he were hearing something—his hold loosened on Dean, and suddenly he let go and fell flat onto his back, his eyes still wide open. Was he dead? She didn't know, but she was losing her grip on the bars, her body was going limp.

"De—" Alex began, saw how her brother took a step toward her, alarm written across his face…and then suddenly, she fell down, losing consciousness. A series of quick visions spiraled through her mind: A man sitting on a bench in the night. A little girl in a frilly dress and with a flower in her hair. A graveyard filled with white wooden crosses. A cell dividing. A man—reaching out, with long, sharp fingernails. A large, ivy-covered house. The girl again. Blood cells rushing through a vein. The graveyard, dissolving into a classroom with rows upon rows of empty desks. The little girl. A pond, the man with long, sharp fingernails standing beside it. A roadmap, where the highways pumped like veins. A red circle was drawn around Aurora, Illinois.

She kept seeing the same face, this man with the pointed fingernails, she kept seeing the little girl, and then blood. So much blood.

Suddenly, it was over, and Alex groaned, rolled over, stood up. Around her, the other vampire girls were doing the same. Suddenly, Boris slammed into the cage door almost, jingling keys around in the lock. "So, he thinks he's gonna come in here and shoot me full of dead man's blood?!" He asked. "I don't think so!"

Alex looked at her brother, panicked. He was laying on the ground, not waking up as fast as the
"Dean! Dean! Wake up!" she screamed, realizing that Boris was going to let out the girls and send them after him.

Dean rolled over, saw what was happening, and he scrambled to his feet, grabbed for his machete even as the cage next to Alex opened with a creak. "Go get him, girls!" Boris shrieked, laughing maniacally, rushing over to Alex’s cage to let out those girls, too—they were hissing and panting, ready for blood, and Alex whipped out her machete with no time to spare, hacked one’s head off in the madness before the cage door swung open. But that didn't even the playing field that much at all—and Dean took off running, Alex found herself grabbed and thrown as she tried to give chance. She groaned, blindsided, crumpling against the outside of the cage.

Boris stood in front of her, and behind him, she could see the bloodthirsty, brainwashed girls disappearing up the stairs after Dean. "Looks like your boyfriend's not the only one who's been naughty!" Boris said, eyeing her bloody machete. This curly-haired fucker in front of her was gonna pay, she decided. Game face on, she stood up slowly—her body didn't hurt like it would have, had she still been human. "What, no dead man's blood?" Boris sneered, looking at her machete in amusement. "Just a huge steak knife?" He grimaced, as if sympathetic. "That's really cute but… you're kind of out of your element right here. I'm pretty fast, remember how I got the jump on you in the alley?"

Alex was feeling the familiar surge of adrenaline she did during moments like these. But unlike before, there was a new, superhuman ability of sense. She felt faster, stronger, smarter than before. "Yeah," she replied softly, evenly. "I remember. But now I'm one of you, aren't I?" She smiled a little, feeling how the blood she'd drank before was strengthening her now. "You might find me a little faster and stronger than before."

Boris didn't seem perturbed. "Maybe," he said, chuckling. He didn't appear worried in the least. "But you're new at this, and I've got a few hundred years on you. If you fight me, I'll kill you, sweetheart." He scoffed, then laughed sharply. "All you vampire chicks are the same… weak, useless. Good for one thing, and one thing only. Do you know how many girls just like you I've killed?"

She narrowed her eyes, taking in everything about him, sizing him up. "No. But as of today, your career snapping up innocent girls is over." This was who Alex was, and she felt confident again. Saving people. Hunting things. This was what she did… vampire or not. Last day on earth or not.

"Oh is it?" Boris asked, a smile playing on his face.

Alex paused, eyes going upward. She could hear the shrieks of vampires, the sound of Dean's blade hacking heads off. A little smile came over her face too. "You hear that?" She asked quietly. "My brother is upstairs right now slaughtering every last one of your precious little nest. And when he comes back down here, he's gonna find me standing in a puddle of your blood, holding your head in my hand." She looked at Boris again, let him know, exactly, how dead he was. "Sweetheart… I'm nothing like your other girls."

Boris's teeth slowly showed as his mouth widened into an almost flirtatious grin. "Oh, I like you," he said, then bit his lip for effect. "Feisty." He lowered his chin, looking at her from almost under his lashes. "Come on then. Let's tango."

And tango they did. Alex leapt across the dividing space between them, machete gripped like a sword—he jumped back, laughing when she swiped at the empty air where his neck had been a minute ago. He'd jumped up—was hanging by a single arm, casually, from the little balcony above.
Still laughing, like this was a game he loved, he grinned down at her even as Alex realized if he could jump around like, that must have meant she could, too. And so she tried it: she jumped with all she had, slashing her blade wildly just a second too late. He dodged to the side deftly and, grabbing her by the back of the head, smashed her forehead into hers, stunning her and letting her drop back down to the ground. She was recovering into a roll on the ground floor even as he jumped down. She was already standing and on the defensive—but her machete was several feet off, had been knocked out of her hand. It was in between them. At the same second, they both rushed for it, and when Alex saw Boris making to punch her in the face, instead of ducking the blow, she pulled an old trick out of the bag and slammed her forehead forward into his fist hard enough to break his knuckles—and in his stunned stumble, Alex's foot caught underneath the blade of her machete and she kicked upward, catching the hilt like she'd practiced a million times. And lunging forward, not giving him time to recover, she slashed her blade with all the strength she possessed. The machete found its mark, and the vampire's head sailed off even as his body went slack and fell over.

Breathing a little harder, Alex turned just a little to look at Boris's decapitated head. If she stayed alive long enough, would she become just like him? Lose all the humanity she'd once had? She looked down at her feet, where blood was beginning to pool just inches away from her foot. Upstairs, the noises had ended and she looked up just in time to see Dean appear. Instead of running to her or hurrying, instead, he seemed taken aback. He was covered in blood splatters, seemed weary. But he was alive.

"I, uh… I got the blood we needed," Alex said, her voice quiet and sort of hollow. Even though it should have seemed like victory, it felt more like defeat. Dean came downstairs slowly, his bloodstained machete at his side. He must have taken on all those vamps himself—he looked drained, pale, and the weird red cast underneath his eyes was more pronounced. "You okay?" she asked him.

He brushed aside her question. Just looked at her, then Boris's head. "Are you?"

Two words that she knew he really meant and wanted to know the answer to. It was time to stop lying. Both to herself and to him. There was a bench a few feet away, and Alex went to it, sank down there. She'd been trying to hide from this ever since… well, a long, long time. "No. I'm not okay." She stared at the ground, trying not to break down, because everything was wrong. Everything. "You're right. You were right." He sat beside her and she couldn't stand to look at him and see how sick he was, how unwell he looked, how screwed up their entire life had become as of just a few hours ago. Instead, she put her face in her hands, made a frustrated sound, then made fists and slammed them down onto the tops of her thighs, breathing out fast and hard, once.

For once, Dean said nothing. Just let her angst in silence. Maybe he was doing the same thing. Even though that was what they were after… the blood of the vampire who had turned them pooling at their feet, Alex didn't feel any hope whatsoever. Just despair and regret. "Do you ever just… wish this wasn't our life?" She asked, frustrated and not sure what they had done to deserve this. "The killing and the pain… the losing everything you ever had?" She was mad about it. "I mean, why? Why'd it have to be this way?"

She finally chanced looking at her brother sidelong. He was looking down at his lap, and his profile was distressed. "I wonder that every day," he said, speaking down, not looking at her. They were silent for another very long moment before Dean spoke again. "You were right too. I haven't forgotten Hell. Not for one day." His voice broke on that last word, he shut his eyes against what looked like great amounts of pain. Not knowing what else to do, Alex hesitated, then put a hand on his back. Let it remain there.
Dean forced a smile and it was a valiant attempt, but Alex could see how close his constant pain was to the surface. "So hey, you know what I'm gonna do?" He asked. "If this cure of Samuel's doesn't work on you, I'm not even gonna try it." What? Alex looked at her brother oddly. He shrugged, still not looking at her. "Just, screw it. We'll go be vampires together. Vampire vampire-hunters. Could be fun, right?" He finally looked at her, and it was like he couldn't stand the thought of the other alternative.

"Could be fun," she echoed blankly. They both knew if the cure didn't work, she had to die. But neither of them said anything about it. And reaching out for help from the only person she had left, Alex looked at her brother, at the point of tears. "Dean, when Cas finds out what's happened to me..." Her face was twisting painfully. "That I'm not human anymore..."

Dean had this way of sometimes surprising her with his ability to empathize and put away his own bad attitude about the subject matter. This was one of those moments. He put his arm around her for thought a second. "Neither is he," Dean said. It sounded like it was hard for him to say, but he said it anyway. "Maybe he won't mind, huh?"

Of course he'd mind. And she couldn't keep acting like things were going to be okay. She just needed to know that Dean was going to help her when, not if the time came. "Dean, if the cure doesn't work on me... you guys have to do the right thing."

He stiffened slightly, understanding that she was asking him to be the one to kill her. "No. Don't say that."

Alex looked at her brother through pained, pleading eyes. "You've been helping me and doing the right thing since the day I was born. Don't you dare stop now."

His arm tightened around her, and they said nothing else, both too upset and realizing there wasn't much left to say. That's how Samuel, Sam, and Jamie found them. Big brother with his arm around his baby sister. Blood flooding the area before them, carnage scattered throughout the old building.

Back at the motel, Samuel mixed up the cure quickly as Dean had more and more trouble being around the three humans—Sam and Dean were at the table where Samuel was working as fast as he could. Jamie stood off watchfully and silently. Alex sat on one of the beds, looking every bit as though she were just waiting for the guillotine to fall. *Thump thump, thump thump.* There were too many heartbeats in the room, Dean was barely able to function at this point, his thirst was so great. He felt like he was dying, past hope. And every time any of the humans got closer, he had to fight himself off the urge to drink them. They all smelled so good.

"If this works, you know it's not gonna be a kiddy ride, you know that, right?" Samuel asked.

"Yeah, no, got it," Dean replied, wincing against all the noises that were bothering him.

"So what'd you see in there?" Sam asked, leaning across the table. Getting closer.

His brother's words were loud and cloying, he didn't understand them, and Dean was annoyed with his brother's closeness. "What?"

"In the nest," Sam said, his voice clanging around in Dean's head, mixing with the loud thundering sound of his heartbeat, "what'd you see in there?"

*Thump thump, thump thump.* "Sam, I can't hear you—your blood is so frickin' loud, okay? Just—just back off!" Dean demanded. Sam did, and then Dean saw Jamie behind him again, recognized her scent as Sam's drifted away—it was different than Sam and Samuel's. Softer, sweeter. And he
couldn't stand the sight of her in that red dress with all that damn blood-warm skin showing. "Why are you even still here?" He asked her rudely, glaring.

Samuel glanced up at Dean briefly, pointedly. "Try being a little more polite to the lady, Dean. She's here as backup."

"Backup?" Dean echoed, confused.

"She's got a way to maybe fix Alex if this doesn't," Samuel said.

Dean realized what that meant and decided to pick a fight. "With what, with your witchy crap?" He went over to her and trying to be intimidating, even though he was falling apart and every sound was like nails on a chalk board. "I don't think so."

Jamie rolled her eyes mildly at him, shook her head, not really giving him the time of day. "Get over yourself," she muttered, and he realized he shouldn't have gotten so close. He could almost taste her, and he was intoxicated with the thought of biting into skin, tasting lifeblood, drinking it all down to the last drop. "You wanna back up a little?" she asked tersely, as if she could read his bloodthirsty thoughts. He heard how her heartbeat picked up a little. He was making her nervous. And somehow that made her blood smell even better...

"Dean." Samuel waited for Dean to back up, which he did. But it was hard as hell. Cagey and getting desperate, he backed up, shaking.

"Hurry it up, grandpa," he growled, realizing if they didn't get it done soon, they'd have a bloodbath on their hands, courtesy of his insatiable desire.

"All right," Samuel said, injecting the sludgy mixture he'd concocted with Boris's blood from the syringe they'd used to collect the sample. He divided the cure into two coffee mugs. "Alexandra?"

She got up, appearing peevish at the use of her full name, but accepted the coffee mug from Samuel, sniffed it, and made a face. Dean was almost sweating bullets at this point, but didn't want to take his until he knew she was okay. "Ladies first," he told her.

Shaking her head slowly, she looked brave but scared. "Together," she said. "On three." Just like they always did shots together. Or had, in the past. He wished they hadn't fallen apart. "One, two, three," she counted, and in unison, they chugged the potion. It was absolutely disgusting and lumpy, tasted like the foulest waste imaginable, and Dean could barely swallow it, yet made himself.

"Ugh..." Alex commented when she was done, frowning deeply, then looking at Dean, watching him. He waited. Nothing happened. He still heard heartbeats, still felt an insane desire for blood.

"I don't think it—" he started, then sudden, violent sickness came over him and he barely spun around in time to retch into the waste basket. His body expelled everything he had, he heard Sam ask if it were working, he heard Samuel say that maybe he was dying, he felt his sister with him, holding onto his shoulders...

And suddenly Dean stopped throwing up and went rigid, almost screaming in pain as he looked upward into darkness, felt his eyes explode and stomach shrink in on itself and mind combust. And then he remembered what he'd forgotten as his body writhed in pain yet remained ramrod straight: Alex, laying there in a pile of trash bags with blood on her mouth, him rushing to her as she'd stood up, then shoved blood into his mouth. But... why? Everything rushed his mind. Lisa, Ben, Jamie, Samuel, Sam, Boris, the nest... he collapsed, curled in toward his stomach, unaware of anything
happening in the real world, just sure that he was in pain and dying. And then, it all ended as abruptly as it had begun. The maddening noises, the pain, the sound of hearts beating. He was laying on the ground, panting and sweating and *human*. Stunned, he sat up slowly even as two sets of hands helped him—Alex and Sam. He looked at both of them, dazed and relieved, then realizing Alex appeared the same as before. A little paler than normal, expression gaunt and resigned, like she had a death sentence.

"Did it work?" He asked dumbly, voice soft with threadbare hope.

Alex shook her head, appearing exhausted and defeated. "No."

No? Still in mild physical shock from the cure, Dean looked over at the spot where Jamie was waiting. Only, she was a little closer than she had been, and her arms weren't crossed anymore. He didn't say anything and didn't have to. He was desperate. He didn't care. He wanted Alex to live.

"I guess that means I'm up," Jamie said, a tight little smile on her face. Samuel looked at her oddly.

"You sure about that?" He asked, and Jamie gave him a quick, pointed look, as if she were telling him to say nothing.

"You always get in bad shape after magic," Alex pointed out as Jamie came over to her. "If this spell isn't a sure thing, I don't want you to get messed up over it."

"It's okay," Jamie said, still smiling tightly. Almost nervous or hesitant. "I'll be fine. We should try."

Alex didn't seem too hopeful but agreed anyway. "All right."

Jamie took in a deep breath, as if steeling herself. In one hand, she had a little journal and opened it up, held it open with one hand, then gripped Alex's neck at the side. The men all stood back a little as Jamie began, in a low voice, to recite an incantation in an language none of them recognized. She struggled to speak the more she said, and both Alex and her seemed to grow weak, slumping toward each other. And then, black like charcoal began to creep up Jamie's hand and arm as she chanted faster. Her eyes began to burn white and the black continued to edge up showing on her neck now then her jawline, as if she were taking on the disease itself—and then there was a sound like a sonic boom and with it, both girls fell over as if dead.
Truth Be Told

"Nobody said it would be easy. Nobody said it would be this hard. Oh take me back to the start..."
- Coldplay

Dean had spent more nights just like this than most people ever would: wide awake and listening to the harrowing rhythm of a hospital heart-rate monitor, worrying if his brother or sister or father or friend was going to pull through. Today, it was Alex's steady heart rate he was hearing translated to that familiar pulse of beep, beep, beep. It was both a constant reminder that she was alive but also that she wasn't okay.

The oldest Winchester sat in a flimsy chair next to his sister's hospital bed where he'd been stationed for going on three hours now. He had his arm resting on the bed, his hand over hers. He wasn't gonna let go until she came back.

Dean was exhausted mentally and physically, as usual, but it was all made worse from the vampire crap and the cure crap. Those two things left him feeling like he'd been hit by a semi truck then run over by a steam roller, scraped up with a spatula and then shoved into a blender. To put it succinctly, he felt like shit and the entire hellish night was a horrible, effed up blur. He remembered getting here to the hospital and racing two unconscious chicks into the emergency room with Samuel as Sam had parked the van, but after that… all he remembered was that the doctors said Alex was unconscious for no discernible reason and they had basically said she must be a narcoleptic. He recalled yelling at the doctors for being certifiable dickbag morons when they'd arrived at that ludicrous, unfounded conclusion. There had been a brief moment when he'd almost been kicked out for unruly behavior after that comment, but Samuel had pacified the situation somehow. And now Dean was resigned to wait. Alex's condition was apparently stable enough that the doctors weren't worried. But that didn't keep Dean from worrying.

He paused, looking up and over across the hall—he could see through the open doors into Jamie's room. She was still and drained of all color. The doctors said it looked like she'd had a massive stroke. She was currently in a deep coma—but it wasn't a normal coma. She was at fatal levels of feverish and her brain activity was off the charts. They'd 'never seen anything like it.' Dean heard that phrase so damn often in his line of work and he was tired of it. Answers and solutions… those are the things he wanted and needed right now. He turned his attention back to his sister, squeezing her hand again. Studying her still face for a few seconds. Mumbling a vague threat like he always did when they were younger and she didn't wanna wake up. "Hey, wake up, Al." Beep, beep, beep. "Hey." He paused. Desperate and punch-drunk. "I'm gonna steal all your clean socks if you don't get up." Beep, beep, beep. No response. No suddenly waking up and pushing Dean away and valiantly defending her socks.

If Dean had been a praying man, maybe he would have prayed right then. But as it was… he didn't. The thought crossed his mind to call Cas for help, but stubborn, bitter pride kept him from trying. It wasn't dire yet. And last time Alex had a problem Cas had stepped in. Dean could handle this one. He hoped.

Where the hell was Sam? Dean realized it had been more than thirty minutes since his gigantic brother had shown his face. He should be here, in this room, with his family. Sam was pissing him off more and more, making him more and more uncomfortable. Dean guessed that his brother was probably out in the car listening to the police scanner or reading a newspaper, hunting for a new case, which made him want to hit something. This wasn't right. Sam wasn't right. Dean tightened
his jaw and heard his teeth groan in protest. Even when the twins had been at odds, even when they'd downright hated each other, they'd had each others backs and had never been as apathetic toward each other as Sam was being toward Alex. Like he just couldn't be bothered with worrying about his own flesh and blood. Like if she died, he wouldn't even bat an eye.

At least Dean wasn't a blood-sucking Twilight idiot anymore, right? Samuel's insane cure had worked and he was a human again. And so was Alex—Dean had checked her gums several times now, verifying that there were no traces of telltale vamp chompers. They would be resting, mostly hidden, above the canines. He checked her again, just to be triple, quadruple sure she really was magically healed—he leaned in and grabbed her top lip and pulled up, peering at her gums. Normal, human gums. Man, he owed Jamie a million apologies. At his touch, Alex stirred, disturbed by what he was doing. Shocked and hopeful at the sudden movement and her slowly opening eyes, Dean froze, like he would break the spell if he moved. "Hey, hey!" he felt a breathless grin crossing his face. "You're back!"

Appearing groggy and a little disoriented… also grumpy… Alex squinted at Dean. "Why were you touching my lip, weirdo?" She asked. Her voice was rough, like she'd shouted herself hoarse, and she was looking at him like she used to as a teenager when she'd wanted five more minutes of sleep.

"There she is," Dean said, chuckling through the affectionate, relieved statement. She was okay— she was herself, she was human, and she was calling him a weirdo. Everything was so much more okay than it had been a minute ago. "Feel all right?" he asked anxiously, studying her carefully, trying to see how she was.

She made a soft little protesting groan as she sat up slowly, thinking about how she felt and how to reply. "Well… I don't wanna bite anybody, so…" she trailed off, pulling a very thoughtful face, like she were wondering if she were crazy or not. "All that vampire stuff… that wasn't a crazy alcohol or drug induced hallucination?" She seemed incredibly coherent, which was another relief. "All real."

Alex took a couple seconds to process. Her eyes darted back and forth over the bedding that laid over her knees as she visibly ran through the night in her mind. "Wow. Okay… wait." She clearly got to recalling the part where Dean had been sick as hell. "Are you all right?" she asked, looking up at him with widened eyes. "Last thing I remember you were puking your vampire guts out all over the place."

That was sweet. Her, worrying over him. Chuckling and a little chagrinned—puking everywhere was never a great moment you wanted people to remember—Dean focused on the more appealing fact: "Yeah, well, the cure worked—I'm a hundred percent human again, and so are you."

Alex shut her eyes and let a relieved breath out as her shoulders slackened. And then she paused, opened her eyes, and abruptly frowned. "Wait. Where's Jamie?"

Dean looked down, a little deflated. He let his eyes do the talking and looked across the hall silently. Alex sat up a little straighter when she followed Dean's gaze and saw Jamie in the bed across the way. "What's wrong with her? Why's she passed out?" There was a lot of obvious concern there in his sister's voice, which only made Dean feel worse.

"She's... in some kinda coma," he told her. Horrified, Alex quickly looked at him for an explanation, now. "Collapsed when she did that witchy mumbo jumbo on you." When she saved your life. Guiltily, Dean tried to be optimistic. "Hey, maybe she wakes up soon, too. Like you just did." He hoped he was right. But he wasn't gonna bank on it. Jamie looked like death and her
prospects didn't seem optimistic. It killed him, because witch or not, she'd saved Alex and royally screwed herself up in the process. What was he supposed to do with that? He'd treated Jamie like shit and badgered her for being a witch… the very thing he now was thanking his lucky stars for. If not for her, Alex would still be fanged up and essentially a walking death-sentence.

"I knew I shouldn't have let her do that," Alex muttered, bowing her head into her hand regretfully, seeming to blame herself. "She always gets messed up when she casts..."

Dean said nothing about it, because honestly, selfishly, he was just so glad Alex was okay he could cry. Yeah, it sucked real bad that Jamie wasn't on two legs, but… a few hours ago, he thought his sister would have to die because she was a monster. Now, she was herself again, and so was he, and they had another shot at this crazy thing called life. Still, it had come with a cost.

"They think she'll pull through?" Alex asked, staring tensely across the hall again.

Dean looked sidelong over his shoulder, lacing his fingers together as he leaned his elbows over his knees. "They got no idea." Dean was left to think about of the trail of dead friends and acquaintances he and his family had left behind in their wake. Would Jamie's name be added to that list?

Maybe Alex was wondering the same thing. Perturbed and appearing almost angry, she tightened her jaw and shook her head. "Why would she do that? Dammit, Jamie." Alex angrily ripped off the heart rate clamp that was on her finger and swung her legs over the side of the bed, standing up. Dean followed suit, a little shocked at how fine she seemed to be.

"Hey, hey take it easy wouldya? You just got topside," he protested.

Alex batted him away, insisting she was fine, where were her damn shoes.

"Hey, you're up!" Came a familiar voice. Alex and Dean stopped. Sam stood there, filled the doorway to the room. There was a pleasant little smile plastered on his face. Alex looked a little confused and faltered at her brother's appearance—her eyes widened briefly as if in realization or fear—then she abruptly went stone-faced. Sam caught it all and his face took on an inquisitive look. "...what?"

"Uh, nothing," Alex said, feigning nonchalance. Weird… Dean's eyes narrowed just a little, because he could hear that something was wrong and she was covering. "Just, uh, surprised to see you." Sam dropped it, accepting Alex's answer even as Dean made a mental note to ask her about the little exchange later.

Newspaper in hand, their brother came over, tapping a page eagerly. "Okay. Look what just read. A few towns over from here. A string of freaky suicides and a couple weirdass murders." He paused and Dean stood back slightly, giving Sam a you gotta be kidding stare. "Sounds like it could be our kinda thing," Sam said, not seeming to notice or care about Dean's reaction.

"A job Sam? Right now you come in here and pitch a job? Anything about your sense of timing strike you as a little off?"

Sam's face took on a note of perplexed innocence, like Dean were the one being strange. "People are dying, Dean. Isn't it our job to keep them safe?" He paused, sized up Alex, who, besides not having her shoes on, looked her normal self. "Alex looks good to go, so what's the holdup?" He paused, seeming to understand and be almost vaguely amused. "What, you two just gonna sit around and babysit the vegetable across the hall?"
Dean was offended by his brother's seeming apathy. "Have a damn heart, Sam!" he exclaimed, judging Sam hard and letting him know it with his tone and expression. "Not everything's about the job!"

"Right," Sam said, as if he were trying to take back what he'd said. Suddenly, he was overly empathetic. "Right, of course not. I'm worried too. Of course I'm worried."

Dean stared at his brother with a dead sort of expression. He was mad, he was over it, and he wasn't gonna let it slide this time. He grabbed the crook of Sam's arm. "You know what... walk with me." He pointed a stern finger back at Alex, who was opening her mouth to protest. "Stay here."

Dean guided Sam roughly out of the room and into the hallway. As soon as they were out of earshot, Dean shoved his brother away. "The hell is your problem, Sam?" he demanded.

"I don't have a problem." Sam was cool and non-confrontational, which only incensed Dean more. He shook the newspaper for emphasis. "Dean, this is what we do. Save people."

Dean gestured angrily in the vague direction of Jamie's room. "Yeah, like her." Confusion flashed across Sam's face. Did he really not get it? "We owe her, Sam! She saved Alex's life and she didn't have to!"

Sam's features worked weirdly, like he was attempting to act sympathetic. "Yeah. Yeah, I get that. And uh, if she ever pulls through, great." He paused, looked at Dean pointedly. "But even you have to admit: unless you know some magical way to bring a person out of a coma, we're pretty useless here, Dean. We're not doctors. We're hunters."

Out to prove a point, feeling petty, Dean made a face. "You know what, I do know a magical way." He crossed his arms and looked up, grumpy. "Cas—Castiel. You got your ears on? Need your help with waking up a sleeping beauty named Jamie Ward, buddy." The brothers looked around for the familiar tan trench coat. No angel appeared. Sam raised his eyebrows challengingly at Dean, who cleared his throat, gave a tight little this will work smile and then spoke a little louder. "You ten-four, Cas? Need ya down here, man, like... now." Dean looked around expectantly, getting more and more annoyed when there was no response. Sam gave Dean a little told you so smile and Dean raised his voice even more, getting fed up. "Cas! Don't be a dick!" He exclaimed, waited... and again... nothing. Disgruntled, Dean glared around at nothing in general. "Just freakin' great."

"Hey, no one can say you didn't try," Sam said patronizingly. His focus seemed pinpointed on one single thing in the entire universe: "Now. Are we gonna go check out this lead, or are we gonna sit around and act like people out there don't need our help?"

Dean glared, because Sam was sort of right but... come on, this wasn't how Sam would act! He might have a point—if people really were in trouble over in Illinois they should go help. But just ditching out on Jamie? He owed her a little more than that. Down the hall, a familiar, bald man appeared and Dean made no reply to Sam. He wasn't into airing the family dirty laundry to anyone but his brother and sister. Grandpa didn't count. He might have been blood, but they didn't know him.

"Problem, fellas?" Samuel asked as he reached them. He had a little cup of coffee from the hospital cafeteria in hand.

Dean looked at his grandfather with thinly veiled mistrust. "No. No problem." Samuel looked doubtful of that fact, that forever constant knowing glint in his eyes.
"Samuel, you wanna do me a solid and stay a few days, see if Jamie gets her groove back?" Sam asked, to Dean's surprise. He was gonna just hijack the job from Dean like that? "We gotta go catch a lead."

Oh do we? Dean asked Sam silently. In reply, he got the ghost of a Sam bitch-face from times past, as if Sam were saying of course we do, moron.

"Already?" Samuel asked. Even he seemed taken aback at Sam's assertion, which made Dean feel marginally validated.

Sam appeared mystified as to why he was meeting resistance and gave his grandfather and brother two pointed looks, like they were the strange ones. "Yeah already. Alex is up, there's stuff going down barely over an hour's drive from here..." Sam trailed off, shrugged in the face of Samuel's confusion and doubtfulness. "Hey, that's just the life for ya," he said. "We don't get to decide when the jobs happen." He looked at Samuel expectantly. "Now you gonna stick around with Blondie or what?"

Samuel took it into grudging consideration, glancing toward the hospital room where Jamie was, then back at the boys. "Yeah, sure. Guess I can spare a couple days."

"Great. Thanks," Sam said automatically, no measure of gratefulness in his voice at all. He seemed annoyed and hurried. "I'm gonna go back to the motel room and get our stuff, Dean." He brushed past his brother. "I'll be back for you two in twenty."

Dean watched his brother leave and there was a bad taste in his mouth. "He always like that?" He asked sullenly, and Samuel seemed similarly unsettled by Sam's behavior.

"Never met anyone as dedicated to hunting, that's for sure."

It made no sense to Dean. Dean who watched Sam run away happily from hunting in favor of higher education. Dean who had to drag Sam kicking and screaming back into this life. Now it was just his favorite thing? "He used to hate this job," Dean murmured, trying to make sense of it. "He used to friggin' hate it."

"People change," Samuel suggested, but it was obvious he was just trying to fill the silence. Dean was too tired to argue with anyone except maybe Sam. "Apparently." He looked toward Jamie's room and shook his head, deeply bothered by this turn of events. "So any ideas as to why's my sister okay and she's not?" He asked. They'd both lost consciousness at the exact same moment, so why hadn't they woken up at the same moment?

Samuel took a long moment, looked like he were trying to decide something. Then leveled Dean with a careful gaze. "Son... last night while you and your sister were at the vamp nest, she told me that trying the spell would probably kill her outright."

Dean's stomach flipped sickeningly. "What?! You mean to tell me she knew this was gonna happen?" Dean gaped, then got pissed. "And you didn't mention this to me why?"

Samuel laid an authoritative hand on Dean's shoulder. Was calm, firm, gentle. "She made her choice, Dean. It was hers to make. And anyway... she's not dead yet." He removed his hand from Dean's stiff shoulder, jerked his head toward Alex's room. "You kids get ready to hit the road. I'll let you know what happens here."

And without another word he turned and left Dean there, completely blindsided.
"I dunno, maybe this is just an extremely twisted town, Sam," Alex said as they entered the motel room. She tossed her car keys down onto the kitchen counter as she walked past. Behind, her twin lumbered in and shut the door even as she tiredly rubbed her forehead. He had a few newspapers in hand. "Maybe these deaths are just what they look like," Alex continued. "Suicides and screwy murders." She folded her arms and turned around to look at Sam plainly.

They were both still in their FBI getup—Sam in a predictable suit and tie, Alex in her tried-and-true black pantsuit. Outside, still in the Impala on his phone, Dean was also in uniform. They'd just been to the home of one Jane Peterson, a young woman who had recently died by suicide during a busy shift at her restaurant job. Normally, suicide wasn't something the Winchesters investigated. But when a town suddenly had a burst of violent, unforeseen suicides and weird murders (construction worker jack-hammering his wife to death then hanging himself, old lady killing another old lady in a beauty parlor by stabbing her to death with a metal hair pick), and all within two weeks, it raised some suspicions that there were supernatural forces at work. But they'd just been to speak with Olivia, Jane's older sister, and found nothing conclusive at the home the sisters had shared. Nothing else was adding up yet either, and Alex wasn't as certain as Sam was that there was actually a job here.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Sam said, taking a seat at the kitchenette table and spreading his newspapers down in front of himself. He didn't stop and was of one mindset: the job, the job, the job. It was sort of exhausting by proxy. "Olivia basically goaded her sister into suicide and isn't sure how it happened," Sam lectured, like Alex hadn't been right in the room when they'd discovered it. "Like she was possessed, or was under some kind of curse."

"Yeah... maybe..." Alex said, arms still folded as she approached the table by a couple steps, "or she could have been lying. I mean, who would want to take the blame for making their sibling feel bad enough to end their own life? Just admit there's a good chance she was trying to cover her own ass." She paused, watching Sam sorting through the three papers he'd bought—one local, two national. "There was nothing witchy at the house, no EMF, no demon-dust... we checked the restaurant, too. This could just be people." She paused, looked at Sam meaningfully. "People do horrible shit to each other."

He glanced up at her briefly and she couldn't see any discernible emotional resonance. "I'll give you that," he said obligingly, "but taking into consideration the other freaky murders and the other suicides, I still think there's something here. I can feel it."

"Ooh, can you, Master Yoda?" Alex asked, half between teasing and sarcasm. Sam just gave her an appraising look from over the newspaper he was poring over. Yet again, she was left feeling disillusioned and even more afraid that her growing suspicions were true.

For the past twenty-four hours, there had literally been no chance for her to tell Dean what she'd remembered when she woke up in the hospital. It had rushed back into her mind with startling clarity and horrifying detail and Alex hoped she wasn't remembering it right, because if it were real... she wasn't in the room right now with her brother. She was in the room with someone else, maybe something else. Again, in her mind's eye, it replayed: Sam, standing there and letting that vampire turn her. He'd had the strangest look on his face, almost the beginnings of a smile as she'd been force-fed vampire blood and turned. Alex had been stealing glances at her twin for the past twenty-four hours now, trying to figure out if what she'd seen was real. Figure out if that was Sam at all there with her. Her guard was doubled and she was no longer relaxed with her twin. Aware of where her weapons were at all time, she was focused on one thing: keeping Dean and herself safe.
But she loved Sam and was desperate for this to be him in front of her, just with a bad case of Hell PTSD. However, she wasn't sure if that's what it was. And she wasn't sure if she could let herself and her other brother stay around him if he wasn't gonna have their backs.

She glanced toward the door. She could see Dean now through the window. He was standing just on the other side of it on the sidewalk with his phone to his ear and was keeping an eye on her through the slatted blinds even as he had what appeared to be an intense conversation. He didn't even know what she knew yet, and still he was on edge about Sam, too. Maybe he could sense it. Alex looked at Sam again, who seemed to have zero clue that she was watching him differently now. Cautiously, carefully. She walked a little closer to him as she took off her suit jacket, then stopped completely when she glimpsed the newspaper date—May the fourth. Her stomach dropped in shock at the realization: their birthday had been two days ago. It had slipped her mind completely—and apparently it had slipped both of her brothers' minds, too. She couldn't believe she forgot, then she realize she couldn't believe her brothers had both forgotten, too. She looked at her twin intently, seeing an opportunity to test the waters. She sat down across from him, studying his expression and hiding her disturbed state of mind. "Hey, is it really May fourth?" She asked, feigning casual surprise. "Did we forget our birthday?"

He glanced at the newspaper date. "Huh. Guess we did," he said, and he had no reaction to it. Just replied to her and kept reading, his expression pinched with focus. She felt a little stung by his blasé reply, that and her suspicions only got deeper and deeper. That feeling of foreboding only got worse and worse. She sat back a little as a horrible feeling of finality and sadness settled over her. Dean had forgotten their birthday for the first time ever and Sam didn't apparently care. You need to tell Dean about what you saw.

Alex felt shellshocked. Not just right now, in general. Everything was a blur since what had happened with Glen. Cas reappearing, the demon blood shit hitting the fan. The panic room. Scotland. The vampire crap. It was too much. Her reality was all building up onto her shoulders and there was this feeling of inescapable grief. She swallowed, told herself to get a grip. But every direction she turned, she was up against a wall and continually feeling like all those walls were slowly closing in on her. How could she get a grip? There was nothing to hold onto anymore. That thought made her fight even harder to push away all the noisy worries, doubts, and fears that made it hard to sleep at night. She wanted to be strong. She had to be strong and couldn't allow herself to think about the things that cut her to the core. In some ways, with Dean being withdrawn and quieter than usual and Sam being whatever the hell Sam was being, Alex felt like she had to be what Dean had always been: the anchor, the assurer, the one who held the family together. There was an awful loneliness to her life that she'd never felt before, and she wasn't sure if it was because of Castiel's absence or because of how she was refusing to be honest about her emotional wreckage.

Dean came in at that moment, ending his phone call as he did. "That was Samuel," he said, tossing his phone onto the table and yanking his suit jacket off. His expression was bothered. "He said Jamie just… disappeared thirty minutes ago."

Alex stood up so fast that her chair almost fell over. "What?"

He jammed a hand through his hair then threw his hands up in a defeated, mystified shrug. "Yeah. I dunno. Said he left for five minutes to get some grub from the caf, then when he got back… no James."

Speechless for a couple seconds, Alex looked at her brother, trying to figure out if he were joking or what—but he just looked disturbed and worried. "What, like she just… woke up and walked out?" she asked, because that sounded kind of nuts.
"Yeah, I guess," Dean said, appearing just as uneasy about the idea as her. "He said no signs of anything weird. Just… empty bed."

How the hell…? That didn't sound right.

"Hey, alls well that ends well," Sam put in, getting two crazy looks from either of his siblings. "What? She's awake, right? That's good news."

He was pointedly ignored by his two angry siblings. "Should we go try and find her?" Alex asked, because she genuinely wasn't sure what course of action should be taken, if any. If Jamie had really walked out and didn't want to be found, trying to find her would be pointless.

Dean seemed to be considering the idea but not sure about how useful it would be to actually try. "Samuel said he's gonna see what he can see. I dunno."

"If she's out there, he'll find her," Sam said in dismissal, then glanced up at Dean. "You guys wanna help me out with skimming these papers?"

Maybe it was petty of Alex, but she was sick of Sam and his belligerent apathy. Deciding to get rid of him, she fixed him with a cool little smile. "Sam, how about you go take a listen to the police scanner in my car while you do that? See if you hear anything worth following up on." She snatched up one of the newspapers and shook it for emphasis, barely concealing how pissed she was. "I'll read this one."

Sam seemed agreeable and got up. "Yeah, good idea." He exited, and the second he did, Alex turned to look at her oldest brother and roll her eyes about Sam. She looked at the newspaper she held with mild contempt before she smacked it down onto the table. She had zero intention of actually reading it.

"Trust me, I wanna punch him in the face, too," Dean said as she plopped down to sit on the corner of one of the beds. She looked up at her brother grudgingly as he grabbed two beers out of the fridge and popped the little metal caps off using the counter and a blow from his palm. "He's getting on my last damn nerve here lately," Dean said, took a swig from one of the bottles then offered her the other one. She took it, even though she didn't really want it. Dean pulled on his tie, loosening it as he sat down opposite of her on the other bed. He looked and sounded exactly what he confessed next: "I'm exhausted." He got his tie loose enough to take off, then threw it without looking at where he'd slung his jacket. Even though he appeared normal enough, Alex could sense all over again that Dean was depressed and just as lost as she was right now. She wished she knew how to cheer him up or make him feel less awful.

"Any luck getting Lisa yet?" She asked as he kicked off his dress shoes. He'd been trying to call Lisa all yesterday and some today, too.

He glanced her way, fumbling a little. "Uh, no. She won't answer." It was easy to hear how much regret he carried. "I messed up bad, Al. I shouldn't have gone there."

To Lisa and Ben's. He'd told them, briefly, what had happened. She tried to sympathize and make him feel better. "You just wanted to say goodbye to the person you care about. Nothing wrong with that."

He scoffed at the latter part of the statement and she could see that he was thinking something along the lines of 'there was a whole helluva lot wrong with it.' But he didn't say so. He didn't say anything for a long moment, just refocused on his shoes. And oddly enough, it made her sad that he didn't argue with her. He'd been so much less confrontational lately, but especially since the
whole vampire thing. It was obvious he wasn't okay and was worried about everything in his life right now, especially her. She didn't want to be a source of worry to him right now; she didn't want to be another thing burdening him. When they'd been growing up, Alex had believed that her oldest brother was a superhero, capable of taking on the whole world. Now, she knew he was just a man. A man who carried loads too big for anyone to carry. And still, somehow, he carried them. She took a pull of her beer, not really enjoying the taste like she used to.

Dean chanced an attentively worried glance at her. "So did you, uh… did you call Cas up to say your peace?" He asked. "Back when we were… you know, bloodsuckers."

The mention of him made her immediately less certain of herself and uncomfortable because the focus had been shifted onto her. She replied fast, tried to make it look like she wasn't ruffled by the question. "No," she said, looking at the ground. Bravely, she looked him in the eye, trying to look confident and okay. "You know me." She shrugged, took another sip of beer and tried to look unaffected. "I don't like goodbyes."

Dean studied her closer for cracks in her armor. "Right," he said, still not seeming to entirely believe the front she was putting up. He was right, but she didn't want him to know that, so she gave a tight little smile and tried not to think about how loud the silence rang in her ears. Her brother studied the label of the beer he was resting on top of his knee. "You know, uh… I wasn't gonna leave without saying goodbye to you," he said abruptly, not bothering to hide how guilty he felt about it. "I really wasn't. Then I just panicked."

"It's okay, Dean." He'd already apologized about the same thing at the vampire nest, then yesterday, and now again. He didn't seem to agree that it was okay and didn't seem to accept her forgiveness. He just kept looking at her with that sad, tense expression and Alex softened. "Stop."

Mild confusion passed over his features. "Stop what?"

"Looking at me with those pity eyes."

He tried to protest and act like he wasn't doing what she said he was. "These are just my regular eyes."

She smiled at him and she didn't have to force it. It was time for him to stop worrying about her and it was time for her to stop letting him. From here on out, she was going to just suck it up and be strong and independent. He just had to get used to the idea. "Dean…" she was gentle but firm. "You've been waiting all week for me to break down." She paused for emphasis. "It's not gonna happen, I'm fine." Her smile softened a little into a fond, solicitous expression. "Just relax. Be normal."

"I am being normal!" He protested a little defensively, looking at her mistrustfully. "You told me you weren't okay, remember?"

Her tearful confession in the vamp nest crossed her mind. I'm not okay, she had told him. "Yeah, I remember," she said, then attempted to discredit the very real confession she'd made. "I remember that I was a vampire with a death sentence over my head. Life seemed pretty hopeless at the time and, heh, I didn't feel very good about the future, you know?" She downplayed like it was her job, and for a second, she could almost believe herself. Almost. "But I got a new lease on life now, so…" she shrugged, trying not to think of the things that bothered her. Instead she turned the spotlight back to Dean. "And don't try and change the subject. You're not being normal. You're being way too nice and way too quiet."

"I'm being 'too nice'?" He repeated, confused. "I'm always nice!"
Now *that* was laughable. Cute, even, and she cracked a grin, because she knew this guy better than almost anyone else, apparently even himself. "No... you're *mean*," she corrected. "Like a cute, grumpy old man. What happened to all the bitching and moaning?"

Dean gave her a crazy look, like he wasn't sure if she were serious or not but he was thinking about laughing at her question. "So lemme get this straight: You're *complaining* that I'm not complaining."

Alex saw an opportunity to make her brother laugh and pounced, took on a playful tone. "Best part of my day is hearing you whining about how I'm taking too long in the bathroom." Dean looked down, a rueful little smile playing on his lips, and Alex started ribbing him with things he had actually said in the past (mostly). She put on a funny high-pitched nerdy voice. "Who decided soy milk should even be a thing? When did *gum* get so fancy? Where did that friggin' idiot learn how to drive?" Alex kept on, getting more animated. "Turn that racket down! If it's not from the eighties it's not music! If it's got too many vegetables in it it's not real food! I'm Dean Winchester and I'm gonna go angry-fix my car!" Dean was fighting a grin now and had a hand over half his face. "I have the blood-pressure of a hummingbird on crack! I hate sunshine and don't know how to text!"

By the last sentence, they were both basically giggling, and Dean especially seemed to have needed it. For a minute, neither of them remembered their dire situations or the things weighing on them.

"Hey, texting's dumb and I stand by that conviction," Dean said in mock-seriousness, then pulled a face. "I mean if you have something to say, just *call* the person, is that so hard?" Alex shrugged helplessly, enjoying the lighthearted moment that reminded her of times that currently felt lost. Their eyes caught the others and their smiles faded a little, Dean's pensive mood seemed to bleed through again and he cleared his throat, forced the smile off his face completely. Like he was guilty about allowing himself any cheer at all. "Yeah. I'm... it's been a rough couple weeks all around," he said gruffly, then looked at her with those sad eyes again. His voice softened, betrayed how worried he was about everything. "I just want you to be okay. I nearly lost you just a couple days ago."

Well, she'd tried. But maybe ducking the issue wasn't the answer. "I know." She nodded slowly, knowing what he was thinking about. The demon blood, the assault. Everything. She redirected the conversation to him again, because those things had to stay hers. She couldn't add those to his burden. "I just want *you* to be okay," she told him seriously. His gaze ducked away.

Alex was a little discouraged. She knew that feeling all too well. The doubt that anything would ever be all right ever again. It was bad enough that she felt that way. He shouldn't feel that way, too. At least Sam the robot wasn't wallowing with them, huh? She glanced at the window where she could see just a sliver of the side of Sam's face. He was sitting in her car, listening intently to the police scanner. At the very sight of him, her stomach turned. She knew all over again that she hadn't imagined him standing by and letting her get turned into a vampire. And Dean had to know what they were up against here. What had happened. She looked at her brother with a hard expression. "All right, so..." she trailed off. How did you even *say* this? That your brother had something really wrong with him and was a danger to the family? Dean heard the anxiety hiding in her voice and looked at her with narrowed eyes and growing interest, like he could sense whatever she was about to say was extremely important.

"Look, I need to talk to you about Sam," she told him, then paused again, worried about how her oldest brother would react to the news. She decided to beat around the bush. "Dean... has he done anything recently that seemed like, insanely out of character?" Her oldest brother's expression showed shrewd confusion and she tried to explain herself better. "Like, has he endangered you, or just, stood by when he should have been doing something to help out?"
His expression kept darkening. "Why?" A cautious, single word.

"Don't freak out," she said, however, she could already tell he was getting there. "Okay. I'm pretty sure… I'm pretty sure he let me get turned. And then let you get turned."

Dean's face went absolutely cold. "Explain. Now."

She did. Intensely and with vast uncertainty. Not because she didn't remember it well. Because it seemed so horrible that Sam could really do what he'd done. 

"...I thought I had to be imagining this, Dean. But I remember it so clearly. Getting jumped by that vamp, and Sam was right there, a few feet off… and he wasn't doing anything. He was standing there watching. Like he was… I dunno, almost like he was interested in what was happening." Remembering it all over again, her veins went cold. "He had this little smile on his face." Dean looked absolutely horrified and Alex shook her head, looked out the window. "I don't know if that's Sam out there."

Dean lowered his voice to a hiss of a whisper, leaned closer to her, freaked out. "Why the hell didn't you tell me this sooner?!"

She matched his whisper with one of her own. "I didn't exactly have any chances since the hospital when I remembered it, Dean!"

He stood up, breathing a little heavier than before, looking out the window with an indescribable look on his face as he set his beer down onto the kitchen table and stared out the window at their brother. Alex stood up too and Dean shook his head, beside himself with blindsided dismay. "I knew something was wrong with him but…" he trailed off, looked back at her in dread. "You're sure? I mean, you're sure you're sure?"

She wished she wasn't. "Yeah. I am."

Dean didn't ask for any more information. He took her at her word, maybe because the building suspicion aimed at Sam had been building in him like it had been in her. He took decisive action, grabbing his cell phone out of his pocket. "Watch the window," he commanded. "You tell me if he's about to come in here."

"What are you doing?" Alex asked as he hurriedly pushed buttons on his phone. She put her beer down beside his. She'd only taken two sips.

"Calling Bobby!" Was the agitated reply. Dean began to pace the room, throwing glances in Sam's general direction as he got hold of Bobby and explained the situation in a gruff, shaken voice, hurrying because they weren't sure how long Sam would actually stay gone. Alex went and sat back down on a bed, her hands gripping the edge of the mattress on either side of her legs. She kept her eyes on Sam, who was oblivious outside. She caught snatches of the phone conversation as she kept watch, but didn't really start listening until a certain point. "Well that's what she told me, Bobby! I don't know what else to tell you!" Dean protested, throwing a hand in the air for emphasis.

"We tested him. Salt, silver—everything." She could hear Bobby's voice through the phone even from her distance, that's how loud Dean's ancient cell was.

"He basically threw us to that vamp, Bobby, are you hearing me right now?!!" Dean turned, began to pace the other way now, his disturbed state of mind translating into supremely volatile demeanor. "It's a friggin' miracle she's human again! I'm telling you—that guy walking around in Sam's shoes is not my brother."
"Well, then he's something we ain't ever seen before."

"Yeah, or it's freakin' Lucifer."

"Did you call Cas?"

Alex's stomach flipped a little at the unexpected name mention.

"He's not answering," Dean grumbled, "Screw him. I can't wait anymore." Dean paused, met Alex's sidelong glance. Cas was kind of a sore subject for them and he hadn't been brought up in the past twenty-four hours even once.

"Look, I get it," Bobby's voice continued, "You're rattled. You're right to be. But let's be professional—"

"Professional?" Dean repeated. "Sam watched Alex get turned! He let it happen!"

Alex stood up, put a hand on her forehead, and rubbed. This was crazy.

"And she's sure she saw what she thinks she saw?"

"Damn it, Bobby, yes, She wouldn't make that up!"

"I'm not tryin' to say she's lyin', son, I just... it ain't the same as proof. 'Cause we're talking about—"

"—we're talking about doing something about this, and fast," Dean said sharply. Again, Alex looked at her brother. 'Doing something' meant killing. That seemed like a giant leap to take, and she faltered, wondered if maybe she should have waited before telling Dean what she'd seen. "It's not just the vamp, okay?" Dean asked. "He's been different from the jump."

"I know," Bobby conceded. "I'm with you."

"Are you?" Dean challenged.

"Yeah, I'll hit the books, hard. Just don't shoot him yet, all right? Watch him. We need facts. 'Cause if it ain't Sam... we don't know what it is. And if we're gonna put him down, we need to know how. You and Alex keep an eye on. Watch for anything weird."

Dean scoffed immediately. "Anything weird? Everything's weird—I don't even want us to ride in the same car with him, much less work a damn case."

"He's your case, Dean, nut up," Bobby sighed. "You got anything else to go on?"

"Yeah, my skin crawls being in the same room with him," Dean quipped darkly. "Why don't you look that up?"

"Yeah, sure."

Dean shook his head and dragged the palm of his hand down over his mouth. "I don't know how much longer I can do this, Bobby. You got to figure out what the hell he is and fast."

There was a heavy pause. "Dean, there's a worst-case scenario."

"What, Satan's my co-pilot? Yeah, I know."
"Well, that'd be the other worst case."

Dean and Alex's gazes met briefly again, and Dean appeared to be confused. "Well, then what, Bobby?"

"Maybe it's just Sam."

The room went completely silent and Alex looked at Dean in somber anxiety. That was her greatest fear. That Sam was... just this way now. That he just didn't care anymore. Somehow that was worse than anything else—him being a human being who didn't care about his brother and sister's wellbeing in the slightest.

"No." Dean rejected that idea and shook his head and his jaw tightened. "No way." He jabbed a finger down toward the floor. "You got a day, Bobby, one day, and then I'm handling this." And without any more, Dean hung up rudely, in a completely foul, bitter mood. He looked over at the kitchenette, where several bottles of whiskey were. "I need something strong," he muttered.

She didn't normally do this, but today... she did. "You sure?" She had noticed how he'd been drinking so much more than normal here lately. Or, more than he used to. It wasn't healthy, and she hadn't said anything about it, but today, she did. And the second she asked him that, he turned around, his expression clouded.

"Don't do that," he warned flatly. "Not you too. I'll drink as much as I friggin' want."

There was a short, tense silence and Dean looked guilty. Alex felt bad and understood, faintly, why Dean was desperate to abuse a substance. Anything to forget the problem and make it go away, but they couldn't do that with Sam. He was their brother. "Look, I get it," she said tiredly. "You're upset about Sam. But you can't just decide you're gonna shoot him if Bobby doesn't find something out by tomorrow!"

"Well what am I supposed to do?!" Dean asked, pleading her for a solution to a question she didn't even know how to begin to answer. When she said nothing, he turned to face her, walked over to speak intensely. "Sam would never just stand by and let you get turned, Alex. Never!" She said nothing, only looked down. "You know that!" Dean insisted. "And I can't let us be around him if he's gonna endanger you! If that is Sam or isn't, he's dangerous."

"Yes you can, and you will 'let us be around him,' Dean," Alex retorted. "'Dangerous' is the life we live—you and I are gonna sack up and figure out who or what that is out there, not lose our heads. Okay?" Dean was chastened and unhappy. He opened his mouth to reply... then never did.

The motel room opened without warning and in walked the one they were arguing about. Oblivious and seemingly eager, Sam cracked a smile. "Guys, there was another crazy murder."

Dean and Alex both faltered momentarily, trying to transition from upset nerve-wrecked high tensions to playing it cool. "Yeah?" Alex asked, finding her voice first.

"Dentist drilled a guy to death," Sam said. He sounded way too excited about it.

Dean narrowed his eyes slightly, glanced at his sister, then attempted a typical comment he'd make. "You mean the... non-sexy kind of drilling, right?"
Sam wiggled his eyebrows once. "Fifty bucks says he's mixed up in all the crazy."

"And this happened when?" Alex asked. She had to admit, that did sound pretty insane, especially if it just happened—it was still business hours.

"Not long at all—the perp just got taken in downtown," Sam said, then jerked his head backward, indicating the doorway. "Let's go talk to him."

Alex was up for it, but Dean hesitated. "Okay, uh... why don't you go ahead?" he asked, then glanced around, fishing for an excuse. Really? Alex didn't think avoiding Sam would give them the answers they needed, but Dean seemed to want to do exactly that. "We'll catch up," he said, then pointed at the newspaper on the table. "Uh... research. We're gonna do a little research." He got a pointed, wide-eyed are you insane side eye. If Dean was going to talk about friggin' killing this guy in a day or two, they should probably make sure they knew who they were killing, not just dodge spending time around him!

Sam paused, frowned slightly in mild confusion. "Research?"

"Yeah," Dean said with a little more false enthusiasm than necessary. "We, we gotta know what we're up against, right?" Alex was trying not to shake her head in chagrin at Dean's weirdo behavior.

Sam took the question in stride, seemed to agree after a couple seconds of deliberation. "Yeah. Yeah, good idea, I guess," he conceded, then paused, looked at his twin, smiled a little even as he squinted in thought. "But is it really gonna take two of you to do research? I could use some backup."

"Uh..." Dean faltered.

Alex did the last thing Dean would want at that moment and decided to go with Sam—almost to spite her controlling oldest brother and prove to him that she was capable of taking care of herself. "No, you're right Sam," she said, grabbing up her suit jacket from off the back of a kitchen chair. "I'll come with."

Dean looked at her with wide what the hell are you thinking eyes. Don't be a baby, she glared right back at him.

"Great," Sam said, not noticing. "Let's go." He turned for the door, Alex followed behind.

"Wh—uh—" Dean protested, quickly following and then loudly stopping them. "No, Alex has to stay here!" He sounded panicked.

The twins turned around. Sam looked confused, Alex was giving her oldest brother a dagger glare, trying to silently communicate butt out. "Why?" Sam asked, mystified and looking at Alex for an explanation. She gave none. Arched an eyebrow slightly at Dean, who tried to come up with something, anything.

"Uh... we were having a really important conversation," he said lamely. "About... feelings. And uh... things."

Alex didn't allow her brother the control. She'd already decided she was going with Sam and made it known. "No Dean, it's okay," she told him tersely. "We'll finish the 'conversation' later. You stay here and enjoy your whiskey." He soured slightly at her dig about the whiskey. "We'll call if we need you. We've got our weapons and we've done this a million times before," she said, basically referring to herself as 'we' so that Sam wouldn't get what Dean's problem really was. "We don't need
you with us for everything. We can take care of ourselves." As an afterthought, she glanced at her twin. "Right, Sam?"

Sam seemed totally unsure but agreed anyway. "Uh, yeah. Sure."

Dean was silently threatening and pleading Alex at the same time with his stare but she ignored it and gave him a meaningful, pointed look of her own. "We'll see you later," she said with finality and turned, grabbed her keys from where she'd stopped them then opened the motel door, exited.

"You wanna drive or me?" Sam asked as he shut the door behind them.

Alex was already headed to her car. "I'll drive," she said flatly. Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she pulled it out, glancing at the screen. A text from Dean. Oh geez. She opened it. U crazy?

She typed out a reply really fast, glancing at Sam discreetly over the top of the car as he swung into the low passenger-side seat. Don't worry moron I got my gun. She got into the car, started it, and fiddled with the air controls. Her phone buzzed again.

**Call if N E THING weird ! gnna kick ur ass l8r**

"Everything okay?" Sam asked, apparently wondering why they weren't leaving yet.

"Yeah," she said, and put on an unreadable expression. "Yeah." She put the car in reverse, well aware of herself, of Sam, and of where every weapon she possessed was. Once they were on the road and cruising, she glanced at him sidelong. Again, she tested him, trying to get a feel for how much of her brother was left in there. "So you wanna listen to some music, or..."

Sam was staring straight ahead, expression unaffected. "Nah. I don't really like music anymore."

Who didn't like music? In the past Sam would have requested Red Hot Chili Peppers or Dave Matthews Band or some other college-y rock group she wasn't too familiar with. "Well, I still like music," she said. "So how about some Journey?" It was a rhetorical question. She'd already hit play. After a couple minutes of driving—Sam quiet and focused on the point in front of himself, Alex chances a few sidelong glances here and there—she cleared her throat, decided to see what else she could find out. "So, Samuel. What's that guy all about?"

Sam's answer was short and concise. "Good hunter. Little bossy. Not bad in a pinch."

All true enough, as far as she knew. But the cryptic tone and brief answer wasn't fulfilling her curiosity. "How'd you guys meet again?" Alex asked.

"Ran into each other on the same job."

Getting answers that weren't one or two words out of him was like pulling teeth. "Which was what kind of job?" She asked, redoubling her patience.

"Rugaru. Over in Portland."

_Huh._ It just didn't fit with Sam's personality, or Alex really didn't feel like it did, anyway, to just take up hunting with a random family member who also happened to be alive again inexplicably. There was something to this. Sam and Samuel were connected somehow, but she wasn't sure how. She kept casually, passively digging for information and clues, anything. "And you just paired up with him. Sight unseen."

"Yeah, pretty much."
The clipped answers were driving her crazy. "I mean, you had to know I was out there somewhere if you knew about what Dean was doing, right? So why did you never track me down?"

"Tried," Sam said simply. "Couldn't." He finally looked at her for more than a millisecond, seeming to sense that she was fishing for some kind of input on his part. He said what she hadn't expected at all. "I'm glad we're back together again. The three of us. We're a good team."

Although it sounded nice, it didn't seem entirely genuine. Was that what he thought she'd wanna hear? He seemed so calculating to her suddenly, and it chilled her to the bone and made her unsure if she really should be alone with him. Memories of Glen, who she'd trusted until it had been too late, came to mind. "Yeah. A good team," she echoed, outwardly appearing to agree with him and to be happy about the family reunion. She forced a smiled in his direction so he wouldn't see how suspicious she was of him. Inwardly, she was more unsure of him than ever and fearing the worst. There was a seemingly caring and thoughtful smile on her brother's face. It had a foreboding effect on her because it was missing an earnestness, a warmth. Alex was definitely beginning to regret her impulsive decision to accompany Sam out on the investigation, but stubborn pride kept her from turning the car around. She had to follow through on this.

A Couple Hours Later

Dean slammed the motel room door behind himself, making a beeline for more whiskey once he was inside. This was easily one of the more stressful days he'd had and there wasn't enough Jack in the world right now to soothe his rattled nerves. He yanked a glass out of the crummy motel cabinet and poured himself a glassful of hunter's helper. This was him trying not to be the overly-controlling brother. Alex wanted to be alone with the guy who'd let her get turned into a vamp? Fine! He downed a huge gulp of the dark amber liquid. Not fine, but what choice did he have? She was super into doing her own thing these days and he was trying his damnedest to let her have the freedom to make her own shitty choices. It went against every instinct he possessed and basically had him in one of the foulest moods of his life. The alcohol wasn't helping much, either. Surly, Dean cast around glances for Sam's laptop. Where was that damn thing? He for real needed to do research now.

Alex had called him a little bit ago with two bits of information: one, the dentist who'd drilled a guy to death? Had committed suicide in his holding cell as soon as he'd been alone. She and Sam hadn't gotten to talk to him, but they'd been able to talk to his assistant, who'd heard some of the lead-up to the murder. Apparently the patient had said some very true but incriminating things that had pissed the dentist off enough to kill right then and there. Dean could see the pattern that was beginning to form: people were telling the bitter, raw truth in this town for some reason, and it was driving people to murder and suicide. Jane's sister Olivia had apparently told Jane how much of a burden and a loser she was, that she should kill herself. Seemed witchy or curse-y, to Dean, but there were no overt signs of witchcraft they could find anymore.

The reason Alex had called him a bit ago was to ask him to go check out a place called Harry's House of Horns while she went and picked Sam up from the morgue. She'd found a receipt from that shop at the dentist's office when she checked out the crime scene and had remembered seeing a magnet from the same business at Jane's house. Dean had gone, trying to see if he could find anything, since the horn shop was the only thing they could find in common for the victims. Harry, the shop owner, had asked Dean (masquerading as FBI, as usual) when he was going to get him his stolen horn back. What stolen horn? Dean had asked. The priceless, thousand-year old antique that disappeared the same day Jane died, Harry had said, then shown Dean a picture of an ancient looking horn.
Dean found Sam's laptop and opened it up. He had a feeling maybe Harry's missing horn was involved somehow in the weird truth stuff going on in town. He started to search the web for horns that appeared in biblical times. He kept getting one hit over and over: Gabriel's horn of truth. There was an arty depiction of it on one of the webpages that looked an awful lot like the picture Harry had shown Dean. "Yeah, great," he muttered under his breath. "The God squad's involved." He reached for the nearly-empty glass of whiskey on the nightstand and drained the last few drops. This was just what he needed. More angel crap. Cas was being an asshole as usual, not answering his calls. He'd tried a few days ago and then again last night, calling him and telling him, specifically, that he needed help about Sam. And then today, after Alex had left, he'd tried again, even more alarmed than before after what Alex had told him. Cas, I need some answers about Sam, pronto! He'd basically shouted. Where the hell are you?! Cas hadn't shown. Typical.

Even though he knew it wasn't gonna work, he still tried, even if he was sort of surly about it. "Castiel? Hello?" He muttered, not putting much enthusiasm into his voice at all. "Possible loose nuke down here, angelic weapon. Kinda your department." He shut the laptop and tossed it down on the bed beside himself then stood up, whiskey glass in hand. He looked upward, raised his voice. "You hear that, Cas?" He rolled his eyes, turned around to head back for more whiskey. Then stopped short when he saw the angel in the trench coat there, leaned against the kitchen counter. There was a pensive look on the angel's careworn face.

"Hello, Dean."

"You kidding me?" Dean asked, shocked that Cas had actually come and getting mad about it, too. "I've been on red alert about Sam and then you come for some stupid horn?!"

Cas was quiet, withdrawn, and plaintive. "You asked me to be here, and I came."

Dean flew off the handle. "I've been asking you to be here for days, you dick!"

A little wounded, Cas's eyebrows moved together slightly as if he didn't understand Dean's insult. Then he looked down and maintained his earnest, pensive demeanor. "I didn't come about Sam… he looked back at Dean anxiously, "because I have nothing to offer about Sam."

"Well that's great," Dean retorted rudely, "because for all we know, he's just gift wrap for Lucifer! And my crazy dumbass sister is just out there with him right now somewhere!"

At the mention of her, Cas was visibly affected, which only incensed Dean further. The angel shook his head slowly and looked down beside himself. "She'll be fine." Cas picked up the half-empty bottle of whiskey that he'd spotted. "He's... he's not Lucifer." Liquor in hand, Cas slowly, abashedly approached Dean.

"And how do you know that?" Dean asked tersely.

In a surprising act of perhaps apology, Cas poured Dean more whiskey into his glass. "If Lucifer escaped the cage, we'd feel it."

Maybe Dean should have been comforted by that, but he just felt more lost than ever. What did that mean? Who was the guy walking around who looked like his brother? Was it like Bobby had said? The "worse-cast scenario"? Cas finished filling his glass halfway and Dean lost his angry front in favor of the fear he was feeling. "What is wrong with him?"

"I don't know, Dean," Cas said heavily. "I'm sorry."

He said he was sorry but didn't look sorry enough. And Dean remembered how Cas had been a
year ago, at the graveyard. Emoting and almost vulnerable, kneeling there beside Bobby's van with Alex, who'd been dying from being possessed by Lucifer. He'd seemed so genuine and caring, and that had been the only time Dean hadn't been totally skeeved out about them together. Cas had been comforting Alex and had known how—hadn't been the stiff, clueless angel he apparently was again. "What happened to you, Cas?" Dean asked, a little sour. "You used to be human, or at least like one."

Castiel looked as if he'd been accused of something wretched and his eyes fell away from Dean's guiltily. "Yes," he said warily. "I was. But... I'm at war." He turned away from Dean completely and went back to the kitchen sink, leaned there heavily and kept his back to Dean. "Certain... regrettable things are now required of me."

That was rich. "Yeah?" Dean basically sneered. "What things, like breaking my little sister's heart?" Cas turned around, his expression strange. Shaking his head unhappily, Dean raised his chin a little and narrowed his eyes at Cas. At that moment, Dean saw Cas as the scapegoat for all the things currently wrong with his sister. "I dunno what you two got going these days, but she hasn't been the same since you," he accused. "And by the way real good job being her guardian angel, Cas, way to keep her safe."

Cas's eyes narrowed as his frown deepened. "What... do you mean?"

"Oh, geez, Cas, I dunno," Dean said with an ugly, blunt tone. "Some dude almost raping her? The way she got turned into a freaking vampire a couple days ago? And you're just off fighting your stupid little war in the sky while this shit goes down?!"

Cas looked positively shocked and horrified. "A vampi—is she all right?"

The panicked look in the angel's eyes was almost like a slap in the face to Dean because it was too little too late. "Yeah, fine, no thanks to you," he snapped. "You talk such a big game about protecting her then never come through when she needs you. My sister doesn't need that shit from you or anyone else, understand?" He tightened his jaw. "What she needs is someone who's not gonna run off on her all the time." He paused for gut-punch effect. "And buddy, that clearly ain't you."

Again, Cas looked hurt and disillusioned. "Why did no one call me?"

"Because you never friggin' answer!" Dean thundered.

There was a tense silence, and Cas was looking down again, seeming to feel ashamed. Good, Dean thought. He should be after failing to keep her safe. And then Cas said something that would stick with Dean forever after: "Dean. If it's about her, I will always come."

Something about the words and the way they were said made Dean have this strange pit of fear in his stomach. He was actively mad at Cas for not caring enough but it freaked him the hell out to hear Cas basically imply that she was more important than anything else. To Dean, it felt like the circumstances were like the perfect storm for something awful to happen—he couldn't even explain it to himself in his own mind. He just had a bad feeling about it overall. Again, he wondered exactly how involved the two of them were, yet was afraid to find out. He remembered seeing Cas kiss her over a year ago and he was pissed off again just imagining it. Disgusted outwardly, Dean rolled his eyes. "Gimme a break, Cas."

Chagrinned, Cas seemed to stow his personal feelings. His face became blank. "What is it that you need from me, Dean?" he asked.
"Gabriel's horn of truth." Dean said blandly, also pushing his more snide demeanor to the wayside. "Is that a real thing?"

Cas was immediately interested, frowning deeply and approaching Dean again. "You've seen it?"

"I think it's in town," Dean said. "Something's forcing people to—" he stopped when Cas abruptly disappeared from in front of him. "Oh, well, you're welcome!" he complained, and raised his glass to his lips, took a long pull, drained the rest of the whiskey.

"It isn't the horn of truth."

Dean turned, almost choking on half-swallowed whiskey. Cas stood there behind him, now by the beds. "What are you talking about?" Dean asked, a little caught off guard. "You were gone for like two seconds. Where did you look?"

Cas's befuddled expression suggested Dean's question was a little preposterous. "Everywhere."

"Right," Dean said. Then decided to let Cas know it was time to leave. "Well, nice seeing you, anyway." He turned around to pour himself more whiskey. Why bother? He should just drink straight from the bottle. It was almost all gone, anyway.

"Dean." Cas hadn't left yet.

"What?" He asked sharply, not turning around.

"About your brother. I... I don't know what's wrong with him, but I do want to help. I'll make inquiries." There was a heavy pause. "And about your sister… you're right. I should watch her closer." Dean turned around to see Cas standing there and looking at the floor in a somber, conflicted way. "This is a difficult time for me."

That guy had a lot of nerve. "Oh how sad for you, Cas," Dean retorted.

Cas's eyes raised to Dean's and were full of confusion and pain. "I'm attempting to help you, Dean," he implored. "All I've ever attempted to do is to help you. Why do you insist on being so hostile?"

The heartfelt question rendered Dean unable to summon a mean retort. He faltered a little and felt a flicker of shame at himself. Cas was tense and his low, sandpapery voice was burdened. He no longer looked at Dean at all. "I'll contact you when I've found any news worth sharing." He disappeared then, leaving Dean in the empty room.

This was just wonderful.

Dean downed the last of his whiskey stash, then looked at the empty bottle mournfully. There was a bar across the street. And that's where, without a second thought, he was heading. As he crossed the street, his thoughts refused to leave the Alex and Cas conundrum filling his mind. Were they still some kind of weird little couple like they'd seemed to be last year? She wouldn't say and Dean wasn't about to ask Cas. Not yet. As far as he could tell, the two of them seemed to be on the rocks or on a different page. Like before, he didn't like it. But maybe it was winding down and over now. Maybe Alex's little infatuation with the angel in the trench coat was running its course and now she'd seen for herself that it wasn't gonna work out. Maybe now she could get over it and find herself a human guy.

And really, maybe he was misremembering things. How human Cas had seemed in the past. That kiss he'd seen, maybe it was Alex who had initiated it—Cas was no Rico Suave, he was a popsicle stick with arms and no personality. It was a huge mystery why Alex was attracted to him at all. Dean remembered how Cas had privately told Dean that he loved Alex a year ago. And now Dean
wondered if maybe the angel had been confused about what he was saying or thought he was feeling. He had said it when he’d lost his powers and wasn’t as robo-angel as he was right now. Dean remembered that day Cas and Alex been gone and apparently spent the night away together somewhere. At the time he’d had this crazy feeling that they’d been together. You know… together. But now he was thinking, honestly, how could Cas have sexual feelings about anyone? He barely had feeling feelings. Either way, it was too gross to think about, a thousands-year old angel trying to put the moves on his impressionable, romance-novel reading, relationship-virgin (and otherwise-virgin) sister. If he ever did find out Cas had taken advantage of Alex’s little crush like that… Dean would probably kill the guy outright.

Across town from where Dean was currently stewing, Alex was in a very pink, very cat-decorated bedroom. She could hear Sam talking in low tones in the living room on the other side of the apartment wall.

She’d gone to pick up Sam from the morgue after her little visit to the dentist and had found him tapping a foot impatiently outside as he had waited. All the murder and suicide victim’s bodies were gone from the morgue, apparently. Vanished seemingly into thin air. But one of the bodies that had disappeared hadn’t been a suicide or murder. It had been a girl named Corey who died in a car crash, and she’d died a week before all the other deaths had started. Patient zero, maybe? Sam was out in the living room, talking to the girl’s roommate while Alex poked around Corey’s cat-obsessed bedroom. There was a framed photo of a fluffy black and white cat on the dresser, little cat statuettes littering surfaces… kind of sickening. Alex didn’t like cats.

She went to the bedside table, noticing the corner of a box poking out from underneath the bed and bent, pulled it out, stood. What was this? She set it down on the bed, about to open it. And then...

"Hello, Alex."

A hand over her heart, Alex jumped back a little and gaped at Cas, who stood on the opposite side of the bed. "Jesus, Cas! Almost gave me a heart attack!" She exclaimed, stunned to see him just suddenly standing there. He looked the same as ever—stern and devastatingly handsome and mildly worried, with his hands at his sides. His abrupt appearance shook her up and she felt self-conscious and completely unprepared to see him. "W-what are you doing here?" she asked, blindsided and wondering if something were wrong.

"I saw you," he said. "When I was searching the town for Gabriel's horn of truth." He paused and looked at her with great somber hesitation. She had no idea what to do or say. "Dean told me," Cas said slowly, and his husky voice was full of concerned anxiety. Alex's chest clenched apprehensively because she did not want to talk to him about this. "About what happened. How you were somehow turned into a vampire." Hearing that cursed word from his pure mouth made Alex shrivel internally in disgust at herself, like she could have somehow controlled what had happened to her. She looked downward, feeling a little queasy. She hadn't wanted him to know about that at all. "Why didn't you call me?" she asked, blindsided and wondering if something were wrong.

"I saw you," he said. "When I was searching the town for Gabriel's horn of truth." He paused and looked at her with great somber hesitation. She had no idea what to do or say. "Dean told me," Cas said slowly, and his husky voice was full of concerned anxiety. Alex's chest clenched apprehensively because she did not want to talk to him about this. "About what happened. How you were somehow turned into a vampire." Hearing that cursed word from his pure mouth made Alex shrivel internally in disgust at herself, like she could have somehow controlled what had happened to her. She looked downward, feeling a little queasy. She hadn't wanted him to know about that at all. "Why didn't you call me?" Cas asked her sadly.

His intensely caring presence was overwhelming to her and she cleared her throat, looking around for something to do or pretend to be doing. Anything to disguise her inner feelings. "Didn't wanna bother you," she said in clipped tones, trying to be brusque and run from her own feelings. "I know you're busy."

"Bother me?" He repeated, hurt. He chanced coming closer, rounding the side and then end of the bed to come toward her. She was hyper-aware of everything about him: how close he was, how tall he was, how easy it would be to go to him for a hug, how good he looked, how his shoes made muffled little sounds on the carpet as he came to stand four feet away from her. "Alex, you should
have called me," he said, and it was easy to hear how he couldn't understand why she didn't. His careful distance from her seemed intentional, like he was trying not to upset her or make her uncomfortable. And she wished it wasn't that way. They'd once been so close and now deep the divide between them felt impossible to cross. "I could have helped you," he continued earnestly. "Or at the very least tried."

She shook her head just once, a pained, tight smile on her face. Speaking became difficult. "Couldn't let you see me like that, Cas."

Further confused and hurt, Cas came a little closer. "Why not?"

"I just couldn't, okay?!" She asked, getting riled up at his increasing nearness. He was arm's length away. Close enough to touch. Close enough to push away. The shame she felt from the demon blood and the vampire crap still ate at her and made her feel so ugly and worthless. "H-haven't you seen me at my lowest points enough?" she asked, looking up into his eyes fully and letting him see, for a moment, her true feelings.

In a moment out of what seemed a past life, he hesitated and then reached out and gently touched her arm, trying to comfort her, maybe initiate an embrace. His touch was simultaneously everything she wanted, needed, and desired... and also not close to being enough and she couldn't take it. She pulled away, not even entirely sure why. Immediately, she regretted it. But it was too late.

Castiel seemed stung and surprised by the way she'd pulled her arm out of his hand. He quickly became abashed despite his confusion. "I'm sorry," he apologized, clearly upset with himself. "I didn't mean to overstep my bounds."

Immediately feeling a little worse, Alex attempted to act like everything was A-OK, like he had nothing to worry about. Tried to cover up over the issue at hand. "It's fine. I'm just... just busy, focused on work. It's a lot. But it's nothing I can't handle." He didn't seem to believe her, looking at her with those intensely sad blue eyes of his. They broke her a little, reminded her of how lonely she was and how unsure she was about the future. She tried to make it about him and tried to sell the idea that she was staying strong for him. "But I guess that's just life right now, right? You've got your stuff upstairs, I'm down here." She shrugged and smiled even though she didn't feel the smile. "You don't need to worry about me, Cas," she lied. "I'm fine." God, she wasn't fine at all, but if he knew that, he if had any idea of how screwed up she was right now, he'd feel guilty for leaving. And she knew, inevitably, he'd have to. In a way, she felt like she was protecting him from sadness by keeping hers to herself. She was definitely trying to protect herself from more sadness, too.

"Alex, we should talk, shouldn't we?"

She wanted to shrink back, disappear. Talk about what? The demon blood? The vampire stuff? The things she'd said in Scotland? Something else? The idea of having an emotional discussion terrified her. "Not now, I have um, a job," she said, excusing herself stiltedly as she motioned to the bedroom vaguely. "The case." Even to herself, her reaction was ludicrous and she hated herself for it. This was hard as hell, because the thing she dreamed of constantly was this, him. All she could think about was how she wanted to just be with him like they had been before. She just wanted to know where they stood. She wanted to let him in and let herself be real with him. But right now, when given the chance, she was too scared to actually let it happen. She'd been so burned, and she was so terrified to be burned again.

"Of course," Cas said after a long pause. He was polite and courteous as ever, but still deeply
anxious, trying again to appeal to her and get her to talk to him. "The job. I only thought—"

Alex shook her head, shifted the box on the bed, trying to look businesslike. "Maybe later, Cas."

"But—"

"No!" She suddenly exclaimed, looking directly at him. She'd said that a little louder than she meant to, and they were both surprised by it. Alex took a second to compose herself. Chastened, she attempted a calm tone. "I… I told you. I'm busy right now."

He looked so miserable and worried and lost that she couldn't look at him. She had both of her hands on the box she'd found under the bed but she just stared down at her hands without seeing or remembering what she was doing. Only realizing that she was fucking up this moment with Cas beyond compare. He'd picked the wrong girl, he loved her too much, and she was doing nothing but letting him down. She didn't know how to be better at this. She blinked away emotion that threatened to turn to tears. At this point, he was studying her profile silently, concerned at the deepest levels. Her hair, swept back into a neat little low pony tail (part of the FBI look) didn't hang down to shield her face from scrutiny.

Cas seemed to see through her. "I don't understand why you're attempting to push me away," he stated, forlorn and maybe wondering if he had done something wrong to her. His insight was heartbreaking.

She glanced his way, pitifully trying to deny his very accurate statement. "I'm not."

Another long pause. "You won't even look at me," Cas observed in a disconsolate tone, sadness coloring the way he sought her gaze. His pained voice softened. "Do you truly find me that abhorrent?"

Sick with herself—she hadn't meant to make him feel that way, and the whole thing was just miserable—Alex put a hand on her face, her attempts at holding him at arm's length buckling underneath her need to reassure him. "No. No, of course not." It was time to just man up and let him know she was having a tough time, that she was hurt and confused and carrying a lot of unanswered questions around, could he please help her understand some things? So she attempted to be honest and dropped her hand down, drew her shoulders up, turned to looked at him straight on, preparing herself for a really intense, emotionally exhausting conversation. "I'm just… this is hard, Cas." That was putting it lightly, but it was all she could dredge up for the moment. With surprising intuition, Cas seemed to understand, vaguely, what she meant, and started to speak to her fear without hesitation on his part.

"What we were before…" he began, then paused, looking upward, his expression darkening and screwing up into a squinting frown.

"What is it?" Alex asked, dread filling her. He already knew. He had to go.

"I'm being summoned to the battlefields." He looked down grimly, his jaw working. *Don't go.* Her hand shot out almost of its own accord, latching onto his wrist through the trench coat as dismay rocketed upwards in her—he seemed surprised by her sudden action and before she could think it through, she closed the distance between them and threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. She had to squeeze her eyes shut against the tears she'd been holding back. She felt his arms hugging around her gently, as if he were afraid of breaking her or upsetting her again and she hugged him even harder, trying to somehow tell him through the touch *I still love you, I'm just afraid. I miss you and I need you more than I know how to say. I just want us to be okay again. Are we okay? Do you still love me?* Being held there in the safety and comfort of his arms, for a
minute, she could believe nothing had changed at all. She drew back regretfully, knowing he had to leave. And as they came apart, her doubts returned, her fears reared their head again. She pulled away completely, stepping back and away from him. She could think of nothing to say.

Cas seemed both encouraged and vaguely worried by the sudden hug and then the abrupt way she'd ended it. "I'll return to you as soon as I can," he promised.

She nodded. And then he was gone, leaving a gaping empty space both in the room and in her heart.

Dean pulled up to the apartment complex and eyeballed it as he parked the Impala there on the side of the road. This was about to get... *interesting*.

About ten minutes ago, while Dean was lurking at the bar uselessly, Sam had called to tell Dean to head that way, saying that he and Alex had found patient zero. Dean was glad (he really didn't want Alex alone with Sam right now, point blank) about it and a little on the freaked out side too—Sam gave him the heebie jeebies for real currently. Anyway, Dean had slapped down money on the bar, just thinking about how bad he wanted to know who or *what* Sam was. The barkeep has innocently asked if she could get him anything else. Dean had said no, then mumbled to himself that all he wanted was the frickin' truth.

An offhand comment. But apparently, the way to get yourself cursed. The second he'd said that, the barkeep had suddenly paused, then wondered out loud why she couldn't get pregnant; maybe because God knew her marriage was a scam. She'd paused, frowned, asked why she said that, then promptly said maybe it was because she'd been snorting oxy all day. Again, she'd been shocked at her sudden confession. Then, the busty woman a table over had looked at Dean and smiled coyly then told him she was sitting the way she was sitting that way so guys would look at her recently bought breasts. She'd then commented on how much attention she needed. Appreciative of the sight of all that cleavage but a little flabbergasted at the sudden outpouring of truth, Dean had hightailed it out of the bar and then realized, hey... maybe this wasn't such a bad thing. He was cursed with hearing the truth from whoever he came into contact with? That meant he had a few questions for Sam.

He got out of the car, intent on going up there and finding Sam and getting the damn truth, even as his phone began to ring in his pocket. He looked to see who it was—Lisa. Finally. But this wasn't the best time. Hmm. He answered anyway, dreading this call. "Hey."

Lisa's familiar voice sounded not so happy with him. "Saw you called," she said lowly.

Not good. "Yeah, it's been crazy," Dean said, feeling like he was about to get raked over the coals.

There was a long, tense pause. "Ben won't even talk about it."

*God.* Dean put a hand on his forehead, filled with self-loathing. "Lisa, I'm sorry, but this is actually the... worst time in the universe to talk," Dean said, looking over at the apartment building again. "C-can we do this later?"

"You shoved my *kid*, Dean," Lisa said, her voice cool with anger. "How about we do this now?"

"It... it wasn't like that," Dean said, not sure how to tell her 'my fangs made me do it.'

"Then how was it?" she challenged.

He shook his head rapidly, coming up with nothing. "I... can't really explain." She probably
thought he was a liar, a drunk, and a child abuser. He knew he was definitely the first two.

There was a long pause.

"You want to know the truth, Dean?" Lisa asked calmly, and Dean could hear how she was holding back, probably had a shitload of stuff to say. And then he remembered the truth curse anew. He was about to hear the whole truth and nothing but the truth. "You've got so much buried in there, and you push it down, and you push it down," Lisa accused. "You never face any of your problems! Do you honestly think that you can go through life like that? Just, what, drink half a fifth a night and you're good?"

Always with the nagging about the alcohol. "You knew what you signed up for," Dean told her grudgingly. It wasn't a point of pride for him.

"Yeah, maybe," Lisa said, clearly not finished airing her opinions. "But I didn't expect that Sam would come back or your crazy sister would reappear. And I'm glad they're both okay, I am. But the minute Sam walked through that door, I knew. It was over. You three have the most unhealthy, tangled-up, crazy thing I've ever seen. And as long as they're in your life, you're never gonna be happy. You're just gonna keep being an overgrown father to two adults who don't even need you. You're the one who needs them." She paused, sounding surprised at herself and a little worried. "That... came out so much harsher than I meant."

"It's not your fault," Dean said quietly, because it wasn't. It was the truth curse. But it still hurt him the same to hear those things. Was she right? Did his brother and sister not need him? Was he the one with the real issues?

"I'm not saying don't be close to your brother and sister," Lisa said, trying to explain herself. "I'm close to my sister. But if she got killed, I wouldn't bring her back from the dead! And she's got problems, too, but I mean, I wouldn't just give up my life to spend it with her and help her out... she's a grown woman! And so is Alex! I mean, you and your sister, it freaks me out. Siblings just aren't supposed to be that close, Dean!"

His hackles raised. She had no right to say that; she didn't know what the hell she was talking about. She hadn't been through the life that he had. She hadn't needed to protect her sister from the shit Dean had tried to keep away from Sam and Alex. "Okay, Lees... I'm not gonna lie," he said gruffly, trying to stay calm and not show how insulted he was. "Okay, me and my family? We... we've got our issues. No doubt." He didn't need to say anything else, because she knew that well enough. "But you and Ben—"

She cut him off. "Me and Ben can't be in this with you. I'm sorry. It has to be over. It's over."

What? He was stunned at the sudden statement, and protested. "Lees—" he started, then heard the click at the other end. She'd hung up. He stared at his phone, shocked. Over? Just like that?

Behind him, he heard the approach of footsteps and he turned, in a daze. Alex was walking down the sidewalk toward him, her expression stern and distracted. "Hey," she greeted as she got to him. "Think we found our..." she paused, finally looking at him squarely and noticing his expression. Her face softened into worry. "What's wrong?"

He must have looked as shellshocked as he felt. "I uh..." he trailed off, barely able to understand what had just happened. "I think Lisa just broke up with me."

Sympathy passed over her features. "I'm sorry Dean. But, hey, I didn't really like her that much anyway." She said it and then immediately balked, confused. "Uh—what I meant to say is, I've
never liked any of the girls you've dated," she said, and her mouth dropped open, she clapped a hand over her mouth, seemingly horrified at herself. "Wha… Dean! Did you get yourself cursed with the truth?!" She asked, putting two and two together.

"Yeah," he said, downcast. "And boy am I getting it." He folded his arms, looked at her challengingly. "Got anything else you wanna confess?"

"I hated your haircut in the nineties," she said, then gasped at herself, clapped her hands over her mouth but she didn't stop. "And your little five-hair mustache that you were so proud of when you were fourteen!" She exclaimed, breathless and disconcerted. "You looked like a rapist." Her eyes widened in shock at herself and she was getting frustrated. "Oh my god, words won't stop coming out!" she said, voice a little shrill with panic.

"You said you liked the stache!" Dean said, feeling a little offended. He'd been so proud of it at the time. "I distinctly remember you giving me the two thumbs up!"

"My thumbs lied," she said, completely truthful and dismayed at herself for it. Her face worked hard, like she was trying not to say more. "Also, I threw your swiss army knife into a gutter when I was seven because you pissed me off."

He'd always wondered what happened to that thing. Grim, he pressed his mouth into a wan line. "This curse sucks."

He spotted Sam coming out of the apartment building, carrying a box. Sam was already coming over, his long stride getting him there quickly. "Hey! So we found something," he said, indicating the little box he had in hand.

Dean looked at Sam squarely. This was what was going to make the truth curse worth it for him. "It can wait," he told his brother. "We got to talk."

"What's up?" Sam asked, seeming willing enough. Alex, arms crossed, was staring at the ground beside Dean, her mouth clamped closed.

"There's a few things I want to ask you, and, uh, you're gonna tell me the truth," Dean said.

"Yeah, Dean. Of course. What are you talking about?" Sam asked, then understanding came across his face and his eyes widened. "Whoa. Are you saying you're…"

"Yeah. I asked for the truth." Dean narrowed his eyes at Sam. "So, like I said, I have a few questions for you." This was the terrifying moment of truth and Dean raised his chin a little. "Did you just stand there and let Alex get turned into a vamp?"

Sam looked down, considered. Then looked Dean in the eye, seeming to be remorseful. "Yes. I did."

It was like an emotional and physical shockwave hit Dean, rendered him unable to breathe for the slightest moment. "And why the hell would you do that?" He asked, low and dangerous. Without even realizing it, he stepped closer to Sam, putting himself between his siblings protectively.

Sam's face took on the long-forgotten puppy-dog eye look, then shame. "I… I froze."

Dean balked. "You froze." That made zero sense. "Dude, you have been Terminator since you got back."

Sam shook his head, somber and increasingly sad, agonized. "I don't know. Shock, maybe? And
then it was too late." He looked at Alex with a worried expression in his eyes. "I feel... terrible about it." Alex's eyes met his and he looked down, utterly defeated. "Terrible," he repeated, then looked at Dean pleadingly. "I'm so sorry. Believe me. Dean... I can't lie here—do you really think I would let something like that happen on purpose?" He was getting agitated and upset, reminiscent of the Sam that Dean and Alex remembered. "She's... my baby sister, my twin. How could you even—"

"Okay." Dean cut him off, realizing that this was the truth and he needed to let Sammy know it was all right. He was relieved, but somehow, he didn't feel entirely better. Why? "Okay. Sorry," he shook his head, glanced at Alex, who seemed similarly surprised at Sam's confession. "I... I thought... I dunno what I thought. I... I guess I was wrong. It's just been a really, really bad day." He thought about Lisa and Cas and everything and rubbed the side of his face.

"Hey. It's okay," Sam said, giving Dean a kind smile. "I got your back, all right? I always have."

Dean nodded, fighting deep emotions off. He could barely look his brother in the eye. "Thanks, Sammy."

"Yeah." Sam motioned to the familiar Mustang parked across the street. "I'm gonna go put this stuff into Alex's car." He brushed past them, and the second that all they could see was his back, his face went completely blank of emotion. But Dean and Alex didn't see that.

Dean and Alex watched their brother walk across the street away from them and Dean shook his head. "Well. I dunno whether to be relieved or more depressed than before," he said, and looked at his sister for some kind of advice or wisdom.

She looked like she was similarly thoughtful. Opened her mouth to maybe tell him it would all be okay, they would figure it out. But instead... she said the last thing he was expecting to hear. "Cas and I had sex." Her face was absolutely floored after she said that. Dean gaped at her. Was she serious?

"No you didn't," he said slowly, because there was no way—no way. She had to be joking somehow.

"Yes, we did," she replied casually. "We were each other's firsts." After she said it, her eyes widened in horror at what she'd said.

Dean was momentarily too shocked to do anything but stare like an idiot. The truth curse. She couldn't lie. "Ho...ly... fuck," he managed slowly, then realized the irony of his choice of words. "Literally," he commented darkly as the reality set in—Cas, that lying bastard had seduced his little sister. "That son of a bitch. I knew it, he knew he was screwin' around!" He growled, then paused, his voice raised. "Again, literally!"

Alex shook her head, made a face full of denial. "We love each other."

Dean held up a hand and made a face like he'd smelled something bad. "Ugh, gross—no, no. Don't gimme that crap..." he said, because it was bad enough that they'd done the dirty, did the L word have to come into it? Was she really that dumb?

"It's not crap," Alex insisted, "he loves me enough t—"

Dumfounded, Dean cut her off. "Cas? Cas?" She was insane, she was friggin' weird, why would she choose him? "I mean, of all the dudes in this universe... him, really? Dude doesn't even know how to pick out a new outfit and has a permanent stick up his ass, how the hell is he gonna... do
that... to you... ugh." Dean felt the need to lean against something. "I'm gonna be sick."

Alex opened her mouth to tell him off, but instead of insults, out came something much worse. "He's an amazing lover, Dean. One time, he did this thing where—"

"Oh no, no no no... no!" Dean told her, panicking and getting more and more furious as the reality of it all set in. "Do not tell me any of that. I'm scarred for life as it is!" She seemed confused. "I don't want you doing that with him," Dean said, features twisted up still with immature revulsion. "With, anyone. But, eugh, him?" He threw his arms wide and looked at the sky for sympathy, deciding in overdramatic fashion: "This is the worst day of my life."

Alex rolled her eyes. "How do you think I felt, growing up, watching you play tonsil hockey with every cheerleader in every high school we went to?! And that time I saw you and Amy Allen in the gym. I still have nightmares. It's gross. You're gross."

"Am not," Dean retorted, then pointed at her. "You are." Wow, not one of his best comebacks ever... focus, Winchester, he told himself. "When did this happen? When did that haloed jerkwad put his ancient-ass angel moves on you?"

She looked like she was going to tell him to screw off. Instead, the truth came out. "That night you ran off to say yes to Michael, then in Bobby's attic a couple days later, then in a car and then..." she stopped, her face turned red almost from effort. "Dammit Dean! I'm really mad you're using this spell to ask me this stuff!"

Yeah, that's nice, cry me a river. Dean didn't really care and her being mad or not—it had been an ongoing thing, and Cas had some fucking nerve to go behind Dean's back and do this crap. He struggled not to hit the roof completely, he tried to take it in stride. "Of all the disturbing shit I've seen and heard in my day... I mean, I kinda thought he was like a Ken doll down there," he muttered.

"No, he's got—"

Dean held both hands out, fast, his eyes going wide. "Whoa, whoa, stop right there, do not need to know that! Never, ever, tell me about Cas's junk, god!"

"You're the one who got cursed with the truth! Shit, Dean, I'm gonna threaten to kill you right now even though we both know I never would." She heard herself and was pissed. "Dammit!"

Dean could care less if she threatened to kill him. He was in Dad mode. "Did you at least use protection!?" he asked her, daring her to say no.

Her face registered something like uh oh. "No. Never. Not even once."

Dean hit the roof. "Jesus friggin' Christ Alex!" He basically shouted. "You crazy?!" He looked around like he literally couldn't find the words to say. "What is wrong with you? That's just what the world needs, Castiel Junior running around!"

Alex seemed to consider that. "Huh. That would be a cute name, wouldn't it?"

Even more riled up than before, Dean grabbed her by the shoulders, trying to get her to listen to reason. "Christ, Alex, you still think you're gonna have a regular life with this guy?! What, you're just gonna get married, settle down, have kids?!"

"Actually, Dean—"
“No, no, enough,” Dean cut her off, let her go, and waved a hand in dismissal, getting disgusted with the entire thing. “I don’t wanna hear any more about this crap, what he did to you or where he did it with those creepy meaty hands of his. Eugh.” That wasn’t the thing that made him the maddest. He was almost so pissed at her lack of responsibility that he wanted to walk away. He couldn’t see straight as he thought it over. Cas—the thousands of years old freakazoid from cloud-land had taken Alex’s virginity in a body that didn’t belong to him, without using protection, and not just once. Enough times to make Cas think he loved Alex and to make Alex think she loved him. And they’d been morons and risked too damn much. Dean couldn’t handle it: What if he’d gotten her pregnant? What if there was some kind of angel STD? Christ, he didn’t know!

They were both idiots, but Dean loved one of those idiots a lot and he had to try and be reasonable. What was done was done. Summoning all the patience he could (it was tough), Dean looked at her angrily. “He better have been good to you, Al,” he said, teeth gritted together. “If he, he forced you into it or did anything that wasn’t…” he didn’t know what word to use, “okay with you…” I’ll kill him.”

Alex looked at Dean with big, emotion-filled eyes. “I was the one who started it.” She sounded a little guilty about it too. That surprised him, no lie, and Dean didn’t think he wanted to know what she meant by that. “He would never hurt me, not on purpose. He was always good to me. The best.” After she said it, she shut her eyes and shook her head, like she couldn’t believe what she was saying to him.

But Dean had latched onto a single word. Was. Implying the past. And with his next question, he set off an unforeseen monologue neither of them expected. “Are you two still together or what?” he asked, his tone brusque. Because he would be speaking with Cas about this, at length. Speaking and maybe punching.

And she shook her head sadly. “I’m not sure.” Her face suddenly registered great emotional pain and she looked down, swallowed. And then it all came pouring out as her voice cracked. “I’m not sure. And it’s killing me. This life is killing me.” Her eyes raised to him and her composure started crumbling at an alarming rate. “I can’t eat or sleep, Dean, everything bothers me and nothing’s normal anymore. Not Sam, not you, not Cas—not me—” her eyes were flooded with tears at this point and she looked terrified. “I was nearly raped, Dean!” Hearing her say it aloud was like being hit with a sledgehammer and Dean didn’t know what to do. “It was the worst, scariest moment of my life and I’m trying to act like I don’t give a fuck because I don’t wanna be seen as weak or stupid, two things I know that I am,” she blubbered, voice wrought with pain. “I hate asking for help because I’ve always felt so helpless, and everything I’ve ever done is me trying to prove that I’m not helpless. But I don’t know!” She put her hands on the top of her head as she looked down, like she was grieved to the point of madness.

No longer mad—now worried and shocked—Dean reached out, trying to touch her shoulder. She felt his hand and jerked away to stare at his hand like it was venomous. “I’m so tired of leaning on people!” She exclaimed, and tears ran down her face. “My whole life I’ve used a crutch and it was you. I used to need that, but I don’t anymore, or I shouldn’t! I’m twenty-nine, I’m an adult, or I’m supposed to be…? But here I am, emotionally fucked up in every way possible.” The utter hopelessness and grief in her voice was painful. “I always thought when I was this old, I’d have it figured out, that I’d feel grown up,” she managed bitterly. “But I still feel like a clueless kid. So I’ve been trying to act like whatever a normal person is supposed to act like, I’ve been trying to be strong because I don’t wanna be your burden anymore.” Another sledgehammer to Dean’s heart.

Alex shook her head, face crumpling all over again. “But it’s killing me. I don’t know how to be anyone but who I am; and who I am is twisted, and lost, and confused,” she rubbed her face with both hands, like she was trying to scrub something away. “Pathetic, screwed up, insecure,” she
mumbled. "My brain is a fucking maze. I just go around and around in circles, trying to just do what I'm supposed to do, just trying to be okay," she made a miserable sobbing sound, "but how am I supposed to be okay? After the things we've seen and the shit life we've lived?" She looked at Dean and begged him for help. "I didn't pick this life. I didn't. But I can't do anything else—I don't know anything else except ripping and tearing and being covered in blood."

She shut her eyes in agony for a quick second. "And sometimes, I like it. It scares the shit out of me. I don't wanna be who I am. I'm a killer. Not just monsters anymore." Guilt filled her tear-stained face. "Jamie shouldn't have done what she did for me, how am I supposed to deal with the fact that I killed her brother and maybe killed her too? We don't know if she's okay. We don't!"

Dean opened his mouth to stop her, but Alex kept going. "You know, I spent the whole year thinking I got Sam killed, that it was my fault for being stupid and saying yes to Lucifer—and it was, you know? Cuz if I didn't do that, Sam might still be Sam. Do you realize that? Your 'precious baby sister' does nothing but screw up?" She was sneering through the tears now. "Come on, you gotta hate me deep down, Dean. I held you back for years. You gave up so much for me and Sam, but especially me. You never would have stayed with Lisa this whole past year if I hadn't left. You wouldn't have." She was becoming angry now. "And you know what? We shouldn't need each other like we do. You and I are so screwed up. Did you know this whole year when I ran off, I never went more than a hundred miles away from you? I checked on you constantly, I called Lisa's house hoping you'd answer just so I could hear you ask hello." Dean was stunned at the confession, but Alex wasn't done—she was crying again, miserable. "I worked on cars like you do, I watched all the stupid shows you and I used to be into. Sometimes at night, I pretended you were just out running errands or, or doing a job and would be back soon. So that I could feel less alone. Less scared. I just wanted things to be like they used to be and I'm so terrified of being alone."

She sank down to sit down there, beside the Impala, weary and drained from her confession. Dean crouched beside her, not sure what to do. She just stared blankly through blood-shot eyes into the empty space in front of her. "I spent the year thinking Cas just left me like everyone else always did, and it was hell. My life, this year. Was hell." She sobbed again, put her face in her hand. "Before him, no one but you ever made me feel like I was someone worth having around. And I don't know where he and I stand anymore and it scares me so fucking bad. I don't know what I'm doing. I just wanna know it's all gonna be okay." A fat tear rolled down her cheek and she shut her eyes in pain. "I feel like I lost him somehow. I feel like I lost everything." She opened her eyes and looked at Dean with a look of utter openness on her face. "Dean, I'm in love with Cas, I love Cas, and he—he's my—" she closed her eyes and struggled, suddenly and violently seemed to bite her tongue—she made a sound of pain and cupped a hand to her jaw.

"You okay?" Dean asked, confused at her sudden sound of pain. She kept her mouth clamped shut, grabbed his wrist and tapped his watch, indicating he look at the date. Huh? Dean looked, squinted at the date…and then realized. "May fourth. Shit." He'd forgotten their birthday! It had been two days ago and he hadn't even thought about it for a second. He'd never, ever done that before—he'd always gone out of his way to make the day special because Dad had always forgotten. Dean's heart sank. "I'm sorry, Al, I don't know how that happened."

She just shrugged, seeming to be in mild physical distress from biting her tongue. "It's okay," she said, not moving her lips much, not looking at him very much, just holding a hand against her jaw and cheek and appearing to be very, very shaken up and violated. "Please don't ask me anymore questions," she said. "I really didn't wanna tell you any of that." Dean's world was absolutely rocked in the worst way possible and he didn't know what to say at all. Now he was worried all over again about her emotional and mental state—he had never told him that much personal stuff all at once. And now she looked so upset that he knew. Dean chanced touching her shoulder again to comfort her. She allowed the touch but looked upset all the same.
A tall guy suddenly walked around the back of the Impala, peered down at them. "Hey! You two gonna sit around all day?" Sam asked, paused, then jerked his thumb toward the road. "We have a case to work."

Dean didn't have any fire left in him to snark off at Sam. "Yeah, uh… we'll be right there," he said, then took a look at his miserable sister. "Actually, know what? You go ahead and head back in Al's car. She's riding with me back to the motel."

Sam looked at Alex's stony, tear-soaked face and nodded, seeming mildly concerned. "Yeah, okay." And he left.

Dean stood up, held out his hands to his sister. "Come on, Al. Get up." She took his hands grudgingly, and he could tell she was embarrassed about everything she'd said to him and told him. "Everything's gonna be okay, all right?" He asked, trying to make her feel better. She said nothing… probably afraid to say more uncomfortable truths. He put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "You were never a burden. Never." A muscle jumped in her jaw and her face worked oddly. Dean decided, for now, to just let all that heavy stuff go. "Wanna stop somewhere for a milkshake?" he asked. Her favorite.

She shrugged, acting like she didn't care either way. "That's what I thought," Dean said in a way lighter tone than he felt, actively working to sweep everything that had just happened under the rug for the time being. "Milkshakes, here we come."

The Winchesters met up back to the motel room, changed out of FBI stuff and into more everyday wear. Alex went mostly silent after figuring out that any time she spoke to Dean, a rude or embarrassing truth popped out. Dean went between feeling bad for misjudging his brother to remembering Alex's confession about getting jiggy with Cas thing, to horror at her broken confession. Focusing on the job wasn't the easiest for Dean, but Sam took lead, which helped. Sam showed him the box Alex had found in Corey's bedroom. In it, a cat's skull, grains of paradise seed, and devil's shoestring. Corey apparently had become obsessed with finding out the truth after discovering her boyfriend had cheated and Sam found out that the three elements stored in that little box of hers were used for a spell to invoke Veritas—the goddess of truth—who didn't just give you the truth. She slammed you with it until she got her tribute. Sam was pretty sure that those vanished bodies of the suicide and murder victims must have been what Veritas had taken as payment for her truth services.

When they realized that, they quickly realized they had to take her out—Dean was on the menu, after all, after having invoked the truth without entirely meaning to. With some more research about Veritas's personality and traits according to lore, they put together a pretty good profile: her Achilles heel was dogs, she hated deception and lies, loved truth and loved giving truth—could see everyone's darkest secrets the instant she looked into their eyes—however she was demanding and self-worshipping—an attention whore, as Dean put it. After realizing that, he chanced it all on a hunch: he'd noticed all these posters and news spots around town with this local news anchor Ashley Frank the past day or so here in Calumet City. She was extremely pretty and had a show called Frank Talk, which focused on revealing the truth within the media.

It was worth a shot, and Dean convinced Sam and Alex to back him up on this one, see if there was anything to see. The twins went with it—they didn't have any other leads, after all. They staked out the news station and waited for the young news anchor to leave for the day. She was very pretty, brunette, and drove an expensive looking red convertible. Under the cover of darkness, they followed her to a ritzy house—it was enormous and modern, with an all-glass front.

In the Impala, parked off at a discreet distance, the Winchesters watched Ashley Frank walk into
the house and switch on the lights. "If you're right about this," Sam said, "we'll be ready." He
handed Dean a hunting knife soaked in blood, then Alex one as well. He had one, too.

"What's on this?" Dean asked, hesitating.

Sam looked at him. "Dog's blood."

"...Do I even wanna know where you got this?" Dean asked skeptically.

"Probably not."

"Ugh..." Dean grimaced at his knife, then glanced into the rearview at his sister, contemplating
her for a few seconds. "Ready?"

She gave a tense nod, catching his gaze briefly in the mirror. She hadn't said anything out loud for
hours. The three of them got out of the car, skirted the house, and peered in through the large glass
pane walls. Ashley had disappeared further into the house. Without hesitation, Dean used his knife
to jimmy the front door lock. It took him a couple seconds and they were in. Sam followed, Alex
behind, a little uncertain. She wasn't as sure about this as Dean was.

The house was lavish and minimalist all at once, the architecture was extremely expensive looking.
It didn't look lived in, really. And it didn't look like an evil villain's lair, either. "Looks normal
enough to me," Sam said in a low, quiet voice, voicing Alex's thoughts. "No dead bodies
anywhere."

A cat ran by, the bell on its collar tinkling lightly. It scurried around a corner and Dean looked at
his siblings in turn, shrugging mildly, indicating that they follow it. The cat scampered down a
grand staircase that went into a darker, lower level of the house. At the foot of the stairs was a
stone mosaic of Veritas—they'd seen one like it on the internet. Dean paused, pointed at it and
looked at his siblings as if to say see? Told ya.

Huh. So this was the right place. And when they rounded another corner, they realized that all the
more. In the dim basement room there were several very disturbing, half-pulled apart, mutilated
bodies. Two were on two separate gurneys, another laid mostly consumed off in a corner, another
was hanging from a hook over what looked like an empty in-ground hot tub. The body was
beheaded with the skin torn off.

"You came for dinner," came a soft feminine voice. As the three Winchesters turned, they saw
Ashley Frank—only, she was now dressed in a goddess's raiment. Before they could react at all,
she raised a hand and waved it, and with it came a devastating blow—they went hurtling across the
room and crashed into the hanging, dismembered torso. Alex hit her head on a marble stair of a
drained spa below, and everything went black.

The next thing she knew, she was coming to with her hands tied behind her back, against a metal
pole. Across from her, Dean was tied, too, and still unconscious, his head lolling down onto his
chest. Sam was tied to a third metal pole to Alex's left, and he was already conscious, had caught
her eye and seemed to silently be communicating stay sharp. They were in what had once been an
in-ground spa, but it no longer had water in it. Above their heads, the bloody torso hung. Alex hit her head on a marble stair of a
drained spa below, and everything went black.

Veritas was over at the gurney, but turned her head and looked at them with a smile. She wore a
beautiful silk dress the color of gold, and priceless, ancient-looking ornaments were pushed into
her dark hair. "Mm. Sit tight," she purred, then pointed at Dean flirtatiously. "You're up next." She turned back around, returning to fuss over the mutilated corpse in front of her.

Sam was wiggling around a little and Alex looked at him with a scowl. What was he doing? Then she remembered how he kept a switchblade up his jacket sleeve. He must be cutting his ropes. Alex glanced at the goddess again, wondering how fast Sam could discreetly get out of his bindings.

Veritas opened the mouth of her most recent victim—the dentist, Alex was pretty sure—and with pinchers, pulled his tongue straight out of his mouth. It came out with a sickening squelch as she pulled, ripping it. She turned around and smirked at them, showing off her prize. "The tongue... is the tastiest part. It's where the lies roll off." She raised the tongue to her lips, took a big bite, enjoying it immensely. Dean, sickened, closed his eyes even as Alex averted her gaze. Gross. "Mmm. Mmm!" Veritas smiled, chewing, then swallowed, looking at all of the Winchesters in turn. "I cannot wait to eat yours. I mean, I've seen liars before, but you three? Gold standard." She laid down the pinchers and sauntered around the edge of the spa. Alex looked at Sam meaningfully. Hurry.

"Point of professional pride," Dean quipped, giving Veritas his best die in a fire smile. Their eyes met.

"I wouldn't be so cocky if I were you, Dean," Veritas said, matching his smile with one of her own. "You know what happens when you base your life on lies, right? The truth comes along and..." her eyes slid to Alex's, and Veritas smirked when the eye contact was made. "So, while you've still got your tongues... let's play a little game of truth, or truth, hmm?" She leaned against one of the floor-to-ceiling columns that connected to the pole Alex was tied to. She was tall and beautiful, her figure was like an hourglass. Dean rolled his eyes and looked away.

Veritas crouched down beside Alex and took hold of her chin, forcing her to look at her. The little smile on the goddess's face grew, as if she were delighted. "Alex. Oh... you're holding onto a good one, aren't you?" Baleful, Alex glared, but Veritas placed a cool finger to Alex's lips briefly. "Think I'll save the best for last. Drop that bombshell as our grand finale."

Veritas stood even as Dean fixed her with a pissy stare. "You can relax, cat woman," Dean spat. "She already told me everything."

"How cute," Veritas seemed to think, and she chuckled, walking down a stair to sit beside Dean. "No. Not everything. There's one more thing she reaaally doesn't want you to know..." Dean frowned, looking at Veritas and trying to gauge if what the goddess was saying were true or not. Alex shriveled, looked down, panicking internally. This was not how she wanted her brothers to find out her deepest secret. "But, all in due time," Veritas said, her voice low and smooth. "First... Dean. I think it's your turn to spill some, being the oldest and all. What should we ask Dean first, hmm? Something... personal?" She looked at Sam pointedly. "About you?" She fixed Dean with that maddening, cool gaze. "Hey, Dean, I'm curious. What do you really feel about your brother?"

"Better now," Dean answered, given no choice but to reply. "Before I found out the truth, I wanted to kill him in his sleep." Both Sam and Alex were surprised at the brutal answer. Dean's jaw was tight. "I thought he was a monster. But now I think... he's just acting like me," Dean said, then looked at Alex. "Just like her."

"What do you mean?" Veritas encouraged.

"It's the gig," Dean said, helpless to do anything but reply. "You're covered in blood until you're covered in your own blood. Half the time, you're about to die. Like right now. I told myself I
wanted out... that I wanted a family."

"But you were lying," Veritas said, her voice curling around the word 'lying' with distaste.

"No," Dean said. "But what I'm good at... is slicing throats. I ain't a father. I'm a killer. And there's no changing that. I know that now."

"How bad, exactly, is the drinking, Dean?" Alex suddenly asked, drawing three surprised looks. Veritas seemed, once again, delighted. But Alex wanted to know and this seemed like as good a time as any to ask.

"Interesting question, little sis!" Veritas commented, then looked at Dean. "Answer."

"Way too much," Dean said, and he was supremely guilty about it. "Half a fifth every night, sometimes more. Anything to numb the guilt. I can't stop. And trust me, I've tried."

"Hm," Veritas cocked her head to the side, looked Dean over with that little smile on her face. "This is good. What else should we ask oldest brother? Oh, I know. Why is it, Dean, that you have such a huge problem with the idea of your sister and the angel, hmm?"

Dean's expression clouded over. "He's older than dinosaurs. Literally. And I dunno if he's trustworthy, if he can take care of her. I should be the only man in her life, as jacked up as that sounds. I dunno what it is he sees in her except extremely naive innocence and a huge crush he can take advantage of." Alex felt wholly insulted, but Dean wasn't done. "And I worry that he's like me: I know how to pick women who look at me and feel sorry for me. They have sex with me, I use them to feel better about myself and then I leave 'em. I never stay and I never follow through. I tried to with Lisa and I guess I couldn't. All I've ever done is use women for what they could give me. And I don't want some jackass like me to ever do the same thing to my sister."

Alex stared at her brother, who was looking down and shaking his head, seeming to feel rueful about what he'd just been forced to say. Veritas patted his shoulder patronizingly. "How sweet." She stood up, began to approach Sam now.

"So, Sam walking back into your life must have been a relief. Hmm? The three amigos, together again? And how do you feel about the band getting back together, hmm, Sam?" She took a seat next to Sam, who looked uncomfortable at her question. Dean seemed to dread the answer.

"Look... what we do... is hard." Sam hesitated. Dean was looking over at a large metal hook that laid on the ground nearby, discarded. Alex followed his gaze as Sam kept speaking. "But... we watch out for each other. And that's what's important. And that's it. That's the truth."

Veritas seemed to be taken aback and looked at him strangely. "No. No, it's not." She stood up slowly, looking at Sam with an absolutely astonished expression. "How are you doing that?" She demanded, anger beginning to fill her voice. "That's not possible. You're lying to me!"

"No, I'm not!" Sam said, matching her anger with some of his own.

"What are you?" Veritas asked, then looked at Dean. "What is he?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Sam said, his voice growing louder.

"Really? I doubt that," she snarled, "I doubt anything that comes out of your mouth right now. You're not human!"

"What?" Dean asked softly, eyes wide.
Veritas looked at him angrily. "You didn't know that? Now, _that_ I believe." Without warning, Sam suddenly stood, snapping his ropes and tossing his switchblade to Dean, who managed to get it with a great stretch. He sawed at his ropes vigorously as Sam leapt for the knives Veritas had confiscated. He got knocked aside but valiantly tried again, leaping for the gurney where the knives waited. The second he got his hands on one, Veritas knocked him down with a one-two punch, then jumped on top of him, began to choke him.

"Dean, _hurry_!" Alex urged with growing alarm, even as he got through his ropes. He slid the knife to her hand and scrambled for the hook he'd spotted. Alex got a grip on the knife Dean had slid to her and worked on awkwardly cutting at her ropes. Sam's gasps of protest filled the basement as Veritas choked the life out of him, but Dean rushed her and swung the hook down, impaling Veritas from behind with it—she whirled and her human face was replaced with a monstrous one. She hissed, making to attack Dean—then found the dog's blood soaked knife in her heart, courtesy of Sam. With a cry of surprise, the goddess collapsed and fell halfway into the spa, her body laying upside down on the stairs there just as Alex got free to stand up. She stood up in the middle of the sunken spa, shocked and staring at her brothers, the switchblade in her hand, forgotten momentarily.

Dean, a knife in hand, held it out toward Sam, who stood up, panting. He took in how his brother threatened him with the knife and seemed taken aback. Sam held his hands out to show that he meant no harm. "Dean, it's _me._"

Dean began to move forward, and Sam edged back. Alex took two steps toward and Dean shot her a deadly serious look. "Stay _there_, Alex." The tone in his voice stopped her cold. "You are _not_ my brother," Dean said to Sam, who was backing up more and more.

"Just listen," Sam said, holding his hands out even further.

"What are you?!" Dean demanded thunderously. "Tell me before I cut your _lungs_ out!"

Sam had to turn now, and he began to back up to edge around the spa. Alex turned with them, her position in the middle of the spa seeming oddly vulnerable to her. "I'm me, Dean," Sam rushed, getting nervous at the look in Dean's eyes and the knife in his hand. "Look, please, just let me explain!"

"Why the hell should I believe anything you say?" Dean asked, and there was murder in his voice.

Sam glanced sidelong at Alex, and without warning he suddenly jumped down, grabbed her roughly and yanked the switchblade from her. With brute strength, he pulled her against him to face Dean, and held the sharp tip of the knife there against her neck—all within the span of three seconds. Breathless and horrified at what had just happened, Alex was shocked into silence.

"Back _off_ me, Dean!" Sam demanded intensely, and he sounded crazy enough to actually try something—Alex felt the switchblade press in a little more to her neck—her adrenaline went wild. "Drop the knife!"

"Hey, hey, take it easy!" Dean said, horrified, immediately laying his knife down and raising his hands. "Don't hurt her, Sam!"

"Sam! What are you doing?!" Alex protested against the bruising pressure of the knife at her neck. She could feel, being pulled so tight to him, how his heart was actually picking up a little—he really _was_ afraid, but she didn't know of what.

"Okay, okay," Sam said, panicking, trying to convince Dean of something. "You want the truth?!
Here it is, here it is. God's honest! Veritas was right. There's something wrong with me, really wrong. I've known it for a while. I lied to you both. And... yeah, I let Alex get turned by that vamp. Because I knew there was a cure, Dean, and we needed in that nest! And I knew you guys could handle it!"

"Handle it?!" Dean asked, enraged. "She almost died, Sam! I could've died! I could've killed Ben!"

Sam shook his head, at his wit's end. "And that should stop me cold. But I—I just don't feel it. I mean, look at me!" He indicated what he was doing to his twin. "Would I have done this before? No! I know I wouldn't! But ever since I came back, I can't feel anything. Nothing! I don't know what's wrong with me. I think... I need help."

Dean suddenly went calm. Too calm. He nodded and considered. "Okay. We'll help you. Just... let her go, Sam." Sam hesitated and Dean repeated himself. "I'll help you. Just let her come up here, all right?" He made a come here motion and Sam let Alex go. She hurried up out of the spa even as Dean grabbed her and pulled her out. Sam stood there for a second as Dean looked his sister over then refocused on Sam. He kept that chillingly calm demeanor and smile up.

"Hey. All right, brother," he said. "Let's get through this together. Like we always have." Dean extended a hand to Sam, who hesitated, then took it. He looked hopeful, and Dean helped haul him up to stand at ground level. And then without warning, the second Dean had his brother where he wanted him, the rage he'd hidden came out. He hit Sam hard in the face and grabbed then rammed his wrist into the stone column hard enough that the switchblade dropped away. Dean let loose and sucker punched a stunned Sam hard, knocking him down to the ground. Dean followed him to the floor, grabbing him by his jacket and he viciously began to beat Sam to a pulp. He kept going even when he was unconscious, and Alex was freaking out completely.

"Dean! Stop! Stop!" She tried to pull him off, but he flung his arm out at her, his eyes were crazy, and she took a couple steps back. Dean was beating Sam to death, and Alex panicked. "C-Castiel, I need you to get down here right now!" she cried out, and almost instantly, he was there—standing a few feet in front of her. Immediately, he turned his head at the commotion Dean was causing and he saw what was happening. Cas reached out and pulled Dean off of Sam, separated him by several feet, carrying the man much like a mother cat carries a kitten—but instead of by the scruff of the neck, it was by the back of his jacket. Dean struggled uselessly at Cas's superhuman grip. "Get the hell off me!" He roared, and when Cas let go, Dean stood to his full height and straightened his jacket with an angry snap then leveled Cas with an angry glare and a disbelieving, baleful slow shake of the head. "You son of a bitch."

Cas wasn't looking at him—he was assessing Alex, who was standing off against one of the spa columns, appearing to be shaken up and out of sorts. "Hey!" Dean barked, demanding Cas's attention. He got it, but Cas remained where he was, standing between Dean and Sam.

"Dean, why are you beating your unconscious brother?" He asked, frowning deeply. He looked around at the bodies scattering the basement. "What happened here?"

"He's not Sam, Cas!" Dean thundered. "He looks like Sam and sounds like Sam but that ain't Sam!"

Cas frowned a little. "I can assure you. That is Sam."

Dean looked like he wanted to kill everyone. "Okay, listen here you ancient pervert—" he started.

"Dean!" Alex said, loud and warningly. This wasn't the time. She got an extremely petty face from her brother but she ignored him in favor of Cas, who was thoroughly confused. "Cas, can you take us to back to our room at the Jefferson Motel? One-twenty-one."
Without hesitation, Cas did as she asked and Dean glowered silently first at Cas, then at Sam, who was now on the motel room floor. He stepped a little closer to Sam and Alex, worried, matched his stride. "Don't hurt him, Dean," she warned. "That's still our brother."

"What do you mean, don't hurt him?" Dean asked, enraged again. "He was gonna hurt you!"

"What do you mean?" Cas asked lowly, looking at Alex for an explanation. Her gaze fell away from his and she absently rubbed her neck—the place where Sam had held the switchblade.

Dean was rounding on Cas angrily. "All right, look, Romeo. You're gonna stay until we figure out what the fuck is wrong with him! He let Alex get turned by those vamps, he friggin' threw me to them, too, and then he has the balls to try and hold her hostage with a knife at her neck... no. No, no. No. Not okay. Nothing that has happened today is okay with me." He cast an angry glare around the room. "I need some fucking ropes to tie this psycho up," he muttered, then looked at Cas with an ugly expression again. "You wanna go get the Impala for me, Casanova?"

"Could you use some manners, Dean?" Alex asked, getting pissed, herself at Dean's immaturity and readiness to beat Sam's skull in. "Cas is not your butler."

He gave her a pointed and snide look. "Sure, you use some protection, I'll use manners."

Alex wilted then shook her head, disgusted with her incredibly childish brother. She met Cas's waiting gaze and nodded slightly, letting him know it was okay to go. Cas paused, and she could see he was very disturbed. "I'll... be right back," he said, and Dean and Alex scowled at each other. It was all of two seconds, and Cas reappeared. Whoa. That was fast. "Your vehicle is outside, Dean."

"Great, thanks," he said facetiously. "You always so fast?" Dean asked. Another immature, petulant dig. He stalked out of the room and slammed the door behind himself. God, grow up Dean. His behavior was ridiculous. But at least he was gone for a couple minutes. The rope was really deep down in the trunk.

Alex felt Cas's eyes on her and she looked at him. He seemed worried. "Are you all right?" he asked softly, approaching her, seeming to be disbelieving of what he'd heard. "Sam tried to hurt you?" He seemed unable to accept that, almost, but still looked her over carefully, as if he were looking for any harm on her body.

"Yeah, he did, I'll explain later, okay? I'm fine." There were more important things she needed to tell her angel. She swallowed, glanced at Sam's unconscious form, just to make sure they weren't being eavesdropped on. He was still, but she lowered her voice anyway. "Cas... Dean found out about us." She realized she needed to be more specific about what he found out when Cas's expression registered a certain kind of shock and apprehension. "That we've been together," she clarified quickly. "It was the truth curse—it made me say a lot of stuff I really didn't wanna say. I couldn't not say it."

Cas nodded, took it in stride... then searched her gaze with growing anxiousness. "What else did he discover?"

Alex faltered, averted her eyes, hedged. "That I didn't like any of the girls he ever dated and I threw his knife down a street drain?" She already knew that wasn't what he had been asking, and when she peeked up at him, she saw the telltale signs of very great worry in his eyes.

"But not..." he trailed off meaningfully, seeming as hesitant to discuss this as she was. His eyes dropped, gazed at her penny necklace and automatically, almost protectively, her fingers came to
touch the cool circle of copper briefly. Their eyes locked again.

Alex pressed her lips in together, the picture of uncertain. "No. He stopped me before I could say it. I almost did, though. A couple of times." If Dean hadn't cut her off like he had those two times, if she hadn't literally bitten her tongue to keep from saying it... Dean probably would have thrown punches or knives at Cas, not just petty insults.

Cas frowned, looked down, then took one of her hands, just the fingertips, gently in one of his own. Silently reassuring her and calming her. "If he knows about the, uh—intercourse—perhaps we should tell him the rest." He looked at her questioningly.

That seemed like the worst idea in the world to her. And besides... "Cas. We haven't even talked about... 'the rest,'" she said, lowering her voice to a intense, nervous whisper. It had been a year ago and it had been during what they thought was the end of time. People did insane things when they thought the world was gonna end, but maybe she and Cas could win first place for their little foray into insanity. She looked down and away from his intense gaze because she felt like all of her inside thoughts were all over her face. "I mean, how would that conversation even go if we decided to tell him?" She asked, then tried spit-balling it. "'Hey, Dean, by the way, remember the apocalypse? Remember when Cas lost all his angel powers and we thought he was pretty much human? Remember that day Cas and I just kind of went off and spent the night away?''" 

Alex looked up into his eyes, facing and naming what they'd done in secret; speaking aloud what she'd kept inside for almost a year now where it had torn her apart in his absence. "Call me crazy," she basically whispered, "but I just don't think he'd exactly jump for joy if we told him how we ran off and got married, do you?"

Castiel never got to answer. Dean suddenly opened the door with a loud bang and paraded his ass back in, a huge coil of rope in hand. "All right, losers," he muttered peevishly, "this kid ain't gonna tie himself up."
April 29th, 2010

"In all the world, there is no heart for me like yours. In all the world, there is no love for you like mine."
- Maya Angelou

A year ago almost to the day, things were very different.

There wasn't a huge gap forced between Alex and Cas, there wasn't a war in Heaven that ripped them apart from each other. Not yet.

Instead there was Castiel, who was all but human at that time. Devoid of his celestial powers. There was Alex, who had spent the past month believing Cas was dead after sacrificing himself to save her.

There was the ever-deepening love affair between them: the fallen angel and the human girl he had come to hold in his heart as most beloved. There was an apocalypse, there was the idea that the world was going to end in a few days or weeks. There was a general feeling of hurtling toward a doomed crescendo, of heading inescapably toward the end of all things.

People do strange things when they think they don't have a lot of time left. Maybe that's why Cas and Alex did what they did. But really... I think you and I both know there was a lot more to it than an impulse decision or flight of fancy. In a time to come, both would come to second-guess and even regret what they did that day. But that day, they felt nothing but certainty and love, desperation to hold onto each other. Maybe it was crazy, maybe it was ill-advised. But either way... a year ago, Castiel, fallen angel of ancient days and Alex Winchester, flesh and blood human, married in secret. This is how it happened.

April 29th, 2010
Springfield, Missouri

Rain poured heavily outside and in the back seat of a stolen SUV that was pulled off to the side of an abandoned road, two lovers who had been recently and cruelly divided by fate were finally in each other's arms again. Unable to withstand the distance or desire any longer and having just had a close encounter with death, the two of them flung caution to the wind in favor of having each other once more—they barely managed to get enough clothes off to make it happen, they were so hurried and frantic. It was only their third time being together like that.

They collapsed down together when it was over, him on top of her in the back seat, both of their bodies shaking from what they'd just done. In the moment of climax, she'd gasped his name and whispered aloud... for the first time ever... that she loved him. Tears had run out of her eyes. And he loved her too.

Castiel, angel of the Lord, fallen to earth and virtually graceless by all appearances, devoid of his celestial abilities and angelic status was trembling in the arms of his human lover. She was the only one he had ever loved at such intense depths and heights; the one who, from the moment he'd laid eyes on her, he had belonged to unknowingly. But as rain noisily pounded the roof of the car they were in, he knew that he had never belonged to her more than he did right then.

"I love you, Alex," he whispered to her—helpless to hold back the words that had for so long
silently beat to the rhythm of his heart; helpless to do anything but finally tell her what he had been
aching to speak aloud for what seemed such a long time. Her face softened, her lips parted slightly
and her eyebrows rose fractionally—her eyes, already shining with tears, seemed fuller. She was
seemingly taken aback to hear him say it, stunned and also deeply reciprocating of the notion. He
somehow saw his own feelings mirrored back at him wordlessly in her eyes, saw and understood
that she loved him too, and vastly so. Incapable of doing anything else, Castiel bent down and
kissed the woman he adored, letting his mouth remain soft and chaste on hers. His eyes fell closed
at the indescribable sensation of her lips pressed to his, of her fingers gently weaved into his hair.
He breathed her in, this resplendent creation of flesh and bone who wrapped him in a warmth like
the sunrise.

She seemed holy to him in that moment, divine and hallowed. His devotion was to her and her
alone; he touched the side of her face with a soft hand, letting his gentle fingertips take in the
feeling of her quick pulse beating underneath the warmth of her skin. She was so beautiful, every
last atom and molecule, so precious. And thinking of how rare and inestimable she was, how
innocent and pure… he drew back from her as uncomfortable beginnings of guilt and wrongdoing
began to creep up on him. His proclamation of love felt so hypocritical, so false. What he'd just
done seemed degrading and inappropriate to her. He hadn't been able to stop himself in the
blistering heat of the moment… and now as always, he was left to feel so wrong about it.

As the physical elation ebbed, deeply ingrained laws and warnings against sexual sin flashed
through his mind. They had copulated three times now, and afterward, each time, guilt predictably
swallowed him whole.

He and Alex were unwed… that was bad enough… but sexual relations between humans and
angels were absolutely forbidden. The first time they'd engaged in intercourse, he'd spent hours and
hours afterward wondering if he should marry her to make it right, had even asked her what she
thought about it. She'd been flabbergasted, then asked if angels even could get married. No, he
supposed they couldn't. But now he wasn't even sure if he even were an angel anymore after losing
his powers—but he did know that he and Alex weren't man and wife. And if he were indeed a
human now or close to being one, doing this with her seemed even worse to him. Castiel struggled.
He should never have gone down this path with her, but what happened between them that night at
the Vatican had started something that he was unable and now unwilling to stop. It felt so recent to
him, too, this discovery of sexuality with her. To him, that night had happened only days ago—the
coma he'd fallen into had made him miss thirty-eight days. So to him, it felt like it had only been
six days since they had first been together. Six days since he'd lost his virginity. He'd been an angel
for countless centuries, and for all that time he'd been above reproach or the call of immorality. But
he'd been a sinner ever since he'd laid eyes on Alex. She'd inspired rebellion and emotion and
desire within him that simply wasn't permitted. It had culminated with their physical union, and he
didn't think he could put an end to it. He didn't want to, either. He knew that he would desire her
again, that every time the need for her was fulfilled it was only temporary, that once again he
would begin to long to discover her all over again and know her in the most intimate way possible.

Everything he had ever been taught and conditioned to believe told him that this was wrong at
every level.

But how could it really be so wrong? Only a moment ago, before it ended in the racing thrill of
bursting feelings and absolute pleasure and helpless gasps as he and Alex clung each to the other,
he'd felt as though they were wrapped up in something from paradise itself. He'd been dependent
on her completely, she'd been his entirely, and it had been so beautiful, this giving and receiving,
this reaching and searching and finding in one another. It had felt right. It had been right… hadn't
it? He had a nagging feeling that it wasn't. That he was wronging her. And the thought of willfully
doing anything that would harm or discredit her was abominable to him. He was confused and
upset that yet again, as always, he was reacting so negatively in the aftermath of intimacy. He saw how she was searching his slowly falling face, how she was becoming concerned, how she already knew something was wrong. A little more shame came over him—he never could do anything quite right. He didn't want to disappoint her or trouble her, hurt her in any way. But she looked like she was becoming sad right along with him.

Etched into his mind, burned into it, passages of scripture ran together. *For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall make her his wife to atone for the sin he has lodged both against himself and against the woman he has defiled. Because of the temptation to sin, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. Give honor to marriage, and remain faithful to one another. The Word of the Lord.*

But did God even *care* anymore? Did these laws still hold true with God gone and seemingly having withdrawn himself from the equation? Castiel wanted to believe his father did not care anymore, that somehow these ancient precepts had been abolished. But that might have also been his own selfish desire to be able to pursue what he wanted without fear of punishment or consequence. Inwardly, at his deepest levels, Castiel knew that God's laws remained unchanged forever, written into the fabric of his creation, and Castiel, acting as he had, rebelling against these laws as if they didn't matter… was unwise. *Dangerous.* Cas was risking too much and had already done irreversible damage by giving in to his urges. Why had he *done* this to her? Why couldn't he *stop*? Why did this have to be wrong at all? It didn't seem fair. Castiel despaired, trapped within himself and his conflicted state of mind.

Filled with a great sadness, his short-lived feelings of bliss were completely overcome with sensations of failure. Cas could no longer look at her. He felt… ashamed. And *ashamed* that he felt ashamed. Totally uncomfortable now, he hesitated, then began to move away a bit. He was sorry, he felt confused, he wasn't *sure*. He used his palms to push himself back and away, then into a sitting position. He awkwardly turned to face away from her and maneuvered himself oddly, ungracefully, to pull his pants back up. This was very distressing and the silence in the car felt clumsy, awkward. Cas moved slowly as he re-dressed and kept his gaze away from her purposefully—allowing her to keep whatever dignity possible as she put her clothing back to where it had been before he'd almost torn it off of her completely.

When he was finished, he sat there silently, head bowed down. Cas didn't know what to say or do. They sat on opposite sides of the car now—him with his hands resting loosely between his knees—he faced forward and finally he risked a sidelong look at her. She was decent again and sat with a leg half tucked underneath herself, facing him at an angle, her arms circling herself just slightly, almost protectively or like she was cold. Her hair was tangled and misshapen, her damp shirt was twisted, the strap was still down, leaving her shoulder bare. She looked concerned—her eyebrows working toward each other, eyes filled with apprehensive worry—she was watching him closely, she kept opening her mouth slightly like she was about to say something then she'd shut it, seeming to be left wordless.

His eyes fell away from hers as he became heavy with guilt. "You don't deserve this," he said, his torn feelings reflected in his troubled tone. This mess, this wreck of a situation, this baggage he bore and inflicted upon her. Surely she found this tiresome, his reaction to sexual intimacy. He doubted a man, a real human man, would be acting this way. And he was reminded, yet again, that he didn't even know what he was anymore. Man? Angel?

Alex shook her head, inching a little closer, worried about him. "Deserve what?" she asked,
imploring him not to feel that way. He was looking down and his brow was rigid—he couldn't manage to look at her. She seemed distressed now, too, especially when he wouldn't look at her. "Cas, you're perfect to me. I… I love you. What's wrong?"

Castiel balked slightly at her tender words and the way she said them to him. He looked at her while silently wondering how she could say that he was perfect. He shook his head in denial, his face a mask of torment, he tried to explain, make her understand how he felt. "I shouldn't do this to you, I shouldn't keep doing this to you." He clenched his jaw, looking away again and down at one of his knees gravely. "Sexual relations in the back of a car with an… an angel trying to pass for a man… a man who isn't even your husband." Saying it out loud made him even more miserable and he hung his head. "And I was rough with you."

Her eyebrows raised slightly in surprise before moving downward to knit fiercely together. "Cas—no… we were both just… really… in the moment. We missed each other." She swallowed, becoming slightly uncomfortable or bashful and she hesitated, eyes faltering away from him now. "What you did, it, it felt good."

Cas looked at her sidelong, wanting to believe her, but not sure if she were being totally truthful or not. He hadn't been gentle at all—and he was so much stronger than her, even with his angelic powers diminished. He felt a lot bigger than her and she seemed fragile to him—she always had. "I didn't hurt you?" he asked, certain that if she said yes, he would wither away into nothing.

She moved across the space separating them and took hold of one of his hands—an immediately comforting gesture—and he looked at her fully, waiting with bated breath for her answer. She spoke with a soft and deeply emotional voice. "No you didn't hurt me." She saw his expression and hers wavered painfully. Alex was full of sadness, and he knew it was because his reaction wasn't what she wanted. He saw mild frustration in her features. "There's nothing wrong about this, Cas," she said, holding his hand more tightly, trying to convince him. He wanted to be convinced, too.

Her other hand raised up, she brushed the backs of her fingers against the side of his face soothingly, chanced a timid little smile. She was hesitant and careful and Cas unconsciously leaned into the touch a little. "We both wanted it and we… we love each other, right?" A faltering, demure question. He realized she was frightened that he might reject her and that she was making herself vulnerable in these attempts to comfort him.

"Yes," he answered, his frustrations mounting at the absolutely confounding nature of this dilemma. He couldn't let her think that he didn't love her or didn't desire her, because he did. It was impossible... nothing he did made anything right, he always seemed to make the problem exponentially worse. He didn't think he knew how to explain it to her fully, or how to make her understand his feelings and beliefs. She couldn't comprehend how old he was, how different they were, and it made him ache. She was a human. He was not, or at least, he didn't have the human experience. He'd been created in centuries past to be one among thousands of God's instruments, his warriors. Now here he was... put into the body of a man and bereft of all the powers and grace that had made him an angel. Still, he couldn't just cast aside the life and reality he knew, he couldn't erase God's word from his mind. And fumbling, grim, frustrated, Cas attempted to explain why he felt so conflicted about sexual relations. "It's... dishonorable to you. This is wrong of me. I shouldn't."

His answer seemed to sadden her, but she just curled into him, laid her head in the crook of his neck and circled her arms around his middle the best she could. Her closeness made him weak inside and he didn't even mean to—but he let the lower side of his face rest against the top of her head and again, he ached. She felt so right in his arms, and just the feeling of her there with him soothed him. He never wanted her to leave—this sensation, her weight against him, her head laid trustingly onto him... it was everything. With her, he felt less unsure. With her, he felt he belonged.
"It upsets me when you say that it's wrong," Alex told him almost in a whisper, her tone honest and soft and a little forlorn. Her sadness only deepened his. There was a long, tense pause. "We both want it, why is it wrong?" She asked, earnest and distressed. The very question he was wrestling. He tried to think of how to explain it to her, then realized that he heard the wavering lilt of tearfulness in her voice when she spoke again. "Why do you get upset afterwards each time? Is it something I do?"

She thought this was her fault? Faintly panicked, not sure of how to take back whatever he'd done to unsettle her, he tried to come up with some sort of way to comfort her.

Alex, however, was looking at him pleadingly and didn't give him the chance. "I just don't want you to feel like that. Like you're doing something wrong to me. You're not." Her eyes fell slightly, flickered back in forth in thought, then rose to meet his again. "No one's ever treated me like you do… so good." She seemed earnest, like she really wanted him to believe her words. "You've never mistreated me. Not even once."

"I don't feel that's true," Cas protested, confused as to how she could overlook his errors. All he could think of were his many faults and mistakes. "I removed your memory of our first kiss. I lied about it not being me who desired you under Famine's influence. I took… I took your virginity while we were both intoxicated. In the Vatican. Standing up." Quickly becoming utterly depressed by his thoughts, Cas's voice reflected his low feelings. "This entire relationship is forbidden; if it harms your immortal soul in any way..."

"Cas," she said gently, raising his chin by cupping her hand to the side of his face. "Stop." Her features were full of concern and her eyes gently demanded his gaze. "The first two things... you fixed those. You told me the truth. When you did those things, you were only trying to do the right thing. I know you were." Her face softened with a fond smile. "You always do." Her eyes continued to search his. "And the Vatican… I wanted that. You know I did. And if I had it to do over, I wouldn't change it. Not ever. If I had to go back and choose, just once or a thousand times… my first time would always be with you. And it wouldn't matter where or when or how to me... just... I would always pick you." Her thumb stroked down against his cheek and he saw how sad she was at his distress. "Our first time may not have been perfect, but… it belongs to us. I don't regret it."

All the things she said touched him deeply, made it difficult to speak, made emotion well up within him strongly. Alex considered something deeply. "We don't have to have sex, Cas," she told him, and he was surprised at the care in her face despite a great amount of anxiousness, too. "If it really bothers you that much... I mean, honestly I love being with you like that." A shy little smile passed over her face and she hid it. "But..." she let out a long breath and shrugged sort of forcefully, and he saw she was trying to be brave, somehow. "If it's too much for you, if you really can't take it, then... we don't have to." She was earnest and he was very touched at the offer, at her gesture despite how she didn't fully understanding his reasonings. "I don't wanna do anything you're not okay with."

When he understood that she was trying to keep his best interests at heart, a powerful feeling blossomed in his chest. "Alex," he said softly, treasuring the way she loved him, and for the smallest moment he accepted her affections without believing himself unworthy of them. His hand was still on the side of her head and he let his thumb brush against her hair once, softly. He felt his already unfathomably vast love for her grow, overtake him even more. He wondered how such a thing were even possible.

She gave him another brave, small smile through what he clearly saw to be trepidation when she felt the little affectionate touch. She seemed sad still. "Maybe it'll just take a little while for you to
be okay with this," she said, looking at him deeply. "But... I can wait. And I will. And if it never happens again for us... that's okay too."

She was telling the truth and attempting to do something for him, honor him and his feelings and Castiel was left stricken, deeply affected. He looked at her in the awe of disbelief and thought of how this moment, this closeness between them was the result of virtually infinite potentials of outcomes—he thought of how precious this was, how, in another reality or dimension, this moment and relationship might not exist at all. How intricate and fragile and exceptional their connection was. She was so very wonderful and incomparable. Again, his thumb brushed down across her hair and things he felt escaped out of his mouth into the air. "I find you so very lovely," he told her honestly, letting his adoration form itself into words. "In every way."

Slightly embarrassed at the sudden proclamation, Alex looked down, somewhere between pleased and uncomfortable. He saw how her soft eyelashes fanned out against her cheeks, how her kiss-moist lips parted and turned upwards slightly. He thought even if he wanted to, he couldn't resist her. "Your offer of stopping is very thoughtful," he told her slowly, thinking out loud almost. "But... I don't think that it would work." She glanced back at him with questioning eyes and he swallowed, a little hesitant as he admitted this to her: "I seem unable to stop myself from wanting... the things that I want with you."

Alex heard him say that and her heart clenched in a way that was both delighted and afraid. She heard how forlorn and resigned he was, how weighted down. He sounded guilty and upset, as he did after every time they had sex. She didn't know what else to do or how to fix it, except to give it time and try not to take it personally. She understood as best as possible, as much as she could, that he came from a different world than she did, that this was new to him, even newer than it was to her. Not just sex: emotions, pain, hunger... he was feeling all those things, and it was all new to him. Some parts newer than others. She ghosted a hand along the shirt over his chest, pensive. Underneath it, the angry red scar was hidden. It was from where he'd carved the angel sigil into his own flesh a month ago to save her and Adam from Zachariah. He'd almost died because of his actions. He'd spent the month in that coma while she'd believed him to be dead and gone forever. She was so fucking glad to have him back even though it scared her a little that Castiel wasn't what he had been before. He was now a flightless bird—a wingless angel—and he had fallen down to earth, crashing here because of her. She wondered if it were her fault that he was powerless now. She wondered if Cas resented the decision at all. She hoped not.

As disconcerting it was for Alex to see Cas clumsily dealing with his growing humanity and fallibility, she wondered: how frightening was it to be Cas right now? He needed her more than he had before, she thought. To be strong, to help him, to be understanding of his conflicted thoughts and feelings. It was scary to live life as a mere human, and who would know that better than Alex? But Castiel wasn't going to live his life alone. She'd already decided that. She craned her neck up and kissed his forehead, trying to tell him, wordlessly, that it was gonna be okay.

She let the press of her lips linger there, then she drew back a little, brushed some hair back from his forehead, and studied him gently. He seemed very vulnerable and unsure to her in that moment, like he was asking for guidance or advice, an answer to the dilemma he was faced with. She didn't really know what to tell him—she didn't want him to feel guilty about having sex with her, and she wasn't sure how to help him be all right with it. Maybe he would never be fully okay with them being intimate. She didn't know; but she meant what she said—she'd wait for him to be all right with it, or if he never was... all right. She'd find a way to take that in stride, if that was what had to happen. It didn't matter; what mattered right now was reassuring him the best that she could, trying to make him feel less uncertain. "We'll find a way through this, okay?" Her forehead bowed down against his, their noses brushed. "Together." Was it selfish of her to deep down be okay with this idea of him being human? In her mind, in secret, she pictured the two of them with graying hair
and wrinkles. Together, until the end.

"Together," he repeated softly, letting his fingers move some of her hair to the crook behind her ear. And Alex had no way of knowing it yet, but Castiel was once again thinking of marriage, and of marrying her. Not just to make things right, but also because the thought of being her husband seemed right, fitting, appropriate. But he said nothing of it to her. Not yet. Instead he kept his thoughts inside, pondering them at length.

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Lincoln, Nebraska

A couple of hours later Cas and Alex sat on a picnic table, side by side. They rested their feet on the bench where you were supposed to sit and they ate generic gas station turkey sandwiches in the shade of a tree. It was midday, the storm had cleared, and some birds had come out, some kids, too —there was a playground nearby. The kind with a slide, monkey bars, swings, a huge metal geodome for climbing. Those had always been her favorite.

Alex glanced at her companion, smiling to herself a little. Watching Cas eat was… well, there was no other word for it. It was cute. Even though he looked to be a man approaching forty, even though she knew that he was thousands of years old, he seemed boyish and youthful to her. Sometimes, she suddenly remembered how the face she saw, the eyes she loved… those weren't even really Cas, not truly. And she didn't understand or know how to think about that. Usually, she didn't think about it for long because it bothered her too much to remember Jimmy Novak. Cas had told her a couple months back that Jimmy was essentially dead and gone. And now, with Cas seemingly locked in a human body and not going anywhere, she selfishly wanted that to be true —wanted Jimmy to be gone forever, because she wanted this to be Cas. Human. Hers. Always.

Alex considered him with relative somberness. Was he human now? He was thirsty, hungry, had pain from his injuries sustained a month ago… but some things still didn't add up. He hadn't needed the bathroom even once since she'd picked him up from the hospital nearly forty-eight hours ago, he didn't sweat like a person should, he seemed just as clean as he always had. It was weird. But she didn't dwell on these things too long. At least he was okay. At least he was there with her. She still found it so hard to believe he would risk everything for even a small chance to save her. The entire past month he was missing after angel-blasting himself halfway across the country, she and her brothers had assumed he was dead. She'd held onto hope just barely. She'd been lost. The moment she'd heard his voice on the other end of the line when he'd called her from that hospital in Louisiana? She'd been found again.

He was alive and here with her right now, and she thought about how much she didn't want to take him for granted. She never had, but now more than ever she wanted to be close to him and care for him. Funny thing… he was a fierce and devastating warrior, yet he inspired a feeling of protectiveness in her, especially right now. Just yesterday, she'd saved his life from Zachariah. And today, they'd saved each other. The rabid croat that jumped her and almost killed her still stuck in her mind. Life could end so quickly. And maybe it was about to, she wasn't sure. There was the whole apocalypse thing hanging over their heads and the thought of it had been unbearable for Alex. With Cas back… it wasn't quite as unbearable.

The depth and intensity she loved Cas had a way of startling and mystifying her. It had come from nowhere and felt stronger than anything in existence. She glanced at her companion again, taking in his handsome, thoughtful profile. Emotion swelled in her chest. Had there ever been anyone like him in the history of the world? He felt her gaze and turned, catching her eyes with his. There seemed to be an unspoken understanding between them that today, they weren't slaves to fate and duty. Today they were just two people, taking what time they could (they'd never had enough,
anyway), pretending, at least outwardly, that it was a day like any other. Simultaneously, they smiled a little at each other, and Alex let her gaze drop away when she felt shy under his unguarded gaze. Taking a bit of a chance, she leaned her head sideways onto his shoulder, letting it rest there. She smiled a little to herself when she felt how his head leaned toward hers.

Maybe dragging their feet in the middle of the apocalypse crisis was stupid and selfish but… they were doing it anyway. Cas and Alex were on their very slow and unhurried way back to Sioux Falls, where Sam and Bobby would meet them. Dean, currently somewhere in Detroit and after the horsemen Death's ring, would probably get to Bobby's that night, or early tomorrow. The five of them would continue to try and find a way to stop Lucifer, stop the apocalypse, stop the entire world from ending. But for right then, on that day… Alex and Cas were just being together.

Alex wondered if Cas were still internally bashing himself over the sex thing… he'd seemed more reflective than normal for the couple-hour car ride from Springfield to here. He'd been off in his thoughts, slightly troubled about them, too. She hated to see him guilty, hated that it was because of her. It wasn't like she was issue-free on the matter of sex, either… she felt shy about it still, sort of new at it and clumsy, and also scared to get caught—but she was about to be twenty-eight for crying out loud...! She knew had nothing to be ashamed of. Cas's guilt over it was just something they had to work through, wasn't it? With whatever amount of time that was left? She grew a little deflated at the thought of the world ending. It loomed over her no matter how much she tried not to think about it.

She took in a deep breath and focused on here and now, making herself forget the big picture. She took in the park, watched some birds, and thought about how pleasant this was. She glanced sidelong, considered trying something. Then she looped her arm through Cas's and timidly cuddled against it. She felt his hand close over hers gently, felt his fingers interlacing with hers, and she realized she was smiling, completely content despite the circumstances surrounding them. What if every day could be like today?

Today, when at the gas station where they'd bought these sandwiches and a bag full of assorted candies and chocolates, she'd made him try on some cheap sunglasses on a whim. She'd laughed at him standing there like a telephone pole, arms at his sides, expression blank, with those dumbass flashy sunglasses on. He'd picked up a tabloid magazine and asked who Kristen was and why it was relevant information to the public that there were rumors she cheated on Rob. Alex had told him that was an extremely good question to ask, and she didn't know—but bought the magazine for him to read, because she delighted in seeing how he reacted to things she took for granted. Sure enough, as they sat there eating their sandwiches, he'd paged through and been quite mystified by American celebrity culture. He'd been utterly confounded: "Why does it matter who 'wore it best'?"

Oh, she loved him. Could it always be like this? Cas with her without ceasing, asking questions that warmed her heart and made her reevaluate things, stop and just see life in different light. She'd been so jaded in the past and never met anyone as innocent in spirit as he was. He had a pure heart. He made her happy.

Alex lifted her head up off his shoulder, reached beside herself for the oversized gas-station drink they were sharing. Cas had the magazine she'd bought him on his knee, forgotten. Alex peeked down at the pages of the magazine as she took a noisy sip of soda. A woman with honey-colored hair was smiling up from a glossy spread that proclaimed **HOW SHE DID IT!** In huge pink letters.

Alex felt herself making a cynically amused face—she could only guess what inane thing that celebrity had done. "What's that article say?" she asked, morbidly curious.

"**Jennifer Lopez has her best body ever,**" Castiel read aloud in a stuttering, uncertain tone. He set the magazine down against a knee again, frowning in thought, then looked at her with slight disbelief, like he thought someone was playing a joke on him. "And... people truly care about this
matter? I don't understand why it's relevant."

"Me either." Alex said with a shrug.

Cas was thoughtful, pensive. "I think it seems like a very odd thing to read about."

"Same," Alex agreed, then offered the drink his way. "Want more?"

Cas laid the magazine aside and accepted the cup to take a sip. Today was the first time he'd drank through a straw, and earlier, on first attempt, he hadn't been able to figure it out right away. Alex watched him sidelong, proud, smiling.

"Thank you," he said, handing the styrofoam cup back to her. She took it back and set it down, then leaned her head against his shoulder again. She liked it there, beside him.

Alex watched a kid swing on the monkey bars out in the park for a minute. If the world was going to end in a week or two, that kid and everyone else in the park was as good as dead. A sobering thought she didn't want to confront. She let her eyes wander over to the houses that were across the park and set in a row on the quiet street. Her eye caught on a cute little cottage with ivy growing up the front, pale blue shutters, and an oak door. The little yard was lined in neat hedges and a single big oak tree grew in one corner. The house looked like something out of a story or something. Cozy, homey, like what she thought a real home looked like. Instead of thinking about the end of the world, she allowed herself to dream of a future. "I'd live there," she said, volunteering the information without a second thought.

"What?" Cas asked, not sure what she was indicating.

She nodded toward it, then pointed. "That house. I'd live there." Cas didn't follow what she was trying to convey, and Alex sat up, tried to explain. She remembered it in a bittersweet way. "I used to do nothing but imagine, as a kid. All the houses we'd pass and see, in the car… I'd always decide which houses I'd live in or not. I had a pretty good imagination. And I guess maybe I wanted a home."

Cas was quiet for a moment. "Do you still?"

Alex shrugged, looking at the cute little house a little longer, then back at Cas. "Eh. I've decided that people are home," she told him, resigned to this opinion she'd cultivated. "Not places." Sometimes, yeah, she did want a real home. A place that would stay there, not change. That she could depend on. A familiar place to land and rest. But the life she lived—home wasn't a place. It was brothers. It was Cas. She looked at him sidelong, squeezed his hand a little in hers, and tightened her fingers through his. She wondered if he knew what the touch meant. He smiled just a little, his eyes softening as they rested on hers.

A kid shrieked loudly as he went down the huge neon orange spiral park slide, distracting the two of them—he'd gone down on his back and backwards. He was laughing raucously as his mother scolded him.

"Did you used to play on those contraptions when you were a child?" Cas asked, nodding toward the playground in curiosity.

"Mm, not so much when I was a kid." At the school playground, she'd usually picked a corner of the yard and lurked there, picked sticks apart, traced drawings and words on the ground, or put her chin in her hand and let her mind wander to daydreaming. Sometimes done pull-ups on the monkey bars or climbed onto the top of the playground (then quickly gotten in trouble for doing so). Dad
hadn't taken them to parks much... after all, according to him, playing was a waste of time. "But Dean and I, Sam sometimes too... we've just gone to parks in the dead of night and acted dumb," she explained, then made a bit of face. "Usually 'cause we were plastered," she said, then clarified in case he didn't know that term. "Drunk, or maybe high." She laughed sort of slyly, thinking of the time Sam smoked too much weed then got his ass stuck in a tunnel slide and she and Dean, also stoned out of their minds, had to yank him out of there. The three of them had fallen down, totally wasted and laughing at themselves. It was a good memory.

Cas's head was canted to the side a little bit as he tried to understand what she'd just told him. "And you did this... for enjoyment?"

"Yeah, cuz we're stupid," she said, smiling softly as she thought of the good times in years past. There had been good in all the crap, there really had been. She fixed her attention on Cas curiously. "What's your idea of fun?"

Stumped, Cas faltered. "Uh..." he squinted, maybe wondering if it were a trick question. "I've... never had to think about that before." She gave him a few seconds, wondering if he'd come up with anything at all. He did. He turned to her, a little, hopeful smile on his face. "I always enjoy spending time with you."

She was touched and caught off guard at his words... as usual. "Me too," she told him, voice soft. She leaned onto his shoulder again and moved as close as possible to him, settling against his arm. Her free hand curved around the crook of his inner elbow. "I'm glad we're together right now," she told him, nestling her head down onto his shoulder a little more. What she'd just said was just the beginning of how she felt, honestly, about how he'd been gone. Just a few years ago she never would have imagined ever loving anyone or being so attached as she had become to Castiel. If she thought about it too much, it scared her, the intensity of it.

They were quiet together there for a moment, and when Cas finally spoke, he sounded tired and hesitant. Worried, and like he was wondering something very strongly, but unsure about hearing the answer. "Dean said... yesterday, we spoke and... he said you didn't do well in my absence."

Dean said that to him? Cas had acted really odd yesterday after Dean spoke to him in private, and Alex had just known her oldest brother had been an asshole to Cas, as usual—but the way Cas said it, seemed like he was dumbing down Dean's actual words. Alex thought a minute, a little mad at her brother, but also unable to deny it. "I thought you were dead," she said faintly, upset again just thinking of it. "How would I ever be okay, thinking that?"

Her fingers tightened a little on the arm of his trench coat. And what Castiel said next—in his usual weighty and wearier thoughtfulness—made her heart feel like it stopped. "I... never want for us to be separated again." Alex sat up, needing to look him in the eye. Did he mean that? Her heart was racing sickeningly with hope and fear alike, because that seemed like a huge thing to say. And she couldn't understand how he would really, truly feel that way about her—it hit her like a ton of bricks and it seemed too good to be true. He was looking at her with the utmost earnestness and concern. "You shouldn't feel alone," he said, then looked off across the park, seeming to think of something far away. "I watched you feel that way for so long. You were with your brothers and yet... you seemed alone." He was frowning at his own words, seeming not to entirely understand his thoughts. He looked at her as if for help in processing it. "I remember thinking that the first time I saw you."

"The first time you saw me?" She repeated, wanting to hear more, transfixed, and feeling like she was asking to hear a fairy tale. Only, this was her actual life story, this was the thing she'd
constantly wondered and wanted to know more about: Cas, watching over her. "When was that?"

He didn't have to think. He answered immediately. "October eleventh, two-thousand and seven." A soft little smile brightened his eyes, which were far off again, seeing memories in his mind. "You were... sitting off, away from Sam and Dean. Shaking dirt and pebbles out of your boots. I knew you were different than everyone else. Right away. I knew." He looked down, becoming thoughtful and faintly bemused. "I still don't know how I knew that." His eyes came back to hers again.

Alex felt herself smiling, because the irony wasn't lost on her. "I knew you were different when I first saw you." Breathy laughter made her shoulders shake a little, cave forward. "Only... I thought you were a super-demon or something." They both knew that. After all, she'd shot him at him when she first saw him. She made an overly-dramatic oops face and was surprised when he, too, chuckled—a shyly deep and vibrato sound. And him sitting there beside her, hand in hers, eyes crinkled up with good-humor as they reminisced... she was reminded that he was worlds more human than he'd been before he burned all his angel mojo away to save her. Worlds more human than the first time she'd laid eyes on him. She pulled his hand off the table and to herself, resting their entwined hands on the top of her thigh.

"I was so mean to you," she murmured, studying their hands—his tan and big, hers smaller and fairer in comparison; carrying scars from years of hard work and fighting.

Cas contemplated her with gentle eyes. "You didn't know me then." He paused for a long instance. "When... when was it that you changed your mind?" He asked her, and there was this genuine, faltering curiosity in his voice, like he was nervous to put himself out there and ask this. "About what you... felt. About me.

Her eyebrows rose slightly in surprise. He wanted to know when she'd fallen in love with him—the thought melted her insides. It had been a gradual thing, falling in love with him and coming to trust him so deeply. So that's basically what she told him. "There were a lot of moments where I started to love you," she said honestly. However, one moment stuck out in her mind, one moment had taken her past the point of no return with her feelings for him. So, she told him, albeit a little shyly. "But I remember in nineteen-seventy-nine... when you gave me your blade." She held his gaze faltering—thinking about it made her abruptly and deeply emotional. "I... loved you then. For real. And I knew it." Just like she knew it now. His eyes, unreal blue, seemed full of tender and questioning things when she told him that, and Alex couldn't help it, she smiled at him, because he was so sweet, he was fierce and awkward and strange and he fit with her. And also, she noticed how some of his hair was sticking up crookedly on the side and to the back. She reached up and patted the flyaway strands back carefully, her heart bursting with warmth and affection.

"I think I knew all along," he said, pausing her actions because of the way he said the words. "What I felt. About you." He seemed to be mildly frustrated, his eyebrows knitting together. "Feelings... they're strange to me. New. Hard to understand." His eyes came to hers, his features softened. "But with you, I understand things more than anywhere else."

When he said stuff like that, it was hard not to feel like a princess, like the most lucky girl in all the world. To think that an angel was saying he'd loved her all along, that he understood the world through her, in so many words... it was humbling, a little overwhelming, and she let her hand fall away from his hair, she lessened the intensity of the moment with a lighthearted comment and dip of the head. "Happy to help," she said, and they shared another meaningful gaze before a loud burst of shrieking laughter distracted them.

A group of little kids were rough-housing and play-fighting by the swings, wrestling over
ownership of a stick with great amounts of boisterous zeal. A girl with bright red hair suddenly emerged out of the pile of kids, waving the stick and running away as fast as her chunky little legs would carry her. "I'm the king! I'm the kiiiitiing!" She shrieked in delight as the other kids gave chase. All of them were breathless with laughter the entire time.

Cas watched the children with a mixture of curiosity and reserved puzzlement. "I can't imagine what it's like," he said, prompting Alex to look at him in confusion. "To be a child."

A little stilled by his declaration, the soft mournfulness in his voice, Alex didn't know what to say. Somewhere, in a photo album far away, there were photos of Jimmy Novak as a child. But that wasn't Cas, who had existed for inconceivable amounts of time and had, to her understanding, just one day come into existence. Like that. No childhood, no growing up. Just instantly all he was now.

I can't imagine what it's like to be a child, he'd said, and attempting to make him feel better, or maybe just saying the first thing that came to mind, she shrugged. "Me either." He looked at her oddly, not understanding, and she had to explain herself. Because she did, sadly, mean it. "I mean, I was one, but... I guess I mean... I was never a kid like other kids were." Like those out on the playgrounds. Cheeks blue and sticky from lollipops with moms waiting nearby. Alex's mood was quickly lowering when she thought of how, in so many ways, she'd been robbed of a childhood, and these kids would be too when the world ended in flames. She tried not to refocus. "We all grew up pretty fast, you know? And he didn't like us to act like babies."

Castiel darkened at the nameless mention of him. "Your father?"

"Right." Alex pulled her hand out of Cas's and leaned over her knees, clasped her hands together, her mood continuing to grow somber. Dad was one of those subjects she just didn't know how to feel about. Cas obviously didn't like her father. But it wasn't that simple. "He wasn't the best dad ever. He wasn't the worst. He just... I dunno. Couldn't let his obsession go." It was complicated and she could probably write a book on it, but she didn't really want to talk about John Winchester any more today. So she forced herself to push it aside and she looked at Cas, smiling and signaling that the conversation was changing tides. "Did you like your sandwich?"

Cas understood that the conversation was shifting, but seemed a little hesitant to answer her, confused about why it was being cut short. "Yes, thank you."

Alex reached down and grabbed up the plastic bag of candy she'd plunked between their feet when they first sat down. "So! Candy. Everyone in the world has a favorite candy. We just have to figure out yours. What do you think? What looks good?"

Cas looked at all the bright wrappers trepidatiously. "How am I supposed to choose?"

She shrugged. It was no big deal. "Pick a couple. Doesn't have to be an informed choice. Be random." She helped him be random and grabbed a bar, the first one her hand touched, then handed it over. "Here, this one." She unwrapped it for him, broke a piece off, and handed it over.

"All right," he said, accepting the little morsel and he paused, hesitating, then bit down on it. "Why is it important that I try—oh—" He looked at the remaining bite in his hand, seeming surprised. "This is very good."

Alex grinned at him, taking a bite from piece she'd kept. "Kit Kat," she said through the mouthful. "Classic."

"I like it very much," Cas said, smiling a little and putting the rest in his mouth, then seeing how
his fingers had a little melted chocolate on the tips. Alex saw him staring at his newest problem.

"Just lick them," she said, briefly thought about doing it herself… but Cas stuck them into his mouth and sucked the chocolate off, frowning intensely the entire time, not sure what he was doing.

He was really too much, and Alex fished out another candy—Swedish Fish gummies—and opened the bag, shooting him an impish, thoughtful glance. "Hey... so, is this our first date?" She grinned, handed him one gummy candy. "Pretty sure it is." She popped a gummy into her own mouth, chewed it in a very unladylike way. "I'm taking you to an arcade for our next date."

"What would we do there?" He asked, then seemed to notice the taste of the candy in his mouth. "I like this too," he said, nodding his approval of the bright red candy.

"Play games," she answered.

"Like CandyLand," he supposed, mildly excited to discuss something he thought he knew about.

"Oh, no, video games—" Alex corrected, then realized he might not even know what those were. "They're a little different, on screens, you use controllers to move these little characters...?" He seemed very suspicious of this idea and Alex dropped it, a grin spreading across her face. "Although, I might be up for a rematch sometime where CandyLand is concerned." She feigned playful suspicion. "I think you cheated."

Castiel opened his mouth to assure her that she was wrong, but then just before speaking seemed to recognize that her expression, tone of voice, and statement were a joke. He took a second to think it over, a little smile spreading over his face, teeth almost showing. "You're teasing me," he said, but it almost sounded like he liked it.

"Sorry," she apologized, not really sorry. "I just like seeing you smile."

He seemed pleased that she said that, then frowned a little, moved his mouth weirdly, like he was having an issue. "This candy is stuck in my teeth," he said, seeming unsure of what to do.

"Try poking it with your tongue. Like this." She demonstrated, opening her mouth wide and poking her tongue around at her lower teeth, then collapsed into laughter when she realized how silly it must look.

Cas was just watching her with a soft content expression. "I like seeing you smile," he said.

Alex put the side of her face in her hand, propped her elbow on her leg, and looked at him through laughing eyes. "God, we are the sappiest couple in the world," she groaned through a crooked grin. Then realized what she'd called them. Couple. Cas looked like he recognized the significance, too. And just as happiness rose, a darker thought came to her... would they even live long enough to have an anniversary of any kind? That's what couples had, right? Dates, anniversaries, time together... a future together. But they probably wouldn't get those things. They were smack dab on the edge of the apocalypse.

Alex felt herself becoming a little morose at the thought. For a minute, she forgot the candy. She frowned down at her shoes. "Cas?" She was quieter, reflective, unsettled. "Do you really think the world's gonna end in a few weeks?"

He, too, became quiet. Shaking his head shallowly, his expression pinched with deep thought. "I'm uncertain. The future we saw in twenty-fourteen would indicate otherwise but... at this point, I don't know what to think."
"Me either," she said wearily, glancing at him just in time to see him cringe slightly, like he had a sensation of pain. Alex forgot her other worries momentarily in favor of concern over him. "You okay?" She asked, straightening a little as she looked at him carefully and quickly, trying to see what was wrong.

"Everything hurts." A simple statement that made her feel so bad for him.

Immediately, she grabbed her ammo bag—which she was carrying around like a purse today. In it, his Lortabs she'd stolen after breaking him out of the hospital. "I think it's definitely time for more pain killers." She shook out another pill, handed him the drink. "Sorry Cas, I should have realized. I lost track of time."

"You needn't apologize." Cas swallowed the pill and handed the drink back. "Thank you. For taking care of me." He reached for the bag of sour gummy worms and looked them over with somber studiousness.

"Well, I mean, I owe you, don't I?" Alex asked, trying to sound casual, but actually feeling pretty serious about the sentiment. How could she ever repay the things he'd done for her?

Castiel seemed confused about her question, let the gummy worms go to his lap. "Owe me? For what?"

"Uh… everything? You fixed me." This was one thing she could never get over, ever. *Ever*. The fact that he'd given her a miracle. A new life. A chance to finally be free from the prison of her mind. He'd given her what she'd dreamed of and hoped for and obsessed over for her entire life: her voice. It was totally overwhelming, what he'd done for her, and her suddenly tremulous voice reflected that feeling. "Every single day I'm… I'm so fucking grateful I can speak," she confessed, and he held her gaze, growing concerned at how upset she sounded. "You don't even know how much it means," she continued, tearing up from not sadness, but happiness and great emotion. "How much you changed. And you didn't have to. You wanted to. I don't… I still don't get it," she said, enthralled and intrigued and not understanding. "Why you would do that for me."

His worry faded. "As I told you before. I couldn't bring myself to do nothing. Everything within me compelled me to do what I did." He brushed her cheek with two fingers, wiping away the tears there. And they were both struck by the thought that what he'd done then wasn't unlike how he'd just responded to her tears just now: he'd reacted on impulse. Growing a little quieter as his hand fell away, his gaze was open and soft. "I saw that you needed something. And I knew that I could give it."

He was like the absolute hero of her story, the prince in the fairy tale, the one that only came around once in all of existence—forget about once in a lifetime. And he loved her. He had chosen her. And she felt like no way could he be for real, no way could anyone love anyone else as much as Castiel loved her. He transfixed her completely. Confused and in love, she shook her head slowly. "What did I do to deserve this?" She asked barely above a whisper, wanting to know but thinking maybe she never would. "You… you just blow my mind. You can't be real."

Cas's face showed mild confusion, even as a little smile spread across his face. A very human expression. "I'm real."

Even though her heart melted and she smiled back, she remembered quickly how what he'd done for her hadn't been without consequence. He had been punished for giving her voice back to her, she'd gathered this over time, but Cas had refused to tell her the details. "You got in trouble for what you did," she said, feeling bad about it, wondering what had happened to him because of his selfless, kind act on her behalf.
He didn't look disturbed. He only looked fondly reminiscent. "It was well worth the trouble, believe me." And she realized he wasn't thinking of the punishment—he was thinking of what he'd given her.

But Alex felt bad. All she did was cause him trouble, really. The more she thought about it, the guiltier she felt. The more undeserving. "Seems like everything you do for me just sets you back further and further." He looked at her, not understanding her meaning, waiting for her to explain. Alex tried not to sound too self-pitying. "I mean… what's happened to you now. Being human. Or mostly human."

Cas looked down in soft thought. His expression intrigued her. She wondered what he was pondering, because it seemed as though he were thinking very hard about something important. She looked at his profile, remembering a time that seemed so long ago—he'd come to her in a dream, stood there with her beside a tilt-a-whirl and she had barely known him then, but he had intrigued her then almost as much as he did now. "I was thinking…" he finally said, soft, thoughtful, looking out at the playground, taking his time. Almost speaking to himself, Alex thought. "Maybe it's better this way." What was he talking about? He opened the bag of gummy worms and took one out, looked at it closely. It was neon pink, and covered in sugar crystals. "Not entirely desirable, but… it seems appropriate somehow."

Alex watched him put the piece of candy into his mouth. He chewed it slowly, thoughtfully, and the way he still stared off into the distance seemed almost like he were trying to avoid something. "What do you mean?" Alex asked. What was better this way? What was appropriate somehow?

He glanced her way briefly, seeming hesitant and reluctant. "I think I like these best," he said, indicating the bag of candy briefly. Sounding words away. "The gummy worms." Was he… dodging the question? Cas studied the bag frowned thoughtfully. "Strange they'd model this confection after lumbricus terrertris."

"Is that… the latin name for worm?" Alex asked, a little smile spreading across her face. He was so weird and wonderful. She never knew what he was going to say. He nodded yes. Alex nodded too, but slowly, sort of suspicious. "Ah, okay." She studied him closely, trying to see what it was troubling him so much right now. "You sure you're okay, Cas? You seem… like something's bothering you. Besides physical pain." He glanced at her guiltily, and she knew she was right. "Tell me," she urged.

He was unsure of how to say what he was thinking, looking down at the space between his feet. "I've… been thinking about it all day," he said, and she swallowed, suddenly nervous about what he was about to confess. Her first instinct, even though she knew he loved her, was to assume he was going to tell her how they couldn't be together or something. Say he'd changed his mind or that he'd had an epiphany. Cas still stared down at his feet. "If I'm going to be a man… not an angel… if we are going to… be together…" his head came up, he paused, then looked at her in the eye, seeming to be vastly uncertain. "Shouldn't we?" Shouldn't we what? She was confused and he saw that, then clarified his meaning. "Be married?"

Her mouth dropped open in surprise, shock resounded in her veins, she stared at him and blinked three times. "Married?" she repeated—he was bringing it up like they'd discussed it many times over. She almost didn't take him seriously. Not at first. "Look, I know the thought of the world ending is scary but… we can't just run away together, or go crazy in the last act."

He seemed a little bemused at her words. "I'm not asking you to run away," he said slowly, thinking hard, maybe trying to figure out how she had made that conclusion. "I just want to do the right thing."
And then, she understood. It clicked into place. And Alex felt a little disillusioned. "The right thing," she repeated, feeling her shoulders slump a little. "Because you think this is wrong." It made her sad, it reminded her of how different they were. She knew Castiel was open to learning and changing, that he had the tendency to feel overly guilty about things he shouldn't feel guilty over. "Cas, we are not a mistake to be fixed," she implored, wishing he could see that. Wishing he would stop making her suspect that maybe they were. And besides, wasn't he forgetting something? "I mean, the world's about to end, would it really matter if we were married?"

He wasn't deterred. In fact, he only seemed more quietly certain. "Perhaps because the world's about to end it matters even more."

"Marriage isn't even necessary anymore," she protested, trying to teach him what she knew—which, she realized the more she thought about it, she kind of knew jack squat about marriage. She'd never seen married couples up close and personal, she'd never seen her father with her mother. She'd just seen marriage in books and movies and she loved that crap, but realized it was just that: crap. Real life was never like the books or movies. And all that perfect-life stuff always seemed to screw people over in the end. In her life, relationships never lasted, love always burned, whatever good things came her way always fell apart. And she didn't want to lose Castiel—she didn't want to jinx the delicate thing they had going. So she tried wracking her brain for why she thought marriage must be unnecessary. "You can love each other without getting married, I mean, these are modern times," she said. "Marriage is, is ancient, it's—"

"So am I," Castiel said, rendering her silent for a moment. He looked weary and his eyes were downcast, his brow furrowed. "I am ancient." He looked at her almost reluctantly. Guilty. "Older than most things you know about or can conceive of. And you're... twenty-seven."

"Almost twenty-eight," Alex said, knowing it made little difference, but trying to inject some humor. What did you say to what he'd just said? Cas was ancient, and sometimes, she felt it more than others. He was from an entirely different world than she was. Maybe he romanticized the idea of marriage. But as much as she loved romance novels and the idea of a happily ever after, she was a little cynical. Cynicism had kept her safe a lot of times in the past. "Marriage is just a piece of paper," she said, "It's just a legal thing."

Castiel seemed to contemplate her statement. "Marriage as my father intended it... is an everlasting covenant between two people." He looked off, then recited something that sounded familiar: "And the two shall become one flesh."

Alex thought, trying to place it. "Is that from the bible?"

"Yes."

Dubious, still pretty sure Cas had no idea what he was asking her or at the very least that he wasn't being realistic, Alex tried to help him along, help him realize he really didn't want what he thought he did. "And you would want that with me?" She asked, totally convinced he'd stop, think about it, then realize no.

"Yes," was his immediate, solemn answer, and Alex was yet again speechless. Cas looked into middle distance, frowning ever so slightly. "Every passage of scripture is burned into my mind—I'm sinning against you. Or, I feel as though I am." He seemed mildly disappointed in himself, or ashamed. "I know that you don't hold the same convictions as I do. I know that you must be frustrated with my inability to be like you."

He was worried that he was inconveniencing her with his very legitimate concerns and doubts? Alex rushed to console him. "No, Cas, it's not that," she said. This was hard—communicating was
hard. And she was trying her damnedest to figure out why on earth he would feel like marriage could fix things that weren't broken. "I just think you're freaking out about the end of the world and losing your powers and being stuck in a human body," she said. "I get it. This is all new for you."

Cas shook his head a little, not appearing to be comforted in the least. "It's not that." He turned his head, looked at her directly, stilling her. "Alex. All I know is that if the rest of my life, however long it may be, will be spent as a man... I should do the right thing. I should be your husband." She was speechless and breathless, dazed at what he was saying. "Will you let me?" He asked, then frowned, squinted in thought, looked at her for answers. "Should I get down on a knee?"

He moved, as if he were going to stand up, and alarm filled Alex. She grabbed his arm, preventing him from getting up. "Wait, whoa, no, don't." He seemed confused at her reaction, but Alex was confused, too—confused and beginning to realize he might actually be for real about this. "You're really serious about this?" She asked, trying to get him to think it through, realize what he was asking. "I mean, have you thought this through? Is this because you feel guilty about us having sex? 'Cause it kind of seems that way to me."

There was confirmation there in his eyes. "I do feel very guilty for what I've done... what I want to do even now. With you."

She swallowed, suddenly feeling extremely aware of herself and of him and of what they'd done together. What he wanted to do more of. What she wanted to do more of. She struggled to focus. "T-that's not why you're supposed to get married though," she said, tucking some hair behind her ear and noticing how the sides of their knees touched. "You're supposed to get married because you wanna spend the rest of your life with that one person."

His expression suggested he knew that already and that he was surprised she implied that he didn't. "Yes. Of course," he said, straightforward. "That's what I want."

All of her excuses fell away. "It is?" she asked, floored at his declaration.

He studied her for a moment, his eyes carrying memories and great emotion. "Alex... when I was assigned to you, I was bound to you for the rest of your life. And now... I can't imagine this existence without you in it." There was another half-smile. He seemed hopeful. "It seems somehow fitting, doesn't it?" He asked, and she waited, hanging on his every word, because he was saying so much right now. He was a man of few words, but he seemed to have really, truly thought about this, and what he was sharing was blowing her away. "I realize now. From the first time I saw you... maybe before that..." he thought hard, trying to find a way to say it. His voice softened, as if he were reverent of what he was saying. "I've belonged at your side. I've belonged to you."

He paused again, faltered. "And not because of celestial commandments. Because of... things I don't even know how to describe." She couldn't find words to reply with, and he was quiet for a long moment, just holding her gaze. How could he really feel that way? It was humbling, it was surreal.

"Our relationship, as it stood before, when I was an angel... was forbidden in all senses in Heaven and on earth." His mood dipped back down into darker territory, and he seemed regretful, burdened. "I don't think I should ever have given in. I've sinned against you. And I'm completely unable to take it back." He sighed very softly without opening his mouth. "And now I'm... mere flesh and blood." He sought her gaze again, and she almost felt he was asking her to let him belong with her here, too, on earth. As a human man. Her human man. Her heart was so full at that moment. "I just... I want to make it right, what's between us, if I can," he said, struggling to explain. "Because of the way I care for you."

She loved him, she adored him, but this was terrifying, what he was asking of her and she wasn't sure how to answer or what to do. "Cas..." she began, trying to think of what to say.
He saw her conflicted expression and his face fell. "You... don't want to." Distinctly wounded and rejected looking, Cas nodded, as if he should have known, and Alex realized he sounded like what he meant was 'you don't want me.' Her stomach plummeted and she panicked a little, because that was not what she wanted him to think.

"No, no, it's not that... it's... I mean, it's not that I don't love you. I do. And I want the same thing, to always be together..." she trailed off, realizing maybe marriage wouldn't help or hurt either way —she already knew no one else would ever do, she couldn't imagine loving anyone else besides him. Still, she resisted the idea out of fear of the unknown. She began to say every single thing that came to mind, trying to show him how she wasn't marriage material and how crazy of an idea it was and how he couldn't possibly really want this with her.

"Cas, almost everyone I get close to ends up dying and you're mortal now and... I can't lose you again, and this seems so sudden and not even possible, I mean, we haven't even known each other that long and you don't know enough about me, and how would we even do it? I mean, I don't think I'm the marrying type, I don't understand what marriage even is, or what it looks like in real life, I would be so bad at it..." Her excuses died out as she looked at how steadfast he was. How all the things she said didn't deter him in the least. Unbelievable... she felt her eyebrows raising slowly, because he really meant it and she was beginning to realize it for real. She was beginning to believe him. She was beginning to consider it. "Y-you would really marry me? Just like that?"

He didn't hesitate at all. "Yes. Today. Now. The sooner the better." She swallowed. Wow. He thought deeply, his face assuming the familiar, intensely introspective frown it so often displayed. "Isn't it what people do when they love each other?" He asked, seeming like an innocent young child in that moment. He glanced at her almost shyly and her heart flip-flopped again. "It seems very appropriate to me. I've thought about this for some time. Ever since we first... were first together." And she knew he was telling the truth. She recalled how he'd asked, the morning after their first time, if he should marry her. A sense of dizzying, overwhelmed awe was overcoming her as he continued to explain himself to her. "It's not a whimsical suggestion. I'm very serious."

He was. And she was realizing just how much, but had to make sure he knew what he was talking about. "And you know that marriage is supposed to be, like, final?" She asked, barely able to believe they were actually discussing this. "That's it? No one else?"

"Yes, of course," he replied, then frowned questioningly, tilting his head to the side just slightly. "Who else would there be?"

Her body felt a little high, Alex was having a hard time staying grounded and realistic. Castiel was asking her to marry him—that's it, no one else, marry him. Talk about surreal—and Alex's romance-novel loving self could have just taken the leap, thrown caution to the wind, blindly followed her lovestruck little heart down the wedding aisle... but she didn't want to do it for the wrong reasons, or without thinking it through. Forcing herself to be pragmatic, Alex tried to keep them both focused. "I-I'm not sure," she said, making herself really, really think about all of it. This was their future after all, and she couldn't let them be idiots about it, go into something with crazy, false ideas. "I... mean, think about it, Cas. It would never be normal for us, like with a, a mortgage, white picket fence, your wife in the kitchen making a pot roast..."

Cas was totally confused about all three things she'd just mentioned. "What do those things mean?"

She faltered, because if that's not what he thought marriage was, what was it? "Those things mean... I dunno, that's just what married people do and have." She paused, realizing she really wasn't the person to ask. "I think." She snuck a peek at him sidelong, her heart beginning to race as she swallowed away a crazy, thrilled curiosity. "Okay, for the sake of argument, say we... did it.
Got married. And then if we lived past this apocalypse, and that seems like a pretty big if... what then?

Cas seemed unsure of how to answer. "More of this?" He asked, then gestured to the things scattered around them, set between them. "Sandwiches and, candy, and... being together?" He looked at her without reservation or guard, with only earnest emotion. Her excuses and reservations were crumbling. She could picture those things he'd just said. She could imagine that. Her. Castiel. Food and life and whatever and just being together.

"You make it sound so simple," she reflected softly, wondering if it really could be that way.

"The rest of our lives," Castiel said out loud, sounding as reflective as she felt. "Together." He looked at her with faint hopefulness. "That is simple, isn't it?"

When he put it like that, she agreed, and it made her stomach turn loops. That was simple. Thrilling. The rest of their lives, however long that might be... together. She already wanted that, and knew it. Cas, with her, for however long she had left. Maybe, she thought, maybe marriage was what you decided it should be. Maybe if she and Cas took that plunge together, it would be like the rest of their relationship had always been. Strange, a little quirky, but theirs. And because of that simple fact, perfect.

Warming to the idea, still, she found herself realizing there were roadblocks. "But, but even if we wanted to..." she said, "you're not a citizen, you don't have any ID, I'm wanted in most states, it wouldn't be legal even if we got married somehow..." She guessed they could do a commitment ceremony somewhere, but was that the same thing? Didn't it have to be legal to be authentic? She looked at Cas, conflicted. "It wouldn't be real, would it?"

Cas took her words into consideration, surprised her with his answer. "It would be between us. Isn't that real enough?"

He was completely entrancing her with this crazy, beautiful idea and it was making breathing difficult. But then a sudden thought came to her, punched a hole in the elation. "My brothers though..." Alex said, realizing how complicated this would be, how big of a problem she could suddenly foresee. "Dean would not go for this."

Cas darkened slightly at the mention of Dean. "I think you're right," he said. "But shouldn't it be your decision? Not Dean's?"

As big a part of her life as Dean always had been, Alex knew that when it came down to the wire, her big brother wasn't going to make any of these decisions for her. But it hurt, because he was so against Castiel and Alex couldn't fully understand why. "Yeah. It's just, I can usually trust his judgement so well. But when it comes to us... he's kind of an idiot." It made her so very sad. "I'd want them there for it," she said. "But I mean, I guess that's not really an option, is it." She looked down, thinking of how it would create so much drama if they actually did it and Dean found out. Sam would be cool, Alex knew he would—but Dean? He'd probably hit the roof.

"We could tell them after all of this," Castiel said, referring to the apocalypse. He paused heavily. "If there is an after."

Truthfully, Alex didn't think there would be an after. Which made her consider Cas's proposal even more. "This is crazy..." she murmured, looking out at the park in front of them, trying to get this through her head. Cas wanting to elope with her. She looked at him, trying to get him to agree with her but also hoping he'd say no. "Isn't it? Crazy?"
He was nonplussed, considering her question, then shaking his head slowly. "I don't think so."

Maybe she was just crazy. Because Alex was actually thinking about it, was thisclose to throwing caution to the wind, marrying the angel she'd fallen in love with, come what may. She was thinking about how in this crazy fucked up world she'd found what felt like the missing piece: the one she loved and connected to without trying, the one who comforted her with a single touch, the one who made her believe in love stories and had given her one of her own. He'd appeared out of nowhere and they'd collided into each other, and nothing had ever been the same again for either of them. With Cas, life was richer, deeper, more meaningful. Realer. With him, everything felt right, like this was the way it had always been meant to be. And above all else… she trusted him. Anyone else, she'd never even think about marrying. Him, she considered it, almost let herself say yes. But she needed to hear one thing, she needed to know it again. "Tell me you love me," she asked him softly, suddenly.

A little puzzled at her abrupt words, Cas's head again tilted to the side, he looked at her. Really looked at her. "I do," he said. Everything about him seemed to soften toward her, reach out to her, reassure her. "I love you."

Hearing his voice wrap around those three words with such tenderness, her throat closed slightly as emotion rose. Her voice softened to almost a whisper. "For how long?"

He seemed perplexed, as if she should already know, as if there couldn't be any other answer than the one he gave: "Forever."

Her eyes were full with tears that she didn't even understand. Happy? Sad? Scared? She didn't know, because she felt all of those things. "You promise?" she asked, still not completely sure about her answer.

He paused, then a little stilted and awkward, he leaned closer, putting his hand on top of where hers rested between them. She realized he was attempting to initiate a kiss, but feeling timid about it. She was compelled forward to receive what he was offering, and he gave her a simple, slow kiss. The comfort of his familiar, tender touch washed warmth over her and neither of them hurried to pull away from the gentle press of the other's lips. His fingers laced through hers and she tightened her grip just a little, feeling his other hand gently coming to cradle the side of her head. He loved her and she understood that his answer to her question was yes, it would always be that way. He promised.

When they did slowly did pull away from the kiss, Castiel didn't go far away, didn't stop touching her face. Just studied her gently. Answered her out loud. "I promise."

There was nothing but reassurance resting there in the cobalt depths that gazed back at her. He'd always looked at her in a way no one else had ever had, and she loved those eyes and the way they saw the world, she loved who they belonged to. He'd seen all of creation and wonders she couldn't even imagine, yet he looked at her like she was the greatest and most beautiful thing he'd ever beheld in his whole life. She was humbled and in love with him, this mystery of celestial origin. It was impossible to completely put her finger on what Cas was, who he was. He was the tan coat and the blue eyes and the dark hair, the half smiles and the inability to get pop culture references, the fierce protectiveness, the gentle attentiveness. But there was so much more, there was something else, something more than she could understand. He was light and power and ancient days, he was above her and beyond her... yet she knew whatever she asked of him, he'd willingly give. She gazed at Cas and wondered how he could look at her like she was his world, like she was different, like she was the one exception to every rule he'd ever had. It amazed her and frightened her. It thrilled her. He wanted to marry her, devote the rest of his days to her. He wanted...
to be hers. And she wanted to be his. She wanted to take the leap, knowing he'd catch her. End of the world be damned... consequences be damned. None of it mattered.

Alex was given over to terrifying, breathless courage. "Ask me again," she said, as if in a dream, never looking away from his eyes for even a second.

He appeared to recognize the significance of the moment. Cas faltered a little, appearing nervous about what her answer would be. "Will you?"

She felt herself drawing a deep, amazed breath into her lungs. "Yes."

There it was. Just like that, one word. But it changed their lives forever, and they both knew it. Cas's face was soft with a dumbstruck quality and Alex felt similarly stunned, amazed, scared and excited all at once. "You will?" He asked, as if he couldn't believe it.

A smile, teeth, dimples, and all was beginning to dawn across her face. "Yes," she repeated. Cas looked back at her, a disbelieving smile widening across his face.

If you happened to at Ballard Park at approximately 12:47pm on April 29th, 2010, you might have glimpsed a man in a tan trench coat sitting next to a woman in jeans on a picnic table. You might have seen her tell him "yes" about something and then seen the two of them look at each other with wordless, breathy smiles, then hug tightly. Like they were each other's favorite thing. Like they were elated about something. You might have noticed how the man held this girl like she were the most precious thing he had ever touched. You might notice how the young woman seemed to implicitly trust and adore this man by the way she rested her head in the crook of his neck, by the way she let her eyes fall closed as she breathed him in. You wouldn't know you just saw the guardian angel Castiel. He was the one all of Heaven told stories about because of his great love for the human currently in his arms, but how could you know that? To you, they would appear to just be an offbeat couple in love, sharing a cheap gas station lunch.

You wouldn't know that today was one of the days history would never forget, the day that Castiel would become Alex's husband. You wouldn't know. You'd just carry on with your day, never knowing how this day was unlike all the others that had ever been.
Song of Songs 6:3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"With you, I will go. You are my love, you are my fair one."
- Chris Quilala

April 29th, 2010
Kripke's Hollow, Iowa

Chuck opened the milk carton and tilted it to pour the contents over his cereal. The second he did, he recoiled. "Aaahh, no, crap, ugh..." huge clots of spoiled, soured milk plopped out onto his Apple Jacks. "Bleurgh," he muttered and grimaced then tossed the ruined food, bowl and all, into the trashcan... then realized his mistake. "Aw come on!" He threw his hands up and made a face and fought with himself for two seconds. Was saving the bowl really worth a dig in the trash? He guessed so. He was running out of bowls after all. Resigned, he reached in there, cringing and making grossed out sounds as he tried to get to the bowl. His fingers touched something slimy, cold, and lumpy instead. He made a face and made a shuddering sound like buh-huh-huh. Was that this morning's oatmeal that he'd put way too much water in then had to toss out?

His phone rang at that exact moment and he looked up. Really? Right now you call?! He retracted his arm from the trash and made a face then shook his hand off as he hurried over to his phone. "Hello?" He held his slimy hand away from himself like it was diseased.

There was a pause at the other end, then a familiar female voice. "Um, hi Chuck. It's Alex." She appended her assertion almost immediately. "Winchester." Of course he knew which Alex it was. He grinned. Wow. So what he'd seen earlier in one of his visions was really happening! "Hey, Alex, I was just writing about you a few minutes ago!" He forgot his disgusting, oatmeal-coated hand in favor of sudden elation.

"Uh... okay..." she said, not following, pausing awkwardly. "...So the reason I'm calling is because I was wondering—" she paused. Must have realized what he meant about how he'd been writing about her. "Oh. Wait. You mean... You were... writing about me. Us?"

"Yeah," Chuck confirmed, friendly and conversational, pretty excited, honestly. "I already know. Really sweet proposal, Cas is a great guy huh?" There was an awkward silence at the other end and Chuck realized, oh yeah... Alex wasn't his BFF. He saw her as his character and he knew her so well that she felt like an old buddy, but... she really didn't know him at all. It was hard to keep these things straight sometimes. He cleared his throat and wiped the idiotic grin off his face, tried to be professional, businesslike, attempting to not scare her off with his enthusiasm. "So, you guys, uh, you heading this way?"

She sounded surprised that he went there without any further pretense. "Wha—well, if you will..."

"Of course I will, are you kidding?" Chuck chuckled out of self-consciousness and excitement alike, feeling important (as luck would have it, feeling important always made him nervous and paranoid). He wet his lips. "Just... gimme a little minute to get ordained online." He gave his trashcan a side-eye, darkening a little. "I was thinking of doing it earlier but... cereal debacle."
There was another pause and he would have bet a million bucks that Alex was making a squinty confused face and wondering what the hell is wrong with this guy? "Uh, right." She cleared her throat, and Chuck heard how nervous she sounded. "Um okay, well we're a couple hours out… so… see you soon."

"Okay, drive safe," he said, then suddenly thought of his manners and rushed to put them to use. "Oh, and, congrats!" He paused, heard nothing. "Hello?" He looked at the phone. "Ah, she already hung up," he muttered to himself, then ended the call on his end, too. Slowly, he turned and gave the trashcan the evil eye. That would have to wait. He needed to get ordained online. Well, did he? This wasn't gonna be a legal marriage, was it? Cas wasn't a legal citizen, Alex was on the FBI watchlist in most states… it couldn't be legal, the more he thought about it. But Chuck had always wanted to get ordained anyway. No time like the present, right?

He cracked his knuckles and wiggled his fingers, heading for his computer... then realized now he had oatmeal on both hands. He froze mid step, grossed out all over again and irritated with himself. "Wash the hands," he said sullenly and headed to the sink. "Good starting point." Stop talking to yourself, Chuck. People will think you're crazy. "I know, I know," he muttered with an exasperated sigh.

A couple hours later a stolen SUV pulled up to the curb in front of Chuck's ramshackle old house. Out of the car came a young woman with dark brown hair. She got out of the driver's side of the vehicle with great trepidation, rounding the front of it slowly, staring up at the house apprehensively. Her trenchcoat-wearing companion was getting out of the passenger side seat and he considered her with disquieted worry as he shut his door; he seemed unsure of her demeanor. He had a plastic grocery store bag in his hand. In it, there was some kind of bunched up piece of white clothing.

Alex looked at Chuck's house and couldn't look away. "Are you sure you're sure about this?" She asked anxiously, finally looking at Cas with a quickly-increasing heart rate. He was a few feet off, studying her. She'd been almost silent the whole way here, getting more and more nervous the closer they got to Chuck's, starting to get scared at the enormity of what they were going to do. "Is this insane?" She asked, then looked back at the house. Her nerves were jangled and she felt crazy. "This is insane," she said and looked at Cas again. "We're insane!"

Cas paused, thinking about it in utmost seriousness. "I feel perfectly mentally competent," he said, not really getting what she meant. Alex swallowed and looked around at the ground in front of her feet, scanning it without seeing much. Her heart was racing—this was real, they were actually going to do this without Dean and Sam, without sleeping on it, without another minute's hesitation. And that was crazy. Cas studied her, trying to understand. "What is it?" he asked softly, concerned, touching her arm faintly. At his touch and the concerned question, she calmed automatically and her eyes went to his hand. She swallowed again, this time slowly. Cas was here with her. He was here. And it was normal to be nervous about this, right?

Her voice was barely above a whisper when she spoke. "I'm just… really scared." Her wide eyes met his, asking for help or guidance.

Cas got even more visibly worried at her sudden confession and he stepped a little closer, searched her face. "Of what?" He asked, then paused, seeming to understand. "Of… matrimony?"

This, them, the apocalypse, the end of the world, death, things falling apart, him dying and leaving her alone again. He waited for an answer and she settled on the truth. "Just… everything."

Cas didn't seem prepared for that—it was too vague and she knew it. Her statement left him confused. But his hand was still on her arm… and he didn't let go. Alex took in deep, steadying
breath, concentrating on the feeling of his hand holding her steady. Maybe that single action is what helped her: him, not letting go, staying in that moment with her, even though he didn't know how to respond to her statement. His presence meant more than words could, honestly. Her nerves were calmer than a minute ago. She remembered how overjoyed she'd felt when she said yes to him a couple hours ago, she remembered how happy and overwhelmed he'd been, too. It had been only a couple hours ago but she was afraid maybe he would change his mind now that the moment was approaching. She searched his eyes, feeling somewhere between elated and terrified. "You're sure about this, Cas? Really sure? This is what you want?" It was about to be too late to go back.

Cas smiled one of those soft little blink-and-you-miss-it smiles of his, letting his hand skim down her arm and take hold of her hand. Pleasant, comforting feelings radiated from the place where his warm hand pressed into hers. He seemed shy to her in that moment. "Yes. You know that I am." His eyes held hers in a steady, hopeful gaze and she thought of the picnic bench and how he'd laid it all on the line to her. Told her that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her and only her. It was the ultimate act and declaration of love. Her heart skip-hop-jumped even as she recognized how his eyes were tinged with traces of worry. His thumb ran across her knuckles comfortingly and suddenly Alex realized that Castiel was just as scared as she was. Maybe not of getting married, but of doing the wrong thing or of pressuring her into something. Even as she realized that, he confirmed her hunch in so many words: "Alex, if you don't want this, tell me."

Her stomach somersaulted. He was the best and most considerate man in the world, he loved her in a way she had never even known really existed and she did want this. But another side of her said it was a bad idea, said it was totally nuts to do it right now without more time to think about it. Nervous fears were eating at her and she kept thinking about what would/could/might go wrong or how she might end up letting Cas's expectations down. He'd made it sound like he had no expectations, like he just wanted to be with her the rest of her days, but really, he had to have expectations, right? This is Cas you're thinking about, Alex. The one who gave everything for you over and over again without a thought for himself. He was as good as his word; he meant what he said. She knew that. And reminded of that truth, she felt the way in which she loved him threatening to burst her completely. Maybe that's what scared her, too. How much she loved this strange and beautiful being called Castiel. Her heart could barely hold it in. "I do want this," she told him faintly, sidestepping the truth a little because she didn't want to hurt him. She did want it... mostly. Wishing she knew how to better put her thoughts into words, she felt foolish for feeling the way she did and didn't understand it entirely. "I'm just... scared, I don't know how else to say it."

He was intense and meaningful and he seemed so strong and trustworthy to her in that moment. "I won't let harm come to you," he promised, assuming she was afraid of being hurt. "In any way." His expression flickered and he looked down at his hand, holding hers. His voice softened and he seemed conflicted briefly. "I don't want you to be afraid."

She wasn't as afraid when he said things like that. He didn't have it all figured out, either; the two of them were equally clueless and stumbling through life. They were kindred spirits, weren't they? They'd known the numbing sting of loneliness, the hollowness of quiet years and the feeling of never quite belonging or fitting in where they were. But when they were with each other, it wasn't like that. Together, they seemed stronger to Alex. And that thought comforted her. She squeezed Cas's hand. She didn't want him to be afraid, either. If they watched each other's backs, protected one another, maybe neither of them had to be scared at all.

A sudden interjection distracted them. "Hey! You two just gonna stand out there all day?"

They both turned their heads to see Chuck squinting at them from his front porch. He wore a ratty old bathrobe over a t-shirt and some boxers. On his feet, slippers. On his face, a stupid grin. Alex and Cas glanced at each other. Alex took a deep breath—no turning back now—and tightened her
hand in Cas's she led him toward the house and up the front porch stairs. Her nervousness increased with every step and she thought maybe she might throw up from it. Instead, she smiled tightly at the author, kept herself together on the outside. "Hi Chuck."

"Good to see you two," he said, and beckoned them to enter his house as he held the door open for them. A huge grin was on his face and he seemed eager, gave each of them a nod as he waved his hand, urging them on. "Come in, come in!"

Chuck led the way in through the tight little foyer where a staircase and hallway stretched. It was dim inside the messy house—looked like no one had ever tidied the place, possibly ever. The kitchen, which was right off of the living room, seemed to have thrown up onto it. There were old juice containers, beer bottles and cans, pizza boxes, empty cracker sleeves and crumpled soda cans littering the place. There was laundry piled high and some towels draped over chair corners—a bookshelf crammed so tight with books it looked like it was about to burst. More books and magazines were stacked errantly on the coffee table, on top of the old TV, on the floor next to the couch. "Sorry, uh, I was just cleaning up," Chuck said, grabbing three empty beer bottles up off his coffee table and then brushing some pizza crumbs off the corner of his kitchen table with his elbow as he passed it on his way to the trash can. "Check it out!" he said, and indicated, proudly, a piece of paper that proclaimed Wedding Officiant on the fridge. "Just printed it off." He crossed his arms and sighed happily at the piece of paper, then looked at Cas and Alex, who were standing there sort of awkwardly. "So... how are you?" Chuck asked—as if he wouldn't already know, being the prophet-author guy that he was.

Alex was sort of beyond words at the moment—both amazed at the way Chuck kept his house (it seemed worse than the last time she'd been here) and fighting the urge to pass out from the neurotic butterflies in her stomach. "Good, great," she said distractedly, noticing how there was a spoon coated in what looked like spaghetti sauce stuck to an open book's pages on the couch. Literally stuck. She looked at Chuck and realized she should probably ask him what he'd asked her. "How... how are you?"

Chuck made a face, as if to convey that thinking about how he was stressed him out. "Ah, you know. I barely ever sleep and I feel like my body's falling apart; my new neighbor is kinda weird, plus I'm really tired of writing but it never seems to end..." he trailed off, seeming to think he'd said too much. He cleared his throat, attempted a casual smile. "So—uh... fine, fine, how are you?" He paused, remembering. "I already asked you that."

Alex was getting overwhelmed and glanced at Cas, who was beside her and studying Chuck. She took the bag Cas was holding from him, drawing a curious look from him—Alex ducked that look. The room felt very hot and everyone seemed to be looking at her. She needed a minute. "Hey Chuck, where's your bathroom? I have to change. And puke." She paused and made a face, conceding that she hadn't thought that statement through. "Probably not in that order."

Chuck looked wary. "Down the hall, to the left."

Alex scurried away in that direction, to the staircase and then to the right, leaving Cas to watch. He stood a little straighter and craned his neck to watch her. Confused concern had flooded his face. "Is she ill?" Cas asked, anxiously looking at Chuck for an answer. "Should we get some medicine, or—"

Chuck patted Cas on the shoulder. "I think it's just nerves, Cas. Have a seat, relax." Cas looked like he'd rather not, especially when he saw the book that was on the couch with a spoon stuck to it. Chuck followed his gaze. "Uh... lemme, just..." Chuck trailed off in slight flustered embarrassment and picked it up, hurriedly closed it, spoon and all. He tossed it onto the coffee
table. With a great, resigned sigh, Cas took a seat on the couch and tensely alternated between staring at the floor and peering up in the direction of the staircase, where Alex had disappeared. He clasped his hands, then re-clasped them, then did it again, seeming to be unhappy each time with the way his hands rested together. Nervous, almost.

Down the hall, Alex shut herself into the bathroom and expelled a shaking breath, tossed the plastic bag down onto the sink and leaned there, breathed in and out. Her adrenaline was rushing and her stomach churned and she shut her eyes, just tried to calm down. You'd think she was dreading this or something. It wasn't exactly that, it just felt huge and momentous and permanent, three things that scared her. She didn't know anyone who had been able to hold onto the one they loved: not Dad, who lost Mom. Not Bobby, who'd lost Karen. Not Sam, who lost Jess. Not Dean, who had never tried to hold onto anyone for more than a few weeks at a time because he didn't want to chance it. Still... Alex was apparently going to try and hold onto Cas. She was going to give it a shot and not consider the dire odds.

Her eyes flickered downward at the plastic bag she'd brought into the bathroom with her. In it, the cream-colored, almost-white dress Cas had spotted in the thrift shop window next to a gas station. It wasn't a wedding dress. She hadn't even tried it on. But he'd spotted it and asked, wasn't white the tradition? Yeah, it was. And on a whim, she'd bought it, figuring what the hell, why not.

Alex looked herself in the mirror and searched her own face, hunting for what it was that he loved about her. Where was it? The thing that drew him to her? She saw a youthful face and big greenish eyes and a peppering of freckles. She saw long nights and hard work and cynicism tempered by naivety. She saw lonely years that were drawing to a close. She saw someone who had been given a love story. Her fingers traced thoughtfully against her own neck, above where her vocal chords lay. Even before she'd ever seen him or heard his name, he'd loved her. She knew that and it was totally overwhelming. An angel, a fierce being from another world loved her.

Alex remembered a day two years ago when that strange, handsome man in a trench coat had walked into her life under a shower of sparks. She'd never been the same since, and neither had he. Steadily they had been drawn to each other, closer and closer. And now this.

Out there in Chuck's living room, he waited: her guardian angel, her once silent and invisible protector, her defender and her hero and her friend. Her heart turned a somersault at the thought of him. He was out there waiting for her to marry him. It thrilled her, it terrified her. This was a total act of trust—love was giving someone the power to destroy you but trusting them not to. And she trusted Cas. She trusted him completely. Really, she was going to do this for him when it came down to it. She would have been all right with staying what they were, but this was what he very obviously wanted and the world was about to end so... what the hell? She didn't not want it...

Alex took in another deep breath and shut her eyes then breathed out slowly, listening to the soft expulsion of her own air.

Tell me you love me, she'd asked him earlier that day.

I do. I love you.

For how long?

Forever.

You promise?
He'd kissed her then and she'd felt his answer. *I promise.*

Alex opened her eyes again and pulled the bag with the thrift store find closer, looked down into it. That was the dress she was going to get married in. She looked up into the mirror, repeating the thought in her mind with an astounded, stunned smile coming across her face as she thought about that. Her inner turmoil lessened as her romantic side experienced a thrill.

*This is the dress I am going to get married in.*

In Chuck's living room Castiel was no longer sitting on the couch. He was pacing back and forth while frowning around the room. He kept looking back toward where Alex had gone. Chuck, sitting on the couch, could only take so much of the angel's stiff back-and-forth march.

"She's just nervous, Cas," Chuck told him, cracking open a cold can soda. Cas had refused refreshment, but Chuck was thirsty. "Relax, will ya? Come sit back down."

"Yes, certainly," Cas said without emotion and sat down—not relaxing in the least, sitting there beside Chuck rigidly in obvious distress. He was silent for a long beat then his eyebrows worked together a little more and he looked at Chuck with that ever-present apprehension. "I feel nervous too, Chuck."

The author chuckled softly, fondly. "That's normal. A lot of guys get nervous before they tie the knot."

Castiel looked at Chuck oddly. "What knot?" He asked, frowning intensely. He seemed to decide it didn't matter; he was too distracted by another thought—he looked down. "I... just want what's best for her." He stared at the floor, his deep frown becoming a concerned expression. "Am I what's best for her?" The question seemed to dismay the angel. In a very human gesture, Cas let out a heavy breath and put his face into his hand, emotionally haggard.

Chuck smiled softly, because he couldn't help it. He was especially fond of this one. He knew Cas had grown a lot since he'd last seen him, but witnessing it in person was pretty amazing. Chuck leaned forward over his own knees and attempted to console Cas, whose care and love for Alex was a rare kind of devotion that would become legend. "I wrote your story, or I'm *telling* it anyway, and... at the very least, I know there's no one else out there who will ever love her like you do, Cas." And it was true. Chuck knew Cas cherished Alex in every sense of the word.

Appearing only faintly comforted at Chuck's words, Cas looked at the floor again, his shoulders slouching, his voice flat and guilty. He shook his head in great chagrin. "I can't seem to stop fornicating with her, Chuck."

"Uh..." Chuck paused. So it was going to go there. "I know, buddy," the author said sympathetically and pat-patted Cas's shoulder awkwardly, got a *what are you doing* frown from Cas. Chuck cleared his throat and took his hand off the angel. "Be that as it may... I think we both know that's not *really* the reason you want to marry her, is it?" He looked at Cas knowingly, who faltered.

"No." Castiel admitted. "It's not the only reason." He paused, considering. "It... feels right to me." His tone suggested he didn't know if he should allow himself to feel that way.

"Maybe that's because it is," Chuck suggested, smiling softly again and watching Cas sidelong. He was proud of Cas and his marked character development. The guy still had a long way to go... but man, how far he'd come. The author took a sip of his soda.
Cas drew in a breath, thinking again, his eyes going back and forth slowly over the space between his feet. "She's afraid, Chuck." Cas looked at Chuck solicitously, like he was asking for help knowing what to do what that information. "She told me that she felt afraid. How is it that I can help her be less afraid?"

Chuck pondered a minute, pulling a thoughtful face as he tapped a finger against the metallic soda can. It seemed really simple to him. "Just… be there for her. Let her know you care." He paused for a second. "I mean, as sappy as it sounds, just knowing someone's with you helps a lot." Cas took that advice in with a squinting frown and Chuck wondered if he were scared, too, not just nervous. Maybe he was. Chuck shrugged, decided to try and make Cas feel better if that were the case. "It's a big thing you two are about to do. Fear, is… it's normal. I'm scared all the time. Bills, talking to women, leaving the house, stop signs—I never know whose damn turn it is—it's all really scary." It stressed Chuck out just thinking about that stuff.

Cas nodded although he didn't look entirely convinced. He appeared to be thinking about something else now, but he hesitated to ask. "Can I ask you something else, Chuck?" He asked.

"Sure, Cas. Anything."

"This may be an inappropriate question," Cas started, visibly becoming a little uncomfortable. His gaze fell away from Chuck's tellingly. "But is it normal… during... intercourse… for her to make sounds like she's dying?"

Chuck sputtered and almost spit his soda everywhere. He had not guessed Cas would ask that specific of a question. "Whoa, Cas—uh—um…" Ah, get it together Chuck. Tell Cas how it is. "Okay, look. W-women? They're supposed to be noisy, all right?" Chuck was turning a little red and he dipped his head low, rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously. "According to the movies I watch, anyway." He paused, thinking about it. "Then again, I think most of those women are faking it."

Castiel was listening with intense, stern attention. "Faking what?"

Chuck shrugged his hands out and gave Cas a wide eyed come on, you know this look. When Cas only looked further confused Chuck had to swallow his awkwardness. "You know." Apparently, Cas didn't. "It. It, Cas." Still no understanding in Cas's face. "The grand finale? The, the big finish?" Chuck got flustered when Cas's eyes narrowed further in misunderstanding. "The orgasm, Cas, the orgasm!" He hissed in an intense, secretive whisper as he looked around as if they were being watched.

Understanding crossed Cas's face. "Why didn't you just say that to begin with?"

Chuck scratched himself under the chin in discomfort, because this whole conversation was weird. "Ah… uh… this is making me kinda uncomfortable," he said while looking around his living room and trying to find something to do, some way of escaping this little exchange. It came to him and he slapped his hands down onto his knees. "You know what?" He stood up. "I think I'll go pick some wildflowers out of the back yard for your fiancée." It was her wedding day, after all, right? Every bride needed flowers.

Cas stood up quickly, his face registering an urgency that Chuck found strange. "No, I should do that."

"Uh… okay. Back yard's through there," Chuck said, indicating the back door.

Cas went to the back door, paused, turned back to Chuck. "You're sure those sounds aren't
something negative?” He asked, and Chuck was a little on the mortified side with what Cas said next in his typical worried tone. "She's always been very loud." He paused and clarified himself with unnecessary reiteration. "Very. Loud."

Chuck sighed and put a hand to his forehead for a moment, fed up and a little amused and not sure if Alex would appreciate this little exchange. But Cas was asking so innocently that Chuck had to give a straight-faced answer. "You have nothing to worry about, Cas," he said patiently. "The more... *sounds*... you can get outta her, the better. Okay? Go nuts." He gave Cas a pointed little look and smile. "Now go pick those flowers, Cas. Also, keep that information about Alex's... vocal tendencies to yourself, okay? Just trust me on this one."

Cas nodded slowly, taking in the advice he'd been given. "Thank you, Chuck." And with that, the angel in the trench coat exited to Chuck's back yard.

Chuck folded his arms and rubbed a hand across his face. "I can't believe I just gave sex advice to a friggin' angel," he muttered to himself. "Add *that* to my resumé." He chuckled and shook his head in good-natured ruefulness. Another good thing to add to his resumé: Ordaining the first ever marriage of an angel to a human. That was definitely something, right?

They were an odd couple, Cas and Alex—emotionally childlike in ways that didn't make sense, the both of them. Alex's life could have turned lesser women to shells or machines, but Alex? She remained strong because she allowed herself emotional vulnerability. And then there was Cas, the warrior who had seen all of history and time and space—he was a merciless force of nature yet was curious and kind at heart. He'd been created for one thing and yet had found his own path... there was something beautiful and sacred about that. They were both special; him among angels and her among humans. They spoke the same language, a language all their own. It was Chuck's favorite kind of love story. The kind that no one had seen coming. Well, not no one. He smiled to himself a little.

Alex Winchester hadn't ever been the kind of girl who had imagined her own wedding day or played dress-up; she'd never even pictured herself as a bride.

She'd been to one wedding her *entire* life—it had been more than twenty years ago and she barely remembered it. She and Sam had been really young, maybe five or six, Dean was nine or ten. Dad had left the three of them with a nice couple—old family friends—for a few weeks while he went on a hunt. This couple had taken the three Winchester children to a friend's wedding. Alex remembered being really unsure about what was happening, sitting in the back of a church as the ceremony drugged on. Then she'd understood toward the end that the nice lady in the pretty white dress and the man in the black outfit were promising, in front of everyone, to be together forever. Then the pastor had said something like, "to cleave to each other for the rest of their lives and leave their families, therefore uniting in..." 'Leave their families' had been the only thing she'd heard and Alex had looked at her big brother Dean, who was bored stiff. She'd been suddenly upset at the idea that someday some lady in a white dress would come and take Dean away from her. Alex, a kid who didn't understand it better at the time, had decided she would marry Dean and maybe Sam too so that they could always be together and never have to leave their family. Nowadays she wasn't sure if her thinking that at the time was cute or creepy. But one part of that memory stuck with her. Two people promising forever. She could do that. She could picture forever with Cas. And today, she was going to promise the rest of her life to him. However long that might be. However scary it was. If it was with *him*, it would be okay.

Today was the wedding day she had never imagined and the thought kept hitting her over and over again, making her stomach turn flips of anxiety and anticipation alike. If she *had* ever been the kind
of girl who dreamed of weddings, nothing she ever could have imagined would have been like this… a whirlwind romance with a centuries old angel… a seemingly guilt-induced proposal with much more behind it than she'd thought at first… and then this, deciding to elope in the eleventh hour. Most women who got married probably knew their wedding day months and months in advance. She'd only realized it a couple hours ago when she'd said yes.

Alex wiggled around in Chuck's tiny bathroom and managed to zip the dress up the back with some creative maneuvering, then straightened it. All she had were her camel-colored work boots. They didn't really match the dress but she guessed it didn't really matter. If Cas hadn't spotted this dress at that thrift shop, she would have married him in jeans and flannel. This was mostly for him because she knew he liked her in dresses.

Alex turned around to look herself in the mirror with the dress on for the first time. Momentarily, she halted, genuinely surprised at how much she liked it, how pretty it was, how kind of perfect it was for her. It hit her all over again: this was real. Slowly, she smoothed the dress down a little, looking herself over in the mirror. Wow. Seeing herself in a white dress was entirely dreamlike.

The dress was the softest ivory and covered in stretchy lace. The hem went to her lower thigh. It had a high, gathered waist and a modest scoop neckline, quarter-length sheer-lace sleeves. It had discreet little functioning pockets on either side of the dress which were hidden unless you were looking for them. Tiny little white-thread loops stuck out on either side of her waist where a belt was supposed to go, she guessed. This must be some kind of summer dress—it definitely wasn't supposed to be a wedding dress. But that's exactly what it was gonna be.

Looking herself over carefully, she decided that her tousled, unbrushed hair left something to be desired. She raked her fingers through the mess. What could she do with it? What would Cas like? She didn't even know how to do much except a ponytail or a braid… wait, there was an idea. Alex squinted into the mirror, her face becoming concentrated as she pulled all of her hair over onto one shoulder and then smoothed down the part at the top of her head, began to braid a small section loosely from the temple of her head to the nape of her neck. She hadn't done this in awhile. It came back to mind and her fingers remembered how after a couple false starts.

Funny story about how she knew how to braid her hair at all—without a mom who knew all those intrinsically girly things, Alex had always had terrible hair as a kid—her dad hadn't even known how to do a basic ponytail let alone anything else, and so she'd grown up not knowing how to do anything with her dark brown mane at all. She'd either have it down and bedraggled, or in a lumpy, uneven excuse for a ponytail. After Dean saw Alex getting made fun of for "ugly hair" by some little girls with sleek ponytails and pretty braids, Dean had gotten his girlfriend at the time to show him how to do a few basic things—braid, make a ponytail. He'd turned around and taught Alex what he'd learned. He swore Alex to secrecy about it. Oh Dean. Alex stopped braiding for a second, feeling deep sadness at the thought of him.

She wished so badly that he were here for this, wished he understood how much she loved Cas. Dean was her big brother, her best friend and rock. Or, he had been. Right now, he was holding her at arm's length. And maybe she was doing the same. She had lost so much faith in him recently when he did what he promised he never would. He'd left, tried to say yes to Michael, then shoved her and hurt her and been mean to her and horrible to Cas. How had things disintegrated between them like this? Castiel was part of the reason that she and Dean were so at odds right now and she knew that. She didn't want to have to choose, but today, she had to make that choice. And she chose Cas. Hopefully Dean would forgive her for doing this without him there to be a part of it. If he ever found out. She returned to braiding her hair with a note of somberness now. The world might be over in a couple weeks, after all.
And Sam. She thought of Sam. Oddly enough, she knew that her twin would understand this, to a degree. In fact, she'd sooner tell him than Dean, given the choice. He'd get this in a way Dean wouldn't... and she just knew that instinctively. Sam would probably be surprised, a little worried, but also respectful of her decision. He'd tell her he was happy for her, he'd wish them the best, and maybe jokingly threaten Cas's life if he ever hurt Alex. Not having her brothers here for this—a huge step and big commitment and an important life moment—that was hard to think about. But this was about her and Cas, she reminded herself. Not her brothers, not anyone else. Dad came to mind abruptly and Alex paused, felt another twinge of uncertain sadness. Dads were supposed to be there on wedding days. Dads were supposed to do a lot of things hers hadn't. Over the years she'd ended up wishing he were gone. And now that he was gone... today, she wished he could be here again.

Alex shook her head as if to make the thoughts go away. This wasn't the day to mourn what was lost. Today was... something good. Something kind of crazy but good. She reached the end of her little braid and checked it in the mirror. It went from the temple of her forehead down the side of her head and rounded out loosely into the rest of her hair, which was swept to the side. It looked fancier than normal, at least. Kind of nice, she guessed. Either way, this was as good as it was going to get. This was the final product. How long had she been in here anyway? She wasn't sure. She'd kind of dragged her feet, finding some disposable razors and shaving her legs stone-age slow, then she wash-cloth freshened herself up because weddings had wedding nights, right? That thought almost made her inexplicably nervous and dizzy and excited.

She needed to get through the wedding part first and had no idea what to expect as far as that was concerned. Hopefully Chuck had that handled. She had no clue. Alex smoothed the dress down over her stomach needlessly, nerves getting the best of her. There was nothing left to do but go do this thing. And that was the trick of it. That was the thing making her anxious and mildly queasy. It was time and she couldn't stall anymore.

She turned, set her eyes on the closed door. Okay. Just... go out there. Her mouth pursed to the side indecisively and she narrowed her eyes at the door knob. It wasn't just a door. It was her whole future. His whole future. ...Their whole future. She reached her hand out, forcing herself to just open the damn door... but found her hand stopped and hovered just above the knob.

There was abruptly a soft but startling knock on the bathroom door and she jumped back just slightly. "Alex?" Chuck's voice.

Immediately, she assumed the worst. Castiel had decided to go. Chuck was there to tell her the bad news. Alex cracked the door open just a little, looking at the author apprehensively. Chuck looked at her with expectant worry. "You okay in there?" He saw her expression and explained himself. "I'm just checking on you. He was worried."

"Oh." He was worried. Of course he was. Relief translated into a little I'm stupid smile as she looked down, almost laughing at herself but too flustered by her internal thoughts to manage quite right. She thought of Castiel worrying about her in the living room. She opened the door fully, but didn't move out of the bathroom.

Chuck took in her appearance and smiled fondly, sort of like she thought a father might look at his child. Like he was proud of her. "You look amazing. Really pretty, Alex."

Inexplicably, she felt bashful under his praise and turned her head down a little. "Uh, thanks, Chuck."

"So... you... gonna come out, or...?"
Alex worried her lower lip, lowered her voice. "Chuck… should I do this?"

Chuck's face softened into an encouraging hell yeah smile. "Absolutely you should. I've been shipping you guys before you two even knew each other's names."

She faltered, squinted in confusion. "What? 'Shipping' us? Like... in the mail?"

His eyebrows rose in amusement, then Chuck let out a little whoop of laughter. "You just had a Cas moment," he exclaimed, seeming greatly amused and approving. Alex was totally lost and Chuck composed himself. "Uh… it's an internet thing. Anyway. Your question, uh… I'm just the writer. Your story is up to you." He smiled with great knowing. "But… I think we both know you want it to include him as a main character, don't you?" There was a certain sort of cheekiness that Chuck was displaying now. He leaned closer, slightly conspiratorial. "By the way?" He asked. "That time you asked me if you and Cas would ever be a thing?" He pulled a falsely humble face. "I might have acted a little less informed than I actually was. Pretty sure you guys have always been endgame, if I'm telling the whole truth."

Alex felt herself smiling and gaping at him at once. He looked so pleased with himself, too. "You little twerp," she accused fondly.

Chuck shrugged, smiling widely as he excused himself. "Spoilers." His eyes slid to his right, indicating that she should look where he was looking. "He's waiting for you," Chuck said. Her stomach flip-flopped. "Come out whenever you're ready." Chuck gave her another little smile then headed back toward the living room. Alex listened to the sound of his slippers scuffing along the hardwood floor and waited until it sounded like he turned the corner into the living room.

Her heart was beating fast again. Was this real? Alex put her hands on either side of the door frame, drawing and then releasing a steadying breath from a small circle she made with her lips. She waited a few more seconds and closed her eyes, gathering her courage and trying not to burst from anticipation. She opened her eyes back up. It was time. Still holding the door frame, she leaned forward just a little and peeked just her head out of the door, craning her neck slightly to look down the hall.

There he was. Her heart stuttered and tumbled and caught all at once.

He stood by the end of the staircase, near the front door of the house, at the very end of the hallway, about fifteen feet away. In one of his hands he held a single daisy. On his face an anxious look was holding steady—he'd been staring at the doorway and the second she peeked her head out, their eyes met. Her lips softened into a smile and all the fears about him leaving fell away immediately. He was waiting and he looked so handsome… it was like falling in love all over again for Alex as she took in his trench coat and messy hair and careworn face, his awkward posture, the look on his face when he saw her. Slowly, Alex came out of the bathroom. When saw her fully as she came out of hiding, his expression fell away into something much softer and stunned, amazed. He appeared almost nervous as she went to him one slow and careful booted step at a time. All she heard was her own heartbeat and the floor creaking as she crossed the distance to him. Her stomach was yet again full of manic butterflies.

Cas remained glued to the floor and maybe more stunned than she was. She reached him, stood there and asked him silently, well? She impulsively did a 360 turn and then, not sure how to end the awkward twirl, she shrugged. She'd seen old movies where girls in dresses did that. Except for the shrugging part. That was just her being typically ungraceful.

"You are…” he seemed lost for words, "beautiful," he managed. Alex never blushed. But at his compliment, her cheeks and neck burned hot and a little smile popped up onto her lips—she tried to
hide it immediately because it flustered her, him looking at her like that. She bent her head down a little and tucked some hair behind her ear. He looked like a little boy who was handing his crush a hopeful love note when he held the tiny little daisy in his hand out to her. "I… found this for you."

Her heart swelled at his simplicity and sweetness and she took it, her fingertips brushing against his as she accepted it. "Thanks, Cas." Chancing a glance into his eyes, she tucked the little flower into her hair, into the braid beside her ear. When she was done, her other hand went to his, which waited. Their eyes held a few beats longer and then, both seeing the soft beckoning and shy desire in the others eyes, they leaned in, holding hands and both thinking the same thing.

"Hey, not yet!"

The would-be kiss was cut off when Chuck's voice startled them—Alex pulled away from Cas and their hands came apart. Chuck was standing there like a creeper while wearing his reading glasses—he had a good-natured scolding look on his face. "Not before the I Do," he said, lecturing playfully. He had a stack of papers from his printer in his arm and appeared as if he were ready to get the show on the road. He looked down at the papers, then seemed to notice what he was wearing and grabbed at his bathrobe, frowning. "Uh… hold that thought. I need to go put on some pants."

"No Chuck, it's fine," Alex said. She looked back at Cas. "Let's just do this thing."

Chuck abruptly looked nervous, his eyes darted to Cas, he wet his lips, then shrugged. "All right. Okay!" He cleared his throat, adjusted his reading glasses, then hesitated. "Right here?" He asked. They were standing beside the staircase, with the living room beside them.

"No, how about in the coat closet," Alex suggested.

For a second both Cas and Chuck thought she was serious, then Chuck's face registered understanding. "Ah," he said. "Sarcasm. Okay, so right here, then." He straightened his papers. "Well. Uh, you two hold hands, all right?"

Their eyes locked and Cas offered his hands to her, turning them palm-up. Alex saw nothing but Castiel in that moment... and in a trance, she slid her hands into his, taking hold and vowing to herself that she would never let him go, ever. Her heart was a hummingbird, her emotions were so near the surface that she was teary-eyed for no reason at all. Breathe. Just breathe. Cas's thumb stroked her hand gently and his gaze continued to hold hers.

Chuck was fumbling with his unsorted papers, but they didn't really notice. "Sorry guys, I don't even know what I have here," he said, looking down his nose and through his glasses at the jumbled print outs. "Just a default marriage ceremony. I might have to edit as we go along." He cleared his throat again, seeming to wait for something. "Well. Here we go." He took in a deep breath and began to read aloud from the page. "'We are gathered here today in the presence of…'" he paused and squinted. "No one. Well, each other I guess. To, uh, marry the two of you crazy kids." He paused, scanning the paper. "It says that now I'm supposed to give some kind of anecdote about marriage and what it means." He paused, looking distinctly unprepared and unsure, like he was reaching. "Uh, my parents divorced when I was eight. And they hated each other a lot. But... some marriages work, I've heard." Alex gave Chuck a weird, half-amused look and Chuck shrugged. "Okay, umm… it says… tell the story of how the bride and groom came to know each other. Huh, hang on a second. I actually have just the thing." He leaned into the living room and yanked a book off the bookshelf there, held it up for emphasis. Alex recognized it as one of the Supernatural books. "No Rest for the Wicked," Chuck said, opening the book and flipping through, hunting for a specific page. "Cas's very first appearance… ah ha. Uh, so this is kinda dark but… what the hell, right?"
Chuck began to read to them from the book. "In the room with Dean's dead, Hellhound shredded body, Alex was huddled down against the wall, arms around her knees, tears soaking her face. Utter grief overtook her and nothing seemed to make sense anymore. Her oldest brother was dead, and she felt afraid. Alone. But Alex didn't know that with her, a form of light and power abided. The angel Castiel, invisible to humans and without substance or ability of touch, sensation, or a physical form, watched over her. He saw his young charge crying and wished, for the first time, to have the ability to reach out, to touch. He'd seen humans rest a hand upon a shoulder to comfort the other. Alex was suddenly startled by a strange feeling of being watched, of being accompanied, and for a moment, she looked around the room, clutching herself tightly, deeply afraid. Unaware that she was in the presence of the angel who would become her champion, her friend, her ally... and more." Chuck stopped, smiled down at the page fondly, then up at them. "Safe to say this is the 'more' part, huh?"

Alex was definitely emotional now at Cas's hands holding hers... thinking of him wanting to touch and not being able to. "So, that's the first appearance Castiel made within the story, as I wrote it," Chuck said, and closed the book. "And we all know when Alex first saw you, Cas, she shot at you." He looked at Alex and there was an impish, fond smile on his lips that reached his eyes. "You little firecracker."

Alex was looking at Cas, not Chuck, a sort of chastened, playful oops smile coming across her face despite her great emotion. "I never did say sorry about that," she said, and her smile faded into reflectiveness. She tightened her hands in his just a little. Shouldn't you recognize the love of your life right away? She hadn't. Cas was returning her gaze with soft, full eyes. He seemed to be bursting at his emotional seams, too.

"He wasn't mad about it," Chuck volunteered, looking through some more books. "A little confused, though... but that's kinda his M.O., don't you think?" He found another Supernatural book and flipped through it, finding another excerpt. "Okay, so this one's from Heaven and Hell," he explained, smiling crookedly at the pages. "One of my personal favorites... the first time in the books where the reader starts to see Cas might have a thing for Miss Winchester." He glanced through, trying to find the best place to start. "Alastair, demons, uhhh... here it is. 'Anna shouted for them to shut their eyes, and the room began to blaze a dangerous burning white. Castiel's head whipped up—he was on the floor, facedown, filled with pain from Alastair's attack. But it didn't matter. He looked to Alex who was seemingly in a state of human shock—she wasn't shutting her eyes, she was sprawled onto the floor and struggling to breathe. She was injured, badly, and Anna's Grace was beginning to sear the room. Alex would be blinded if she didn't shut her eyes and look away. A feeling like no other rose in Castiel, who dragged himself over to her without a thought and all but slammed his hand over her eyes to protect her—he felt how she was startled at the touch, but she didn't pull away. In fact, when he pulled her closer to him, attempting to cover her with his vessel, he felt how she blindly grabbed ahold of the front of his shirt. A feeling he had never felt struck him. This feeling was soft, warm, it seemed to reach out to her on a plane of existence he didn't know of, and it originated in the place under his ribs, in the left of his chest. What was this? There was a sound like an explosion, and then wind gusted over them, as if a tornado had torn through the place. The light died away and Castiel, stunned for reasons he didn't know, let his hand come away from Alex's eyes. She blinked rapidly, looking up at him through her striking hazel eyes, and he was entranced with her all over again, in a way he didn't fathom. She seemed very surprised, or maybe afraid, and let go of his shirt... and then she suddenly grimaced and made a whimper of pain. Alarm stabbed through Castiel, its intensity frightening him. Nearby Dean was bellowing something at the demons, but Castiel could only focus on her—her ribs were broken, it wasn't fatal but it was very serious and very painful... but he wasn't supposed to heal her unless it was absolutely fatal. A desperate, broken groan of pain came from deep inside of her throat and that feeling of alarm skyrocketed in Castiel, he felt his face change and respond..."
to heightening emotion, it was that strong. He glanced briefly at Uriel, then back at Alex. She needed what he could give. And without more thought about it, Castiel reached out, laid his hand on her ribcage, and their eyes locked as he did so. What are you doing, she seemed to wonder. As he let healing cover her broken bones, her features softened into both relief and surprise. He felt how her ribs rose and fell with breath beneath his hand and Castiel realized then what he’d always known, but it resonated with him on a startling new level: She was alive but wouldn’t always be—she was fragile, fleeting, important and special and he knew it but wasn’t sure how to explain it at all, even within his own mind... then he realized he had finished healing her, yet his hand remained there on the warmth of her body. He pulled his hand away and abruptly left her, unsettled by these things which he did not understand. He would dwell on that moment for a long time to come.”

Castiel listened to Chuck read that with a soft look of reflection on his features and when he met Alex's waiting gaze, she was once again totally blown away. Chuck, sort of oblivious to their deeply emotional silent conversation, snapped the book closed. "Kinda cool, having all your greatest hits written down, huh?" He asked, grinning.

He grabbed another volume. "This one is from The Song Remains the Same. Your little trip back to the seventies. I never published this one, actually." He cleared his throat. "'There came a moment for Alex when she realized. Realized that her feelings for Cas were unlike what she had felt for anyone, ever before. They were deeply affectionate and fond in nature, curious, somehow protective even though she knew he wielded more power than she could even comprehend. And for Alex, who trusted little and denied herself much, the growing need to know this angel frightened her. She knew what it meant, and she thought of how a blind man touches the face of another, gentle and exploratory. That action was done not out of necessity but out of the deep compulsion to know, to satisfy some unnamable curiosity. And this was how Alex felt about Cas. Inexplicably drawn to reach out to him... to see who he was. In nineteen seventy-nine, in a honeymoon suite somewhere in Kansas... Alex knew. She was in love with her guardian angel. And there would never, ever be any going back from that.'"

A tear rolled down Alex's cheek from the emotion that the words made her feel, and Cas wiped it away without thought. She reassured him with a tight little smile and he took her hand again. It felt like, to Alex, they were both holding onto each other for dear life now somehow.

Chuck smiled softly, watching them. "I could read excerpts from these all day but I hate my own writing and you get the basic idea." He tossed the novel back in the general direction of the living room and returned his attention to the marriage ceremony printouts, shuffling through them. "So... what page was I... dammit." He dropped all the papers on the floor and scrambled to pick them back up. "Ah-ha. Okay." He attempted to sound serious and proper. "'Marriage is based on love. True love is rare to find in the world. Many philosophers have asked what love is.' Call me crazy, but I think the two of you know. But I'll read this thing anyway." Chuck paused for effect. "'Love is patient and love is kind; love is not jealous or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own selfish way; it is not easily angered, it does not rejoice in wrong, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.' Chuck seemed, finally, to feel like he was hitting his stride. "That's why we're here today," he said, using his own words. "Because the two of you have found... in this crazy, brutal, fucked up—err, sorry, screwed up—world... a love like they wrote about since the beginning of time." He glanced down at his papers, looking for what was supposed to happen next. "Now I'm supposed to ask the groom to... express his devotion and love to his bride. You, uh, you wanna take a stab at that, Cas?"

Cas nodded, seeming a little caught off guard, but obliging and up to the task without a second thought. "Of course, Chuck." He set his gaze upon Alex, and he started off very stiffly, trying to
word himself properly. "Alex. My devotion to you is..." he trailed off, considering it with a soft expression and fading uncertainty. He took his time telling her what he told her next, like he was searching within himself for the right words to say the things he treasured in his heart. "My devotion to you," he started again and this time he sounded real and sure. "Is the strongest thing I've ever known or felt. I think of you always, ceaselessly. I desire to see you safe and to always be at your side." His eyes were full of truth and affection. "I have seen countless centuries and millions of human souls..." he paused, and she was teary-eyed, but even moreso when he concluded. "But the love I have for you is the realest thing I've ever known."

Alex and Chuck were both stunned into silence momentarily, Alex trying to keep her composure. "Wow," Chuck commented, studying Cas in admiration. "That was good, Cas. Uh, okay, now, Alex, express your devotion to Cas." Alex tightened her hands in Cas's, looked at the author in sudden fear. "Now? In front of Chuck, right after Cas had ruined her with his heartfelt confession? Just... say all her feelings? Chuck smiled soothingly. "Don't pay me any mind. Just talk to Cas. Tell him why you love him. Take your time."

Alex swallowed and turned her gaze back to Castiel. "I love you because..." she trailed off. "Earlier you told me you've belonged to me since you first saw me. I think... that..." she stopped, a little unsure of where she was going, a little frustrated with words. "I don't know how to describe it." She thought hard, looking briefly down at the floor. "My whole life, I always felt like I was waiting for something." In epiphany, she looked back up at him. "I don't feel like that anymore." She thought of what Chuck had read to them and the story that had led them to where they were in this exact moment and again, tears filled her eyes as love made her heart burst at the seams. "And, I love you. I do, so much." She couldn't think of a way to say it any better, but even those words didn't say enough. "I guess, if you belong to me... then I belong to you, too."

Was it a trick of the light? Cas's eyes seemed to shine more than they had a moment ago, and the expression on his face almost made it seem like he was at the point of tears with her. Again, Chuck smiled softly. "'Marriage is many things,' he continued, 'but it's not something that should be entered into lightly.' One look at the divorce rate should tell you that," he said, then immediately apologized for the interjection. "Sorry. Uh... 'we are here today to bear witness as you commit your lives to another before God and man. I ask you both to consider what you're entering into with wise and guarded hearts that are fully aware of what you are about to embark upon.'" He made a face. "God, who wrote these? Sorry guys. 'Speak in truth to one another... spirit of faithful engagement... solemn declaration... bind you together,' blah blah blah... ah, here it is. The important part." He cleared his throat and looked at Cas with a note of somberness.

"Castiel." He paused and Cas and Alex both looked at Chuck. "Do you take Alex to be your wife? Do you promise to love, honor, cherish and protect her, putting her above all others in your life? Do you promise to hold only unto her forevermore? If you vow to keep these promises, answer 'I do.'"

Castiel looked Alex directly in the eye and every moment that had lead them here seemed to explode across Alex's mind as he answered in a soft voice. "I do."

Alex stared at Cas with heightening emotion as Chuck asked her the same. "Alex, do you take Castiel be your husband? Do you promise to love, honor, cherish and protect him, putting him above all others in your life? Do you promise to hold only unto him forevermore? If you vow to keep these promises, answer 'I do.'"

Husband. Love, honor, cherish, protect. Forevermore, only unto him. It was terrifying and amazing and never had she ever believed in anything more strongly than when she answered the question...
while looking at Cas and promising him with everything she had. She heard herself say the words as if she weren't even in her own body. "Yes, I do."

"Alrighty then," Chuck said and switched pages nosily. "Cas... repeat after me."

Chuck then led them both in an exchange of vows. They took turns saying the following: Wherever you go, I will go. Whatever you face, I will face. For the better or for the worse in all circumstances, I take you as my own. For richer or for poorer. In sickness, and in health. From this day forward and for the rest of my days, I choose you.

And then Chuck looked at his little ceremony guide. "Now's the ring part… 'The wedding ring is a symbol of eternity. It is an outward sign of an inward and spiritual bond which unites two hearts in endless love…'" he stopped abruptly. "Wait, do you guys even have rings, or...?"

Alex frowned—she hadn't even thought about that. Looking down at her hand, Dad's silver wedding band she'd worn for years now gleamed back up at her. A little bittersweet, she decided it was time to let go of this possession. Let Cas have it. "Yeah, actually," she said, and slipped it off her index finger, placing it into Cas's hand and closing his fingers over it. He seemed very surprised at the gesture and unsure of what to do. It wouldn't fit him, she'd had it resized for her small fingers years ago—and besides, they both already knew this had to stay a secret, at least for awhile, so him wearing it wasn't even a thing, but... she smiled at Cas and shrugged a little. "You can keep it in your pocket."

"I have nothing to give in return," he said, looking at her gift with a pained expression. With his other hand, he reached into his coat pocket, trying to find something. Anything. Out came a single penny. He looked at it somberly, seeming to be very disappointed in himself. "It's... all I have with me," he said, very depressed about the fact.

To her, a penny from Cas was better than all the diamonds in the world. "I'll take it," Alex said, and held her hand out for it. He appeared to be a little disconcerted about it, but placed the penny into her hand. She pinched it between two fingers in her other hand and put it into the little pocket of her dress. Cas saw that he was supposed to follow suit and took her father's ring and put it into the pocket of his trench coat, then took her waiting hands again. They looked at Chuck for guidance.

"Good enough, I guess," the author said. "Okay, well... 'because you have desired each other in marriage and pledged your love and faith to each other, sealing your vows in the giving and receiving of...' a ring that doesn't fit and a penny... by the power vested in me by the internet... 'I hereby proclaim that you are husband and wife in the sight of God and man.' I, I think." He paused, and when they did nothing, just stared at him for further instruction, Chuck motioned for them to move in closer. "Kiss now, kiss!"

Oh. Alex and Cas looked at each other and her heart suddenly soared up to the top of her throat. They were married, and this was the kiss that sealed the deal. Cas was looking similarly dumbstruck by the same kind of awe she felt and at the same moment they closed the distance, still holding hands, and kissed each other softly, almost shyly at first. One of Cas's hands came up after a few seconds to the side of her hair. A little plastic snapping sound and a burst of light startled them and they pulled apart to see that Chuck had produced a little disposable camera out of his bathrobe pocket and had taken their picture. "Kodak moment," he said, grinning widely.

Cas, of course, frowned and asked what a Kodak was.

That Night

Sioux Falls, South Dakota
Three hundred miles later Alex switched on the light in the dark motel room—beside the queen sized bed, a lamp came on to softly illuminate the dim room. She kicked her hot boots off, walked barefoot to the dresser, put down her ammo bag. Behind her, Cas closed the door quietly.

It was like floating on a cloud. Whatever had happened after that I Do kiss and now was a big, beautiful blur for Alex. She remembered Chuck had jokingly called them "Mr. and Mrs. Castiel" then tried to give them twinkies as "wedding cake" and subsequently joked about bringing the kids to visit their Uncle Chuck someday. He'd promised not to tell a soul about the wedding. They had thanked him and then left there looking at each other like *did we really do that?* Cas had asked for a driving lesson ("shouldn't I know how to operate a vehicle?") and she couldn't remember ever laughing so hard. He didn't really get the concept of easing the brakes. She recalled the sound of the tires squealing *erk erk erk* over and over again as he made the SUV lurch forward like it was having a seizure. God, she loved him.

They'd stopped at a mom n' pop diner along one of the highways. He'd had a cheeseburger, she'd opted for chicken fingers. Neither of them had finished all of their food or said very much, not out loud. Alex likened them to bumbling and shy little high school sweethearts in her mind. They had sat there at that diner beside each other instead of across each other in the booth, elbows brushing, knees touching. Every time she tried to sneak a glance at him, he was already looking at her.

Now they were here and she was standing at the dresser, her back turned to him as she worried her lower lip inside of her mouth. She heard his soft footsteps approaching her and they were muffled by the carpet. He came up behind her—his trench coat brushed against the backs of her legs, his hands came to touch either of her arms. "What is it?" he asked, sounding concerned. It surprised her a little how he knew something was bothering her. Since day one of meeting each other in person he had been learning her more and more. But she was still always so surprised when he knew things like that.

"Nothing," she said, still looking down, thinking. Well, it wasn't nothing. "I guess I'm just a little overwhelmed?" *To say the least.* She bit her lip briefly. "I can't believe…” *we got married.* "Any of this." She was amazed and scared and couldn't get over the day they'd had.

She snuck a glance up into the dresser mirror and saw them there, him standing behind her, close. He had his hands on her arms and was gazing down at the side of her face intently, clearly worried about her. The girl smiled a little and crossed her arms over her body to touch each of the man's hands with hers. Those people in the mirror had a love story not many people would believe.

Alex turned her head and looked up at him. He searched her eyes deeply. As always, he saw her in ways no one else ever seemed to. She leaned forward, closing her eyes then letting her forehead rest against his chin. Out of everyone else in all the world... he had chosen her. That would always, always amaze her. Alex just let him hold her, tightened her hands a little where they still held his. She felt him breathing steadily and after a minute she withdrew and opened her eyes, tilted her chin up, kissing his lips softly, slowly, the promises and vows they'd spoken filtering through her mind once again. The tips of their noses brushed as they drew apart, not far, and then Cas leaned in and sought another kiss from her—a lingering, slow kiss that conveyed a steadfast conviction. How had they found this? This unshakable connection, this space that only existed between them, this understanding only they possessed. This sacred, profound bond.

His hands began slowly tracing upwards across her arms, the exploratory touch matching the way he kissed her. Her breathing caught and their mouths came apart… she felt the gorgeous warmth of his hands skimming her arms even when they reached the lacy sleeves of the dress she wore. She
glanced into the mirror again, watching him, the way he touched her and looked at her. He was
gazing at her without ceasing, eyes going from the side of her face to the curve of her neck and
everywhere in between. His hands stopped at her shoulders, one stayed, the other moved her hair
back from the front of her shoulder, exposing her neck… he leaned down and pressed a soft,
lingering and hesitant kiss there just below her ear, closing his eyes briefly as he did so—and the
place where his lips touched was like a lightning rod, a small epicenter of abrupt warm feelings
that spread under her skin, tickling and comforting and arousing all at once. She melted to the
touch, softening into his arms. He drew back and they looked at one another. His eyes were filled
with questions, he seemed to be gauging her reaction to the way he'd kissed her neck, wondering if
he'd done it right.

"Again," she told him in a murmur, maintaining eye contact, feeling a newfound and growing
confidence in this part of their relationship.

At her soft command, Cas's questioning look faded and he leaned close again, pressing another kiss
a little lower on her neck a little more confidently. His nose brushed the sensitive skin there, his
scruffy jaw skimming against her skin. It felt amazing. Her eyes fell closed again and she
unconsciously tilted her head, giving him better access to her neck. His hands moved down to her
waist, she caught one of them in hers, lacing her fingers through his and she hugged herself into
him, feeling his warmth radiating into her. His lips unevenly and slowly trailed kisses on her neck
and the top of her shoulder, getting her physically turned on and fast without even meaning to. She
turned her head toward his, breathing shallowly now. He stopped kissing her and his head was
beside hers, his breathing soft in her ear. She felt one of his hands lightly trace a path down her
back, from shoulder blade to the small of her back. A light, inquiring touch that seemed to ask if
she wanted more.

She answered yes by turning around and abruptly circling her arms around his neck, kissing him
softly, slowly, deeply, maintaining the slow burn of the encounter, just savoring every small
moment and touch. He made the softest little sound as he pulled her against himself with the
utmost gentleness. She felt his hands go to the top middle back part of her dress—and when she
realized he was going to undress her—their mouths came apart and she stared at him, totally
transfixed. They were a breaths distance apart, he watched her with mild apprehensiveness as he
slowly tugged the zipper down all the way. His eyes traveled her face, her mouth, her shoulders
and bust line as he traced the tips of his fingers down the bare skin of her spine—starting at the
nape of her neck to the dip of her backbone—not intending to arouse her, she didn't think, just
wanting to feel the pattern—but the way he was looking at her and touching her made her shiver,
made her eyes fall closed, made her breathe a little faster and grab a little bit of the front of his
shirt, trying to hang on to the world itself. He touched her like she was a piece of art, something to
be appreciated and adored at the highest of levels, and it was too amazing to be real.

His hand rested against the small of her back and Alex opened her eyes back up, touching the side
of his face with the backs of her fingers, adoring him silently. His eyes, fantastic blue, were deep
and full of things meant only for her. He touched her face, too and tilted his head a little, leaned
down, pressing his warm lips to hers lingeringly in an innocent, chaste kiss that she smiled against.
In that moment, she let go of and forgot her worries, fears, distractions.

He surprised her when he drew his arms back and awkwardly shrugged off his trench coat and
jacket at the same time, not breaking the kiss as he did so. The garments hit the floor with a soft
sound even as he put a hand to the side of her head, fingers slipping into her hair as their lips came
apart. It felt like a dream to her and she wanted more. She reached for his tie and tugged on it,
loosening the knot with both hands. He waited until she pulled it off to step just a little closer—
chest to chest—and he stroked a hand against the back of her head once as she began to unbutton
his shirt and kiss him once, twice, three times, angling her face forty-five degrees right, then left,
the right again, exploring his lips with hers as her hands unbuttoned his shirt deftly, working downward. When she loosed the last button, she pushed his shirt open and leaned into him, kissing the hinge of his jaw whisper-soft as she pulled the shirt off by the sleeves, one at a time. Underneath her hands, she could feel the jagged skin where the scar was from the angel sigil he'd carved into himself. *Oh Cas.* Her devotion to him only seemed to increase tenfold at the thought of what he'd risked for her.

Naked from the waist up, Castiel leaned in and caressed the side of her face then kissed her cheek reverently, pausing to breathe her in. She felt his warmth all the more as his bare chest touched hers through the dress. His hands came to the tops of her shoulders and curled around the neckline of the dress, pulling downward gently, enough that the dress slipped down, pooling around her feet. This left her only in white panties and a bra. She barely had a chance to register it—he wrapped an arm around her waist and hefted her up, hooking his other arm behind her knees—sweeping her up easily and he turned them, carrying her the three feet to the bed, looking her in the eye the entire time, his gaze intense. He wanted her. He was going to take her. And he was her husband. These thoughts floored her. The gentle way he held her, the careful way he laid her down by following her motion with his body, never letting them separate—short of breath, dizzy with familiar aching desire.

He settled her down, shifting her easily underneath himself and looking at her face thoroughly, moving some of her hair back from the side of her face. She craned her neck upward to meet his lips with hers, missing his kiss already. There seemed to be no other more intimate moment to her as his lips met hers. He overtook her every sense as he opened his mouth to her, as his tongue coaxed hers into a slow dance—he had gotten so *good* at this and it ruined her. A soft, low moan sounded in the base of her throat. He had ruined her forever. She would never, ever be over the effect he had on her. She heard him kicking off his shoes as she ran fingers through his hair. She held on tight as the kiss grew deeper and deeper, more impassioned, more heady. He groaned lowly and his fingers tangled then tightened in the hair at the top of her head. He moved his hips forward, grinding himself down on her purposefully, eliciting a soft gasp of pleasure from them both.

They broke apart and he looked at her with soft eyes for a moment. He seemed to be considering something, and he leaned down, kissing her jawline slowly, curiously. Decisively, he kissed the side of her neck in the same way, then the dip of her clavicle, then the very top swell of her breast where the bra began, making her very uncomfortable in the best way—and slowly, in exploration and fascination and tenderness, he took his time and pressed soft slow kisses against her everywhere—the bend of her arm, the inside of her wrist, the top of her ribs, the curve of her hip bone, the soft give of her stomach, the top of her thigh, the side of her knee, the front of her ankle. His nose dragged against skin as he traversed her, his hands touched her, felt her, and it wasn't in a lustful way. It was worshipful and kind, it was admiring and gentle. Alex remembered the words from *No Rest for the Wicked,* the ones that had talked about how he'd wanted to touch her. He slowly worked his way back up, doing just that… pausing to gently press his lips to the scars on her stomach. He traced his fingers across them, drawing back to look at them, then up at her. She pushed herself up onto her elbows, craning her neck toward him, wanting him to kiss her on the mouth again—and he responded to her, moving up to her and giving her what she wanted. His hips settled between her legs and she put an arm around his back, pulling on him even as she pressed her hips into his—they both gave a soft, strangled sound at the pressure.

He circled his arms around her middle and pulled her up a little as they continued to kiss. His hands fumbled with the clasp her her bra uselessly, he couldn't seem to figure it out—Alex smiled against his mouth as she reached back deftly with one hand and undid the clasp for him. She laughed lowly—then forgot what was so funny when he pulled the bra off and his warm skin hit against hers. Her laugh turned into a soft little gasp of pleasure, her head fell back as he lowered her down to the bed.
again while staying body to body the entire time. *Oh*, he felt so real, so warm, so alive, and she couldn't stand how good he made her feel. The human body wasn't made to contain these amounts of pleasure, was it? She felt him tracing his fingers down her neck, across the roundness of her shoulder... and then he boldly let his palm graze against one of her bare breasts, inspiring a moan from her in response to the gentle, exploratory touch. Watching her the whole time to make sure it was all right, he kissed her shoulder—eyes flickered up to hers—he kissed a little lower—his eyes flickered up to hers.

She was breathless in rapt attention, propping herself on an elbow, wondering if he was going to kiss her *there*... and just as she wondered, his head bowed low and he kissed the swell of her breast just above the nipple, making her breath catch. Then he moved down a little more, his eyes flicking up to hers constantly now, hesitantly. She was biting her lip without really realizing it, holding her breath as he continued. He was *experimenting* on her, seeing what sort of touches did what to her—and when she realized that, a thrilling rush of deeply abiding love and intensity overcame her. And then he kissed her nipple directly. Alex took in a sharp breath at the zinging sensation of those soft lips against the delicate skin. Getting more confident, he kissed it again, softly, then *again*, but this time he kissed it as if he were kissing her mouth—yet awkwardly and uncertainly, like he'd seen it done but wasn't sure how to do it himself, he let his tongue softly nudge her nipple, he closed his mouth over it and the sight of him doing that alone would have been enough to make her die, but the sensation of his warm tongue moving against the sensitive skin was enough to make her go blind for the smallest second, she gasped involuntarily, noisily, and grabbed him by the hair. He stopped and withdrew, looked at her, and she stared at him dumbly, under his spell.

"Is that... pleasing to you?" He asked, further flooring her with the sweet, stilted way he asked. Words didn't seem to come to her... she bit the edge of her mouth and nodded slowly, not too good at responding with any semblance of clarity at the moment. *Um, yes. Pleading as hell.* His pupils were impossibly dilated and she could see how turned on he was, which only turned her on more.

He swallowed. "Should I... do the other one?" he asked.

The question had a comedic quality to it he hadn't intended, and her heart burst, she grinned and the hand she'd fisted into his hair came to rest against the side of his face. He looked up at her expectantly. "Yes please," she murmured, biting back a smile and a laugh and then not having to try as he repeated his actions on her other breast—her head fell back, her mouth fell open, her eyes shut and she made a guttural sound of amazement as she tried not to faint. The warm cave of his mouth on a place she had never realized was so damn hypersensitive drove her to blissful insanity. He paused his actions and in a daze she looked at him, saw that he looked up at her. "I want..." he faltered, went silent.

When he said nothing, she shook her head a little, looking at him with a rapt, questioning gaze. "What?" she asked breathlessly. *Anything, Castiel.*

He swallowed very slowly—she saw his adam's apple bob. His voice was husky and deep and sent shivers through her, he seemed increasingly hungry and apprehensive at the same time. "I want to touch you."

She swallowed, breath hitching. "You *are* touching me," she said thickly, wondering if he meant what she thought he might.

"No I mean..." a muscle flexed slowly in his jaw. "Somewhere else."

There was no mistaking the trembling, anxious tones of desire in his voice, and her body responded with a rushing shock of warmth and adrenaline. "Where?" she asked faintly, and he looked up at her silently, saying nothing, seeming instead to be feeling timid. "Show me where," she whispered,
voice catching—she almost choked on how much anticipation she was feeling because she thought she knew where he wanted to touch her and oh god she wanted that too, so much that she wanted to die. Obeying her prompt slowly, his hand moved from her ribcage over the skin of her stomach, falteringingly, achingly slow, trailing down further, and her breathing became increasingly heavier, her eyes shot up to his. He was looking at her, not his hand, watching her reaction to his touch.

His fingers brushed down to the space between her legs where she was the warmest. "Here," he breathed, even as she involuntarily breathed out a soft groan at the soft pressure of his fingers against where she ached; she moved against his hand slightly without even meaning to—and then his warm, sweet lips came to hers, kissing her softly, slowly, achingly, matching the hesitating way he began to rub her through the underwear. Her eyes screwed shut and her eyebrows slammed together. Oh, Castiel, god—she whimpered out nonsensical noises, barely able to kiss him back, losing her mind at his touch which became more and more sure as her reaction spurred him on. It only became more and more wonderfully torturous, what he was doing to her... and then abruptly, his hand moved away, jarring her out of pure bliss. She groaned, frustrated, aching for his touch again, desperate and confused... then she realized what he was doing.

His hand slid down into her underwear and he was watching her now, eyes flickering back and forth between hers as his fingers made contact. They both shuddered when he touched her there. She clung to him even harder, enchanted and addicted. And then, shocking her, he moved his hand further down and carefully, falteringly, pressed two slender fingers into her. His face changed when his fingers curved in and a strangled little sound escaped her mouth—his eyes squeezed shut, his mouth fell open a little and he bowed his head down, seeming to be overcome at the feeling. She, too, was overwhelmed: The beautiful aching pressure of his fingers caused her hips to move forward into his hand and an unashamed moan to break free from her lips. He opened his eyes and an awed expression was on his face.

"You feel so beautiful," he breathed, then grew faintly shy. "So warm and... and wet." Alex withered a little underneath him at his comment, abashed at his straightforward and potentially-mortifying proclamation. "Do I do this to you?" he asked, innocent and curious. By asking that, he struck her temporarily mute, dumb, and helpless. Her tongue was heavy and her head was dizzy in the most pleasant way and she could have laughed if it weren't for the maddening amount of desire and need she was feeling—and she just nodded, putting a hand against the back of his neck and pulling him to her for a kiss—enough talking—she wrapped her arms around his neck and ground herself down over his fingers and gasped into his mouth at the feeling. She did it some more, trying to show him what she wanted, the way to move. He seemed to have trouble concentrating on doing anything at all, he lost the ability to kiss her and was almost in another world—he was making sounds as she moved around his fingers and she realized he was getting off on just feeling her.

That was so fucking hot and she was so turned on that she couldn't see straight, his head rested on her shoulder now, his breaths were hitting her neck hot and fast and it was too much, those sounds he was making and the luscious tension his fingers heightened. She realized she was going to come right then and there if they didn't stop—and when she realized that she froze and shot a hand down to cover his, silently telling him to stop. She didn't want to, not before he did. Immediately, he raised his head and looked at her in mild worry. "What is it?" he asked.

"I was gonna, uh..." grow up, Alex—she felt herself turning red. She couldn't bring herself to say it, even though she had a pretty foul mouth in other parts of life. "You know."

His face distorted slightly into one of those I-think-I-know-what-you-mean-but-I'm-not-entirely-sure squinty frowns.

But before he could ask her an awkward question about it, an idea struck Alex, a thrilling and
slightly scary one, but one she had to pursue. And suddenly focused on that, Alex put her hand on the front of his shoulder, pushed him a little, indicating he should do what she suggested next: "Lay down." He looked surprised, and then nervous and anticipatory as he did what she said, as she followed his motion with her body and laid down on top of him, her legs resting on either side of his. A soft little sound came out of his mouth as her hips pressed down over his, her weight settling over him. He was very ready, and she felt it through her underwear and his pants. He looked up at her with a dawning sense of wide-eyed wonder as he saw the look of intent in her eyes. Feeling confident and a little coy, her heart beating fast in nervousness and anticipation, Alex wondered: how would he react? What would he do? She wanted to make him feel the way he always made her feel.

She began to press kisses down the side of his neck, slow and soft, a few nips and sucks in between. Her hands trailed down his arms—which had circled her loosely. A thrill rushed through her at the realization that he couldn't seem to not touch her. She kissed his sternum, moved a hand down his side, curling her fingers in a little, dragging her digits across the skin and reveling in the soft sound he made when she did that. She paused to press a gentle, grateful, broken kiss against the scar that covered so much of his torso. She continued to kiss her way down his stomach. Brazen when her hand reached his hip, she dragged her hand inward and rubbed her palm over the crotch of his pants—he made an even louder sound. She saw, out of the corner of her eye, how his hand grabbed a fistful of bedspread and her stomach flip flopped at his reaction to what she was doing. But that wasn't even what she had planned.

His chest and stomach were heaving up and down faster and faster the lower she got—and when she reached the top of his pants and kissed the skin just above the fabric, he made a nervous, breathy little sound and then she began to unuckle his pants, and glanced up at him, saw how he looked almost scared but also aroused as hell. She sat up a little and grabbed boxers, belt, pants and all, gave a great tug and got it all down to his knees. Alex shuffled back on her knees and pulled his socks off, then yanked his pants and boxers off one leg at a time. She lost a little of her nerve when she saw him like that—completely naked, for what was only, really, the second time ever. He was intimidating and magnificent. She crawled back up to him, anxious and dizzy at the thought of what she was about to do. But she had to know what his reaction would be. So she crouched there between his legs and reached for him, held him steady and bent her head low, planting a single, soft kiss on the very tip of him—she let her eyes flicker up hopefully. Cas looked absolutely shocked and aroused all at the same time, his body went rigid and he backpedaled onto his elbows, sitting up a little, staring at her with wide eyes.

"What are you—" he asked, almost sounding panicked, but she followed him and gripping him gently at the base, she hesitantly closed her mouth over him and he seemed to temporarily lose the ability to speak. "Ahh—Alex, uhh—no you—uh—" he looked at her in something like aroused terror, he was rigid all over and stared at her as if in fear. "I don't want you to—" he protested and she pulled back, confused.

"But doesn't it feel good?" she asked, startled. Had she done something wrong? All guys liked blow jobs, she thought…? Maybe if she used more tongue.

"Yes, but—" he started even as she tried again, bent over him. "Oh, ah… but it seems demeaning to—ah—you—uh—" His incoherent words grew even more incoherent as she she circled her tongue around him in a way that seemed like it would feel good. She tasted salt and was surprised at how turned on this was making her. His head fell back and his features tightened in pleasure and concentration, he groaned noisily and was utterly overwhelmed, breathing fast and hard, like he'd just run a marathon. Oh. He did like it. Encouraged in the most heated of ways at the sound she'd just gotten him to make, Alex pushed her luck and, not entirely sure of what she was doing, just wanting to make him feel as amazing as he always made her feel, she gingerly took him in further.
For a few moments, she experimented on his length with her mouth and lips, drawing moan after moan, and finally, Cas seemed to lose patience and whispered for her to "come here."

Alex did. In only her underwear, she was on her knees between his legs. He pulled her closer by the small of her back and lifted slightly, her knees parting as she settled across his lap, chest-to-chest, legs folded on either side of his. She whimpered at the pressure there, which only increased when one of his hands gently slid down, grasping the curve of her ass, pulling forward to him. There wasn't a word to describe what it was like, him holding her like this, their bodies responding to the other's like this. The rising heat and tension, the stirring bliss and the absolute intimacy and safety that existed here, with him. The humbling feeling of being so fully adored and treasured. They were learning each other in every way, but this way was one of her favorites.

His arms wrapped around her tightly and he hefted her up, turned them both, caught himself with one hand as he lowered her down onto her back again. And when she was settled there, he watched her as his free hand traced down the front of her ribcage, over her hip bone, and then caught on the edge of her underwear. Breath stopping mid-throat, Alex's stomach fluttered. He didn't know how magical he seemed to her, when he did this to her, when he touched her, loved her, looked at her.

Instead of pulling her panties off then and there, Cas surprised her when he mimicked, almost blow for blow, what she had done a minute ago—he kissed his way downward, first her neck, then her shoulder, then the curve of her breast, then the ridge of her ribs, then the top of her pelvic bone as he slowly pulled the white underwear away. He was crouched between her legs by the time he got there and Alex suddenly wondered… was he going to…? He threaded the underwear off her one leg at a time, his fingers traced through the dark curling patch of hair there and she felt embarrassed and aroused at his closeness and how exposed she was.

She watched him as curious, slow, experimental, he planted a single little soft kiss into the space between her legs, just above where she ached. She made a startled sound, gaping at him as a rush of tortured pleasure exploded where he touched. "Ca—ah—ahhh—" she tried, but words were lost on her completely. Watching her the entire time, he did it again, but this time, lower—exactly where she wanted, and her head fell back, she gasped loudly at the new, impossible feeling. He paused, did it again, a little harder, a little longer and she squirmed, bit her lip, body coursing in pleasure as a sound like *nrrgh* tore out of her mouth. She looked at him in total surprise, shocked at what he was doing, but not about to protest even for a second.

He was looking up at her, eyes bright. "You like this," he observed thickly, seeming to be pleased with himself and both interested and aroused at her reaction.

*Christ, Cas, do you have to be so cheeky without meaning to be?* She tried to open her mouth and say something to him but then her back arched as instead, a sound of total pleasure broke free from her lips. His lips were pressed against her again, she could feel him breathing and it felt *so amazing. "Cas, oh, you, ah—!" And like he had a minute ago with her breasts, he slowly and experimentally opened his mouth and began to use his tongue, nudging uncertainly... and when he did *that*—an unintelligible word-sound escaped her mouth, her hands grabbed out for anything to hold onto—one of them found a fistful of bedspread, the other one caught hold of his hand, their fingers interlaced.

"Ah, *oh*—" she writhed, felt his other hand move over her stomach, move down and skim the top of her thigh, he grasped her a little, pulled her even closer, continuing to touch her slowly and torturously with his mouth and tongue, and in the back of her mind somewhere she wondered if he were doing this because he thought a husband should do this, or just because he was curious or oh *god!* He had moaned softly, and the low sound vibrated through her agonizingly. She pulled so hard on the bedspread that it came untucked, sheets and all.
Her hips were tilting up and forward into his face unbidden; her body was desperate for more and the need was rising to blinding amounts. She tightened her other hand in his, barely able to handle how good she felt, going blind from pleasure and the thrill of this new way of being touched. But even as she drowned in the sensations he was creating, she so keenly felt his absence—wanting his face and mouth to be near hers again, wanting, no, needing, him to be inside of her and now.

Deciding she couldn't wait anymore, she cupped a hand against the back of his head, pulling on him, trying to get him to come up to her because she was beyond ready for him, she absolutely couldn't wait any longer. He stopped what he was doing, looking at her questioningly. His eyes were almost black, the pupils were so dilated. "Come here," she whispered, and it was clear what she meant.

He immediately obeyed, crawling back up to her, seeming to share the sentiment of ultimate, furious need. The anticipation was so much that she could barely see, she pulled on him uselessly, hellbent on having him as soon as humanely possible. She felt his knees pressing her legs apart, felt his weight settling over her and she grabbed the back of his head with both hands, kissing him sloppily, deeply, tasting herself on his tongue and whimpering as she felt the press of him between her legs.

Her head arced back into the bed and she made a loud, unrestrained sound of relieved anguish as Castiel sank into her fully. He was burying his face in her neck with a deep groan even as her arms circled around his neck tightly. Alex was overwhelmed with pleasure and love and relief and agony all at once, her legs went to wrap around his middle and no time was wasted—entangled with each other, mutually lost in heady bliss, their entire atmosphere become nothing but the hot, heavy breath of the other, the feel of sweat-damp skin, the friction created between their bodies. Loud, lost, and beautifully frustrated, they moved together, learning the best way, finding the most blissfully distressing cadence of movement together—fingers were tangled in hair and dug into skin, arms were tight against the other, bodies remained flush together as they ground into each other with quickening frenzy and deepening passion.

It didn't take long at all. They grew frantic mutually with rising urgency, reaching out for what the other could give and Alex gasped loudly underneath him, whimpering anxiously as he took her impossibly higher and higher, hurrying her toward the absolute peak... he was reducing her to nothing even as he gave her everything. She cried out helplessly as she hit the wall of ecstasy; she groaned out his name in awe and desperation alike as it came over them like a tsunami: the covenant, the fall, the rapture itself. He moaned in soft distress over and over again against her neck as the climax ripped through them and rendered them lost, then left them dumbstruck completely. With his hands tight and hard on both her upper and lower back, Castiel's body rocked against hers once, twice, three more times... and then slowed, relaxed, gave out, completely spent.

For a minute, it was silent in the room except for the sound of their mingling heavy, slowing breaths. Stunned as always, exhausted by the torrent of pleasure, Alex was momentarily speechless and amazed. They were so physically close—her nose pressed into the curve where his neck met his shoulder, and she felt his pulse... the warmth radiating off of his skin. Cas lifted his head off her shoulder—he was flushed and worn out and satisfied. She'd done that to him. He touched the side of her face with utmost gentleness, she felt her lips tugging slightly into a soft, shy smile... and she covered his hand with hers, she turned her head and pressed a kiss into the palm of his hand, then peeked back up at him.

"You... are the most amazing thing in all of creation," Cas told her in a soft voice, and his expression was so intense and intimate that her smile fell. His fingers laced through hers, he seemed almost afraid of how much he loved her... and she resonated with that feeling, that fear. His heart thundered in his chest and echoed into hers, he was trembling a little, physically drained
from exertion.

Transfixed by him, by his love and his devotion, Alex craned her neck up a little, kissed his lips softly, and their hands came apart, mutually cradled the others face tenderly. It was like they both realized how sacred and breakable this thing was that they shared. Cas rested his forehead against hers when the kiss ended and just breathed, closed his eyes, his hand moving from her face to the curve of her shoulder.

Warm and content in every way possible, Alex smiled even though her eyebrows were knit together in a strange anxiety. This felt too good to last forever, he was too perfect to be true, this was too right and wonderful to stay the same. But she believed it would. Which was also why she was scared. Pushing aside the fear, she ducked her head toward his neck and shoulder, pressing kisses there, so filled with affection that she couldn't do anything but. He tensed, then he flinched away and squirmed and then giggled—wait, giggled? It was a surprisingly sandpapery, rich sound. Oh my god.

She looked at him with a weird expression, because Cas didn't giggle. "That—that felt strange," he protested through an oddly wide grin, and he seemed perplexed and worried and extremely amused all at the same time.

"Cas, are you ticklish?" Alex asked, a disbelieving grin dawning across her features—her skin was hypersensitive after sex, maybe his was too—she tested her theory, running her fingers lightly down his neck repeatedly, and he almost yelped, rolling sideways jerkily, trying to get away, making laughing noises almost frantically but Alex held on and rolled with him, laughing at his reaction. He almost fell off the edge of bed, then suddenly Alex was rolling off the bed, squeaking in surprise as she fell to the floor, knocking the lamp over when her arms flailed in an ungraceful swan dive.

Tangled in the sheets she'd dragged with her, she laughed hard, sort of punch-drunk, propping herself up onto her elbows at the absurdity, at the thought of Cas giggling and the realization that she'd probably just looked the stupidest she ever had. He wasn't giggling or smiling anymore, he was freaking out, already coming down to her, and he was awkward and naked and she laughed harder as, very concerned, he reached for her, on his knees beside her. "Are you all right?" He asked.

"I, I think I need help up," she said, smothering a giggle and pressing a smile away because she was planning something sort of devious. She tried not to look too excited about it. He bent and circled his arms around her, unaware of her playful intentions. She grabbed onto him, hands just under his armpits, and she tickled hard and he protested with a shriek that turned into rising laughter, a sound she'd never heard out of his mouth before. Losing ability to coordinate himself, they rolled away from the bed further, Alex going mad with laughter as he tried feebly to push her away, gasping for air and laughing hard.

"W-what's h-happening to me?" he asked in a voice that was both panicked and drenched with mirth and Alex stopped—he was tangled in the sheet with her now, laying on his back, hands hovering in front of himself as if in defense, a breathless, panicked grin on his face. Her hair trailed down, touching his chest, and she smiled at him. Loving everything about him.

"What's happening to you... is a tickle war," she said softly, then she kissed him gently, felt him relaxing... then she grabbed his sides again and dug her fingers in deeply and wiggled them, causing him to protest. At first, he tried to get away, then seemed to have another idea and mimicked what she was doing: he grabbed her sides and wiggled his fingers into the space below her armpits and Alex howled with laughter, suddenly trying to get away from him now.
"Noooo, stop, it tickles!" she shrieked, tears in her eyes as she doubled over beside him—he was still on his back. He did stop and they looked at each other with breathless grins, and even though it was strange to see him smiling like that… she loved it. Without warning, completely overwhelmed with affection, she hugged him around the neck as he laid there. She buried her face in the front of his chest, then turned her head so her cheek rested with her face turned toward his. She was exhausted from this crazy day, but she didn't want to miss anything—she wanted to stay up all night and just be together while they could… because she was very aware that tonight was in the minority. They just didn't have the freedom to be together like they wanted to right now, not with Dean around… this might be the last time they got together for awhile. She didn't know.

Alex traced her fingers across his chest, thoughtful and quiet and feeling how her heart was slowing to its normal rate. Underneath her fingertips, the scars Cas bore from what he'd done to save her. "You okay this time?" she chanced quietly, curious and a little worried about what kind of reaction he'd have this time, if he'd feel guilty about sex like he always did. When he caught her hand in his, moved his thumb across her skin gently, she propped herself up a little, enough to look him in the eye.

He looked so manly there beneath her, his free arm resting underneath his head, his expression unguarded, genuine, soft. "Yes," he said, and his thumb moved across one of her knuckles again. "I think that I am."

Relieved and happy, Alex kissed one of his knuckles, studied their hands a second, then laid her head down on him again. This was heaven. And she should know… she'd been to the real Heaven and it hadn't been right, but this was. His hand still held hers and she wondered how she'd stumbled into this. What if they had never met? What if she'd insisted on keeping him at arm's length? What if she'd never allowed herself to fall in love with him? All of those what ifs didn't matter. Here they were and as crazy as it was, they had taken the leap, tied the knot. She still couldn't quite believe it. "Did we really get married today?" she asked him in a dazed murmur.

"Unless I'm misremembering," he said, and she heard almost a teasing tone to his voice.

Her eyebrows rose fractionally in pleasant surprise even as she pushed herself up a little to look at him. "Cas… are you joking with me?" He just smiled a little more and she laughed, slow and comfortable. He smiled back but it was still gentle, no teeth showed.

His eyes seemed so tender as they searched hers slowly and without a thought, Alex traced fingertips down the side of his face, her laughter subsiding into the whisper of a smile. She thought back to the first time she saw him, how stern and frightening he'd been, how she'd tried to kill him. How could she have guessed he'd be the one to give her a new life entirely? Make her believe in love, give her a reason to trust? He had become her safe place to fall, and she felt understood, she felt real with him. Like she'd said earlier that day… she belonged to him. And maybe this was what a soulmate was. She kind of believed, deep down, that he was her soul mate. Even if angels didn't have souls… he was her other half. He had to be.

Shy now, she dropped her gaze away, the reality of what they had promised each other that day hitting her all over again. Her brothers would be so hurt when she told them, which eventually they'd have to. If they lived past the whole end of the world thing. Maybe this marriage would be something Cas and Alex took to their graves. Maybe she didn't even need to worry about the future as much as she was—everyone might be dead in a few weeks. But what if there was a future? What would that be like? Growing reflective, wanting to dream about what that might be like, her gaze flickered back to him. "So… if we live past this whole apocalypse thing… what do we do?"

He seemed slightly sobered by the thought of the apocalypse, the reminder of the fate hanging over
the head of the world. He took her hand again. "Whatever you want."

She thought maybe he'd answer like that, and she frowned a little, in thought, trying to get him to answer for himself, not just defer to her. "But what would you want?" He appeared to have no reply and Alex felt slightly saddened, but prompted him, remained optimistic. "Think about it. What kind of life would you want us to live?"

"...I would want what you want," he said, repeating himself, basically telling her he would follow her lead. Or maybe saying he had no idea. At her slightly befuddled expression, he seemed confused, too.

"Cas, come on. I know you must have thought about it. What you'd want." Right? Had he really not?

"What I want is selfish," he said, intriguing her, worrying her briefly.

"How so?"

He was looking at the ceiling, eyes going back and forth, and he seemed far away in memories. "I saw how we lived in the future… it was us. Living together. We had a cabin. There were things of our own inside." He spoke of it fondly, even though there was a note of somberness there, too. He looked at her again, and his hand, curved around the side of her shoulder, moved a little, running across her skin gently. "I think I'd want that."

Alex studies him. "I don't think that's selfish," she said in a hushed tone. It wasn't the life she lived now, on the road with brothers, but… it sounded good. Just, a simple life. It didn't have to be normal or American-dream, if it were ordinary and offbeat and simple and with him… they'd figure out the rest. One curiosity remained with Alex. "I remember there being another thing in that future that we had..." she said, recalling with great intrigue what he'd told her about that day in Bobby's attic… how the two of them had been about to become a family of three in the visions of the future he'd witnessed. She hesitated, nervous to ask and nervous to know. "Would you want that, too?" It was a curiosity, the thought of them pursuing parenthood.

Cas's reply was soft. "With you, I want everything." He was seeming to get down on himself, distracted. He fumbled for a minute. "However, I'm not sure how to… I didn't think about… how this would truly work."

"What do you mean?" she asked, worry jumping up in the pit of her stomach again.

"I was better equipped, before, to do this," he said, still not explaining. "I suppose I could try to get a job. Or maybe I could become a hunter, like you." Oh—Alex's eyebrows rose in understanding. "Money is necessary, isn't it?" he asked.

"To a certain point," she said, shrugging in false modesty. "But I think I can get us by. I know a few tricks."

He paused, frowning uncertainly. "Shouldn't I be the one who does that?"

Alex searched his gaze earnestly, meant this: "We take care of each other. It's... a partnership. And Cas… I don't doubt for a second you'll take care of me." She felt unworthy, like however much she loved him would never be enough to return his affection.

Gazing at her and totally in love, he seemed to take her in anew. "I can't put it into words," Castiel murmured. "The things I feel for you, the way I think about you."
"...I don't think you have to," she told him in a faint voice, and her emotions were right below the surface, her eyes filled with them abruptly. "I know." And she did know. Through and through, that he loved her beyond limits. Enough to reach out to her in compassion and heal her, restore her before they had spoken even a word to each other. To heal her and save her life numerous times over, to defy Heaven and everything he'd ever been loyal to. For her.

She laid her head down on his chest again, settling into the curve of his side, quiet and stilled. She looked up at the weird shadows on the ceiling made by the fallen lamp. After a moment, he abruptly spoke. "I wish I could have given you something better than a penny."

She smiled a little to herself. It was perfect to her because it was something simple and everyday. It had great meaning behind it, and that was something worth cherishing. "You gave me you," Alex murmured. She was so sleepy and content, warm here beside him. "There is nothing better."

His arm tightened, pulled her a little closer, she felt how his chin and jaw brushed against the top of her head. Mmm. She could have fallen asleep there like that. Alex looked at the ceiling shadows again drowsily and was suddenly struck by a whimsicality. Maybe it was how tired she was, but it she lifted her hand up into the shape of a dog and smiled crookedly at the shadow it cast onto the ceiling. Cas looked at her hand oddly, then the shadow created, slightly mystified. "Shadow puppets," she explained offhandedly, then said "'Hello,'" and moved her hand like the dog was saying it. "This is a dog," she explained, and Cas's head tilted to the side, she could literally hear his internal dialogue: that looks like no canine I have ever beheld. He surprised her when he looked at her hand in concentration and mimicked her motions, haltingly making a dog shape with his hand. He squinted and frowned at the shadow it made.

Alex moved her pinky finger up. "Now it's a bunny," she said, and made her hand hop slightly. She chuckled at herself and glanced at him sidelong, then moved the tips of her fingers to touch against the tips of his—making the shadow dog and bunny kiss. "The bunny… I think she loves the dog a lot," Alex said, letting her eyes sidelong to Cas's. "More than anyone else she's ever known."

Cas seemed mildly perplexed and looked at the shadows intently. "How can you derive that opinion from..." he paused and turned his head to look at her. "Oh. They're us."

"Yes," she said and dropped her hand down, craned her neck and kissed him, soft, slow, lingering there in his atmosphere. His arms circled her, his hands touched her gently, and his familiar warmth called her closer to him. She melted into him, kissing him leisurely with a soft mouth and she explored him carefully, hands moving over his face, neck, shoulders, chest. He felt so good to her, strong, solid, safe, warm, inviting. And they were both quickly becoming uncomfortable and aroused again—but for a few minutes, all they did was touch, pet, pull at each other and kiss deeply, exploring until Alex couldn't stand it any longer—she pulled the sheets that had been bunched between them away and laid down on top of him, slid down, initiating another encounter.

"Again?" he asked in a breathless whisper, seeming both surprised and also highly approving of the idea. Her hands found his and pressed palm to palm, fingers lacing through tightly. She held his hands there beside his head on either side, feeling a little emboldened.

"Yes, and… this time, you're not allowed to move," she told him in a low voice. She pushed her hips down over him, taking him with a low moan—he exhaled softly, surprised at the suddenness of her actions. His eyes were glazed over and dark as, still holding his hands, she began to move slowly, tantalizingly, purposefully torturing him and unintentionally herself... underneath Alex, Cas—much bigger and stronger, so much more powerful—let her do what she wanted, surrendering to her.

Seeing him like that: totally submitted to her and what she was doing, vulnerable and begging
wordlessly with panting breaths and gasps... she felt like she was a goddess. His goddess. She let go of his hands abruptly and wrapped her arms closely around his head, not satisfied with how far apart she felt from him. His arms immediately circled and tightened around her, hands splaying into the skin of her shoulder blade and mid-back. He bit his lip in anxiety, eyes screwed shut; he grunted then let out a frustrated breath, she began to kiss the curve of his shoulder, slowing her hips to an even more maddening crawl. The feeling of the slow burn was incredible and she was having problems keeping herself together, she felt absolutely insane with bliss. She tortured them both like that for about thirty seconds before Castiel, apparently, couldn't stand it any longer.

"Uh, Alex, faster, please—" Cas pleaded, pulling on her hard, begging desperately, and she couldn't say no to the need in his voice. She obeyed his wishes and gave him what he wanted, moved faster and harder, making him breathe louder and quicker. He didn't seem to know what to do with his hands, first they pressed hard against the small of her back, then they grasped her sides and pulled, then they gripped her upper arms, then they cupped her face as he kissed her sloppy and distracted, then one of them grabbed the hair at the back of her head as the other one trailed down to press against the softness of her breast desperately, and suddenly he cried out loudly and his hand tightened in her hair, she could feel him shuddering underneath her. She was no longer in control, now she was crying out for him as she seized, he held her harder, his hips rocking against hers as he disobeyed her rule of no movement but she didn't care. She pulled against him, urging him on as they destroyed each other with the throes of absolute pleasure. With a surprised gasp and then a desperate cry, she lost control too and began to die a small death in his arms on the floor of the motel room. It was blindingly intense, it took everything out of her, and if Cas wasn't holding her as tightly as he was, she thought she might fall off the face of the earth itself. She went limp over him as the orgasm finished with her, her heart was hammering so hard that it felt like her entire body was vibrating. She felt defeated in the best of ways, drowsy, out of everything, too weak to move—but somehow managed to raise her head and look at him in the eye. Wow. He seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"You've made me lose my mind," Castiel said, still out of breath. His voice was soft and he tucked some of her hair behind her ear, his eyes going back and forth between hers. He looked at her like she were absolute magic. "The things you do to me…"

She smiled, feeling like she was glowing with sleepy pleasure—she kissed his cheek softly, then the corner of his mouth, then his lips. Her body was weighed down with an afterglow like no other and she laid her head down on his shoulder, her face turned to him. With lessening clarity, she murmured against his neck that she loved him then listened to his heart beating. Her eyes were heavy and she shut them for just a minute, just a minute—faintly feeling how his lips brushed and pressed a sweet kiss against her forehead. She drifted off without meaning to, there in his arms.

Morning came, and the motel room slowly grew brighter as the sun rose outside. In the bed, two people laid—a large man, a petite woman. Naked and underneath the blankets, they faced each other, the man cocooning the woman with his arms. She was nestled into him, resting against him trustingly. They slept deeply, warm and safe there together. The room was calm, quiet, peaceful.

Alex woke up first. She remembered drifting off to sleep on Cas, and now they were in bed, covered by the blankets modestly. When had he moved them? Cas held her, and from his deep, even breathing, she could tell he was still fast asleep. Her heart fluttered a little. She had just woken up beside him. Last night and yesterday rushed her mind and her heart did a little skip-hop-jump. Alex drew back a little—slowly, trying not to disturb him—just enough so she could see his face. He looked so peaceful and handsome and she wondered if a heart could break in happiness. Hers felt like it did, and she smoothed some of his hair back, studied his face, loving every single detail—the age lines, the little scars she saw, every hollow and arch and dip.
He stirred at her touch, opened his eyes slowly, and for the briefest second he was groggy, confused—then he saw her and a soft little smile came over his face. She smiled, too. "Good morning," she said softly, feeling the need to whisper, not break the magic of the moment.

"Good morning," he echoed, his voice quiet and rough with sleep. He reached over and moved some of her messy hair away from her face, let his hand rest there on her head when he'd finished. She nestled closer to him, their noses grazed, they said nothing, just existing there together in a bubble of each other for a moment.

Castiel was hers and she was his—he wasn't going anywhere, they were going to be together. Maybe for a couple more weeks, maybe for five more years. Briefly, Alex's happiness wavered when she thought about how yesterday was gone. Today, they needed to go back to Bobby's, face the music. The apocalypse was still on the calendar and they were the ones who were stuck trying to stop it.

For the first time in her life, Alex truly considered running away from it all forever. Because now, she had something—someone—to run to. She thought of Dean, who would try and ruin the relationship and run her life and Alex looked at Cas with hesitation. It wasn't fair. They'd just been reunited, and more than that, they'd just found each other in the grand scheme of life—he'd lived for thousands of years alone, and she felt like she'd lived for thousands of years alone. The world couldn't end, not right now, not yet. "I don't wanna go back," she confessed. "I wanna ditch out on everything. Can't we just stay here forever?" She was only half-joking, and he seemed to see that.

He didn't say anything, but the look on his face suggested he was silently telling her you know we can't.

A small self-deprecating smile came over her face.

"We have to go back," he said, the voice of reason. His eyes dropped to her lips, went back to her eyes, and was that... a hint of playfulness in his eyes? Intrigued, she forgot her more complicated thoughts. "But... we don't have to leave yet." Suddenly feeling a heightened sense of interest, she searched his crystal blue gaze. Her stomach began doing flips of anticipation at that look in his eyes.

His mouth crooked up just slightly to one side as with his thumb and index finger, he gently took hold of her chin and kissed her sweetly. He slid closer—bare skin to bare skin beneath the sheets. She made a soft mmm sound without meaning to as his touch brought her to life, as she reached out to hug herself to him. He was melting her with the gentle assertiveness of his touch. It was like a new discovery, every time he touched her, every time he kissed her, every time this happened, and she wanted it, loved it. Loved him. She opened her mouth for him, deepening the kiss—feeling her stomach zing when his tongue gently nudged against hers. They were never going to get anything done if they kept this up, she thought faintly. And as if reading her mind, he began to press her body downward, putting himself over her, gently initiating what would stick in her mind as the best wake-up call she'd ever gotten.

Forty-One Minutes Later

Stunned, Alex's head hit the pillow. "Holy shit, Cas—!" She exclaimed through her ragged breaths. He grinned at her a little lopsidedly, coy and pleased and tired but happy. His skin shone with the slight sheen of perspiration and Alex grinned widely, bit her lip, shaking her head in staggered amazement. Beside her now as he rolled off her, Cas looked down at her, propped up on an elbow. She impulsively grabbed his neck and kissed him hard, smiling and chuckling even as she pressed her lips to his. She pushed him hard, using her weight as she kissed him to make him lay on his
back and then she flopped down onto her stomach. "Good morning to you too." She had her arms
folded underneath her cheek and he rolled over to be closer to her, mimicked her posture. "You're…
just… wow," she told him, biting a smile away. Her body felt so completely spent and satisfied—
he was the sexiest man alive and she knew it firsthand.

He shifted a little, putting his hand on the back of her head, gazing at her with a soft smile and
adoring eyes. She shifted a little higher, his hand moved, she took it in her own, laced her fingers
through his, let their hands lay in the small space between their shoulders. She smoothed her thumb
over his hand, searched his eyes. Remembered the real world. "I wish every morning could be like
this," Alex confessed. It was hard knowing that this wasn't going to be standard.

"I do, too." Cas said. He grew a little more somber. "If they ask where we were today and
yesterday… what should we say?"

Alex knew there was going to be some Dean Winchester hissy fit action happening later that day
when they got back to Bobby's. She wasn't really looking forward to it. "I'll handle it," she told
him, equally somber. "And just remember. Dean doesn't have a right to know everything, even
though he acts that way." It was bittersweet, really. "Someday, we can tell them. Someday." Just
not yet.

"It must make you very sad that they weren't there," Cas said with heavy thoughtfulness. "I'm
sorry."

She was touched at his insight, but saddened a little when he said it. "Yes and no," she admitted,
which was the truth. It kind of was one of those 'it is what it is' kind of things. Yeah, she was sad,
but… what could she do about it? "It's okay," she said. It had to be.

She smiled a little at him. He looked so perfect there like that next to her and she suddenly realized
she needed to cement this moment in her mind, remember this. She pushed herself up, looking
around for her phone. "Don't move," she told him, and using sheets like a huge towel, she got out of
bed (and realized her legs were weak from all the, um, working out she and Cas had participated in
recently). She took her on-silent phone from out of her ammo bag. "I need to take a picture," she
explained, then paused. The phone screen showed a bunch of missed calls from Dean, all recent,
like an hour ago. Hmm. This wasn't going to be pretty, facing him again.

"A picture of me?" Cas asked as she got back into bed, laid on her side. He seemed to think that
was a strange idea.

"Of you," she confirmed and held her phone up, pushing the capture button as he looked not into
the camera, but at her. It was the most perfect picture in all of existence. Grainy, a little blurred, but
him. She smiled at it, then him, leaning over to him to hug him sort of awkwardly from behind,
then kiss the back of his shoulder before she sighed regretfully. "Okay—I have got to take a
shower," she confessed, feeling less than fresh at the moment. Did he need a shower, too?

She'd grown up with men and maybe it wasn't ladylike of her but she stuck her nose into his armpit
and smelled—but weirdly, she didn't smell sweat, he smelled like deodorant, as always—clean.
She drew back and laid on her side, propped up on an elbow. He wasn't completely human. He
couldn't be—he hadn't needed to shower, use the bathroom. He'd been hungry and had slept, but
other than that…

"Why... did you smell me?" He asked, seeming very curious about the sudden sniff.

"Fresh check," she said. That's what Dean had always called it. Cas saw how she was troubled and
he rolled over to lay on his side, propped up on an arm. He squinted at her armpit, wondering
something very intensely.

"Am I supposed to reciprocate?" He asked, and leaned forward a little like he was about to.

"No no no," she said, giggling suddenly, picturing Cas with his nose in her sweaty armpit. No. That didn't need to happen. "I was just seeing if you needed a shower." Her smile faded a little. "Which, you don't." Her smile evaporated completely and her troubled question came out after a couple of falters. "What if you never age like I do, Cas?" She paused, imagining an old woman hobbling around with Cas beside her, young, just like he looked today.

"I... suppose that's a possibility," he said slowly, frowning in deep thought. "But what would that ma—oh." He seemed to understand, but then became perplexed by it. "Are you afraid I would no longer love you in old age?"

She looked at him silently. Well... yeah?

"Alex. Nothing will change my devotion to you," he told her, sitting up a little more. "Ever. And certainly nothing as transitory as physical attributes." He touched the side of her face and she leaned close to him, resting her forehead to his and shutting her eyes for a second, nodding.

"Okay. The shower," she said, pulling back and putting her worries out of her mind. She paused though, turned around as she got out of bed. She still clutched the sheets to herself to hide her nakedness. "Do you need more painkillers? You feel okay?" She asked.

Cas considered it. "I should probably take some, yes."

Alex smiled sympathetically at him and got a plastic motel cup off of the top of the microwave, filled it at the sink, then brought him his dose of Lortabs.

"Thank you," he said, accepting both.

"Don't miss me too much while I'm gone," she said teasingly, and then headed for the bathroom. Cas watched her go then swallowed the pills. It wasn't a comfortable sensation, but he was getting better at it. Cas heard the water start as Alex showered, and he re-dressed, picking up his scattered clothing items from all over the motel room floor. He picked up her dress, too, and carefully zipped it back up, folded it clumsily and set it on the dresser. He picked up the lamp they'd knocked over, then looked at the bathroom door. She wasn't done yet. His stomach growled and he looked down at it. Food. She'd be hungry, too, wouldn't she? Cas hesitated, getting an idea, then looked for her wallet and found it, taking out some dollar bills.

He went to the vending machine he'd noticed outside the motel yesterday. There he got a random assortment of packaged foods, not sure which ones were appropriate for breakfast, if any. He got about twenty of the packets, not sure if that would be enough. He took them back to the motel room, spread them out on the little table, then got another plastic cup off the microwave and filled it with water, setting it and his cup onto the table. Was that enough? Would she like that? He didn't know. He sat on the end of the bed and waited, alternating between looking at his hands to the bathroom area, anticipating her reappearance.

He thought of yesterday. He thought of last night. He smiled to himself when he thought of her. In all of existence, Castiel was sure no man could count himself as blessed and favored as Cas had found himself to be. It was difficult to truly accept that she had consented and given herself to him as his wife—it seemed 'too good to be true'—a human saying that he now understood. He sat there with a wistful little smile on his face, staring into space unseeingly, pleasantly. So lost in thoughts of her, Cas was startled when he heard Alex speak to him.
"You got breakfast?" She asked in pleasant surprise, looking at all the food in crinkly wrappers on the table.

He stood up, surprised he hadn't noticed her come out of the bathroom. She was wrapped in a towel and had wet hair—water clung to her fair skin. She was doing that smile which he understood to mean that she was amused and confused at the same time. He followed her gaze to the table. "Is it too much?" He asked.

She chuckled. "We might have leftovers... just an educated guess." She looked at him fondly, and he could tell that she liked what he had done. That made him feel good. She sat down at the table and he followed suit, sitting down across from her—she was looking through the things he'd gotten and he waited to see her reaction.

"Trail mix, bear claw, powdered donuts, potato chips… Hostess Cupcakes?" she held up the package in question with a little smile on her face as she looked at him.

"Your favorite," he said proudly, smiling. He'd gotten all of the ones the vending machine had—seven packets of them. He hoped that was enough. Alex seemed to be very pleased, she was grinning and shaking her head. She got up and came to him, stood between his knees then sat on one of his legs, circling her arms around his neck. She pressed a kiss against his forehead, murmuring that she loved everything about him. He looked into her eyes and he loved everything about her, too.

"So, how does it feel to be my husband?" She asked, seeming to be playful and shy all at once.

She said my husband and he felt as though something inside of him burst. The thought made him feel like he could soar. "It feels… very good," he admitted, not doing verbal justice to the true feeling it gave him. He attempted to match her playful tone, but he sounded more genuinely curious to himself. "And… how does it feel to be my wife?" Saying the words aloud was stunning and surreal. My wife.

"Your wife," she repeated, biting her a smile as she looked down, appearing to be amazed at those words just like he was. She looked back at him. "It feels right."

Her answer brought him to life all over again and he didn't know what else to do—he kissed her, never tiring of the soft press of her lips to his. He only meant to kiss her briefly. But when they drew back, the distance seemed too much and they kissed again, a little longer and slower. They drew apart but it didn't last for long and Cas enveloped her in his arms, cradling her there as they came together to kiss again, deeply this time. Breakfast was forgotten for awhile.

The newlyweds stole a couple more hours together—making love to each other again, eating breakfast in the park across the street, visiting an arcade like Alex had joked about the day before. Castiel, of course, was terrible at video games. And when it became clear that they had done all the stalling done that they could, the two of them embraced tightly and prepared themselves for reality, heading back to Bobby's around mid-day. What happened on April 29th, 2010, remained an unspoken secret that they carried in the deepest and most hidden parts of their hearts. They didn't even speak to each other about it again for over a year. It wasn't normal, this marriage of theirs, nor would it ever really be. But it would always be theirs. And that was enough.

Some uppity playwright once said, "Love is only a dirty trick played on us to achieve continuation of the species." Personally, I disagree. Love is real, rare yes, but real. I've seen with my own eyes.

The End
He typed out "The End" and stared at the two words for a long minute then hit backspace, erasing those words. It wasn't the end. It was just the beginning.

Chuck sat back from his computer and smiled fondly. The Profound Bond. That's what he was calling this little novella he'd just completed. He wasn't sure if he should change the names of Alex and Cas and try and sell it as a romance novel in the distant future, but for now he knew he was going to do his part and keep this secret with them like he'd promised. He printed the draft off, put all the pages together with a binder clip, then put it away safely into a box of other manuscripts he wasn't releasing yet.

When Chuck Shurley disappeared off the face of the earth without a word soon thereafter, everything in his house, including this box, would be seized by the bank. Everything he'd owned would be auctioned off to the public. Castiel and Alex's story as told by Chuck was lost in the mix, and it would be a long time before anyone would ever read his carefully crafted words or the beautiful story of how despite all odds, the girl who'd grown up with no voice had found an angel. How these two totally different beings had existed in this insanely large universe and how a million things could have kept them apart, but instead, despite the odds, these two found each other. Loved each other. Held onto the other, promising forever in the face of the great unknown, in the face of the great and terrible odds against them.

It's the kind of story no one ever forgets. It's the kind of story that has to be told.

Chapter End Notes

There were hints about their secret marriage that I scattered throughout the previous chapters, did anyone guess it or notice the clues I left?! They are listed below this blurb. I feel like an evil scientist muuuahahah. FYI, I hadn't originally planned for them to get married... possibly ever because to me they were always forever bound, already married in a way because of their clear soul bond (even though as an angel Cas doesn't technically have a soul). BUT, when I got into character head-space and realized how Cas would feel at this particular time in the story... believing he was gonna be human and believing that this was going to turn into the 2014 storyline... I realized that being an ex-angel who had God's laws seared into his mind, he'd want to marry her for sure now that he's a mere human, or like one.

CLUES I LEFT:

Chapter 42: Dean notices Alex's ring is gone, she claims to have "lost it." Some text dances around what happened.

Additionally in Chapter 42, Sam, giving a goodbye speech, tells Alex to go be happy and marry Cas—which upsets her even further cuz she already did and can't bring herself to tell him.

Chapter 43: Lucifer, possessing Alex, taunts Castiel and says he is "an angel married to his work" — he can see all of Alex's memories and knows of Cas and Alex's secret.

Chapter 44: Cas thinks about how he and Alex were going to share a life together. He remembers how "the day before yesterday" he promised to go with her wherever he went and stay with her for the rest of his mortal life. In a later scene, Alex laments that she didn't think "the rest of our lives" meant a few more days, she thinks about how
Cas has proved his love to her with his promise, she thinks about how he has given himself to her in every way possible. She thinks about how two days ago they did something "crazy" and acted like they had forever. In a later scene, Lucifer mockingly says "til death do you part" as he makes Alex stab Cas to death in the graveyard.

Chapter 45: When speaking with Cas, Crowley calls Alex Cas's missus and wifey. Cas thinks about keeping the promise he made to Alex to stay at her side.

Chapter 46: Crowley taunts Alex and says that she and Cas aren't even out of the honeymoon and there's trouble in paradise. Crowley calls Cas her hubby in a later scene. And even later in the chapter, Cas reaches into his pocket and curls his fingers around the "small silver object" Alex gave him. His ring.

Chapter 48: Alex thinks about how she and Cas had been forever and belonged to each other and how it seems to be lost. She thinks about the things she "doesn't want Dean to find out about."

Chapter 49: Alex's sexy dream of Cas is kind of a memory of their wedding night. The dream turns into a nightmare and she's crying about how Cas "promised he wouldn't leave." In a later scene, Glen tries to give Alex a diamond necklace to replace the "weird " penny necklace she wears.

Chapter 50: Alex looks at the cellphone pic she took of Cas the morning after they got married, remembers waking up with him.

Chapter 51: Alex feels like a widow, thinking of how Cas is gone: "She realized how much like a widow she was in that moment. Alone and in mourning; clothed in darkness at the thought of her other half lost forever."

Chapter 53: Cas thinks about his wedding vows/promises, Alex gets insanely upset when she realizes she ripped off her penny necklace and threw it in his face, realizes maybe he thinks she regrets the marriage etc. Crowley tells them he knows and has a mind to go blab to Dean (just to get a rise out of them). Cas asks if they should "tell Dean about it." Alex freaks out and says no, no and avoids the subject. Cas gives her the penny back and essentially forgives her, wordlessly reassuring her that nothing has changed. (Kill me ok.)

Chapter 54: Crowley calls Alex "the missus" to Cas again, sneers at him for becoming good at keeping secrets.

Chapter 56: This chapter was crammed with hints lol. When confessing the truth, Dean cuts off Alex several times. The following is what she was about to say.

1: "It's not crap," Alex insisted, "he loves me enough t—" o marry me.

2: Dean: "Christ, Alex, you still think you're gonna have a regular life with this guy?! What, you're just gonna get married, settle down, have kids?!!" Alex: "Actually, Dean —" we already got married.

3: "Dean, I'm in love with Cas, I love Cas, and he's—he's my—" husband.

Then, of course, the last scene where Calex are hedging about "what Dean found out." And there you have it folks. XOXO.
Not Broken

"So I wait for you like a lonely house until you will see me again and live in me. 'Til then my windows ache."
- Pablo Neruda

Present Day

In an unremarkable motel room in Illinois they spoke in hushed whispers over the unconscious and bloodied body of Sam Winchester.

Dean's found out about us and how we've been together, she told him. But not the rest? Cas asked in veiled alarm. She paused, knowing exactly what he was asking about. No. Not the rest.

Silent and barely acknowledged at all, it hung between them: The secret they'd kept from everyone, even themselves at times.

Alex had shed many tears the past year thinking of Castiel and those precious, too-perfect hours when they had been together and everything had been okay... when Cas had been like a human man and called her his wife. She'd woken with him at her side and her heart had yearned for all mornings to be like that. And then no other morning had been at all.

She had spent the last year despairing for him to return. And now...? Nothing felt certain anymore. Cas had barely been around since she discovered that he was, in fact, still alive. There were so many things left unsaid between the two of them, so many questions that she had. She continued to hold her doubts and fears inside where they threatened to shatter her.

Castiel, who had at the time of their marriage thought himself a mere and mortal man was no longer either one. He had been brought back to life by God himself. And not as a man. As an angel. He was once again ageless and immortal and forbidden to pursue Alex in a romantic sense. But his vows to her had been everlasting. No matter his species, he counted himself as her husband and was fighting this war not only to keep the apocalypse from restarting but also to find a way to permit their union, to find a way to save Alex from what he had done. Damning her soul by being physically intimate with her weighed heavily on him; the marriage had fixed nothing and he knew that now. But he had a way to remedy it, to absolve her of damnation forever—he would rewrite or rip up the celestial commandments when at last he won this war. Alex knew nothing of his discoveries or plans and he didn't want to speak of these things to her. She had enough burdens to bear. Including him. The husband who had been forced to abandon her not even half a week after he promised her everything. When she had ripped off her penny necklace in the panic room last week in a fit of insanity because of the demon blood, she'd screamed at him and said their marriage wasn't real and could never be, that he didn't love her anymore and she knew it. It had cut him to his heart for her to say that. He thought he must have hurt her very greatly for her to think those things even for a second. His guilt was triplicate and his shame was plenty—he'd promised never to hurt her, and he had done just that. Unknowingly, unwittingly... repeatedly. Now, things between them seemed cracked and torn. Alex was so sad and he didn't know how to comfort her. He was sad, too, heavyhearted at the thought of the staggering difficulties facing them now. He couldn't remain at her side, and they both knew it. The war demanded much of him. Would it take more than just his efforts and strength? Would it take her, too?

Before Cas and Alex could discuss any more, Dean suddenly opened the motel door, a huge coil of rope in hand. He'd disappeared a moment or two ago and was in a distinctly foul mood. "All right,
"losers," he muttered peevishly, casting dark glances to both the angel and his sister as he entered, "this kid ain't gonna tie himself up."

He was talking about Sam, who he'd beaten unconscious. Alex and Cas, who had been standing close and touching, stepped apart the second Dean entered. It wasn't necessary for them to do that… he knew about them now, after all. Or he knew *enough*. The sour look on Dean's face suggested he had many things to say on the matter, still he remained in huffy silence for the moment.

Cas lifted Sam up off the floor as Dean uncoiled the rope angrily with great, exaggerated movements, watching both Cas and Alex hawkishly. Alex pulled out a chair from the kitchenette table, indicating that Sam be put there, and Cas followed her lead, sitting Sam's slumped form there as Alex held the chair steady. Over Sam's shoulder, Cas and Alex's eyes met and clung with great amounts of mutual yearning. What was she thinking, Castiel wondered. Was she all right? It was impossible for him to tell—she was quiet, her expression was strained. They needed to talk, he knew they did and he glanced at Dean. Now wasn't an opportune time. Cas hoped so strongly that he would not be called away to Heaven right now or anytime soon. He sensed that he was needed by Alex, and very much. Knowing how needed he'd been the entire past year devastated him further. If only there were a way to take back what he never could.

Dean rudely leaned down between Cas and Alex in a way that wasn't necessary and began to tie Sam's wrists tightly behind himself to the chair. Alex stepped back and Castiel did too. This greatened the distance between them. Probably just as Dean wanted. Alex's eyes were reluctant to look into Cas's now and Dean continued to restrain Sam, not saying anything. Finally, he finished tying the ropes and straightened, looking Cas dead in the eye. "We got to talk," he said, steady and controlled. But there was cold anger in his voice and eyes.

"Oh my *god,*" Alex commented bitterly, bowing her face into a hand for a minute then slashing the same hand out angrily as she looked at her brother with a testy glare. "You *cannot* be serious, Dean."

"Oh I'm serious all right," he retorted churlishly.

Alex quickly grew incensed. Her voice trembled. "No. *No!* It's none of your business!"

Dean looked at his sister weirdly, as if he was displeased and confused at her. And Cas broke his silence, trying to draw Dean's attention his way instead, attempting to take or divert the brunt of Dean's oncoming verbal assault. "Dean… perhaps this isn't this time to discuss—"

"*What,* Cas?" Dean demanded, aiming his angry gaze at Cas now. "You *screwed* my sister!" Cas's face fell as he wondered how Dean could put it in such low, vulgar terms. And then:

*Thwack!* A slapping sound, Dean holding a hand to his cheek in shock, and Alex pointing a finger in his face which she had just smacked. "*Stop it.*" She was pissed, breathing heavy, and annoyed. Her anger made her speak in aggressive, clipped tones. "You're acting *insane.* Just *stop.*" It looked like she might deck him for real if he tested her.

Dean stood there wordless, too shocked to react. And instead of blowing a fuse, instead of acting a fool, he took a moment, let his hand fall away from his reddened cheek, and pressed his mouth into a thin line. Cas and Dean exchanged a tense glance. Castiel wondered what Dean would think if he knew that they were, in fact, married. Would his anger about them 'screwing,' as he had put it, dissipate if he understood that the physical side of the relationship was part of something more sacred and profound… everlasting? Would Dean recognize and admit that Castiel truly did love Alex if he knew how they had committed themselves to one another a year ago? He had a strong
feeling that Dean would be even more enraged to hear of their union. It saddened the angel, who loved the entire Winchester family and saw them as his family. He desired Dean's friendship and brotherhood, not his wrath and hostility.

Although the oldest Winchester was still clearly unhappy, his sister's reaction had put him into his place. Not very gracefully, Dean changed the subject by clearing his throat and sniffing loudly, then crossing his arms and looking at Sam darkly. "All right, so… if that's really Sam like you say, Cas—you gotta figure out what's wrong with him. Stat. Get crackin'." He stalked off further into the room to sit-lean moodily against a low dresser.

Truthfully, Castiel would have much rather consoled Alex, who he knew was upset under her anger, but as he had so painfully learned recently… his desires did not have top priority. In Alex's eyes there was resignation. She had accepted that this moment was not made for them and that there were other things to address. He had to accept that, too. Reluctantly, Cas turned his attention to Sam—who he had secretly brought back. Pretending not to know seemed deeply shameful but Castiel couldn't tell them, especially now, knowing that he'd brought the middle Winchester back from the grave so much wronger than he thought. Wrong enough that Sam would let Alex fall prey to vampires without doing anything, wrong enough that Sam would put a knife to her throat. Cas would have killed anyone else who attempted such a thing upon Alex, but this was Sam. And the reason Sam wasn't himself was Castiel's fault. It was a maddening, guilt-ridden conundrum, and he felt that both Dean and Alex would be appalled to learn the truth.

Sam slumped in the chair, his broad shoulders caved forward and his still face a bloody mess from Dean's fists. "He looks terrible," Cas commented darkly, wondering how he could have made such a mistake and endangered both Dean and Alex in the process. Sam began to stir at that moment, and groaned, blinking blearily as he raised his head.

"Cas? What's—" he stopped short when Cas pulled one of his eyelids back to examine his eyeball. "Get off me," he muttered, straining a little against his ropes.

"Has he been feverish?" Cas questioned, glancing at Alex, who stood off to the side and slightly behind her twin, unseen by him for the moment.

"Have you?" Dean asked Sam brusquely.

Disoriented and confused, sounding overly innocent, Sam stared at Cas oddly, then Dean. "No. Why?"

"Is he speaking in tongues?" Cas asked Dean, then didn't wait for an answer, looked at Sam. "Are you speaking in tongues?"

"No," Sam repeated with continuing confusion. "What are you…" his face fell. "Are you… diagnosing me?"

"You better hope he can," Dean said, almost threateningly. Cas put two fingers to Sam's neck, feeling the pulse there. Normal, steady.

Sam's face twisted as he stared at his brother. "You really think that this is—"

"What, you think that there's a clinic out there for people who just pop out of hell wrong?! Who try and get their brother and sister killed?!" Dean fired off hotly, and he walked forward, drawing himself up to his full height, as if he were trying to be intimidating. "He asks, you answer, then you shut your hole. You got it?"
Chastened, a little sullen, Sam fell quiet and Cas took his fingers away from his neck.  

"How much do you sleep?" the angel asked. He was beginning to form a terrible suspicion.  

There was a short pause. "I don't," Sam answered. Cas felt a sinking, dread-filled sensation.  

"At all?" Dean asked, surprise filling his face.  

"Not since I got back."  

"And it never occurred to you that there might be something off about that?!" Dean asked, getting more than just angry—he seemed afraid and he looked at Alex briefly, whose stony expression gave away little—she was absolutely silent. And Castiel understood Dean's show of fear. If Sam, who appeared to have no conscience had tried to hurt his sister just today, had let her get turned into a vampire without a second thought… if this Sam shared a room with her while she slept unguarded and unaware—that was highly dangerous and unsafe. For a brief moment, Dean and Cas looked at each other and were united instead of divided… both immediately and silently understanding how averse they were to the idea of Alex being around Sam at all right now.  

"Of course it did, Dean," Sam said, then hesitated oddly. "I-I just never told you."  

Dean and Cas looked at each other yet again and on a whim, Cas crossed to stand on Sam's other side now, putting himself between Alex and Sam. Sam still hadn't even seen his twin, but Castiel would take no chances. "Sam... what are you feeling now?" Castiel questioned, his suspicion growing exponentially… because a human who didn't sleep at all wasn't even fully a human.  

Sam scoffed sarcastically. "I feel like my nose is broken."  

"No, that's a physical sensation," Cas said, growing upset internally. "How do you feel?"  

Confusion was set across Sam's face. "Well, I think—"  

"Feel." Castiel reiterated the word strongly, and Sam blinked twice, uncertain.  

"I... don't know."  

Castiel took in a heavy breath and looked at Alex long and hard. Sam followed his gaze and said nothing when he saw his twin. Cas began to take his belt off, drawing three perplexed stares.  

"What are you...? Uh…” Sam stared as Cas approached him with the belt.  

"This will be unpleasant," Castiel said, and offered the belt to Sam, holding it near his mouth. "Bite down on this," he said, and Sam did, looking wary and doubtful. "If there's someplace that you find soothing, you should go there. In your mind." His eyes flickered to Alex, who was appearing to be absolutely shocked at what was happening. "You may find this disturbing to watch," Cas warned, more gentle when he spoke to her. He couldn't spare her from this. It had to be done.  

Like he'd done with Aaron Birch, Castiel reached his hand into Sam's chest and red veins crawled up Sam's neck even as grunting cries of agony escaped through his clamped teeth. Castiel reached out, trying to find Sam's soul, to confirm it was within him. But there was a large void. A great nothingness there. Sam continued to suffer loudly at the excruciating pain Castiel was causing him.  

Alex's expression contorted and she looked away, unable to deal with her twin in pain—and the more Sam writhed and cried out, the more her face twisted in silent agony. And then it was over and Cas withdrew, his expression grim. He'd found nothing—no trace of the soul at all. Sam was left to gasp noisily as he reeled from pain, grimacing with his eyes shut. Cas took his belt back
even as Alex got a glass with a shaking hand and got some water from the sink.

"Did you find anything?" Dean asked as Cas turned to face him.

Castiel was stony, deep in thought, trying to work out, in his mind, how he had pulled Sam out of death without his soul. "No. I found nothing," he said truthfully, looking back at Sam.

With a strange expression—pained and uncertain—Alex stood in front of Sam and touched his shoulder with one hand, helped him take a drink of water... still displaying compassion for him even though he'd sought to harm her only moment ago before Dean had knocked him unconscious. "Thanks," Sam murmured after he gulped and sputtered some water down. He seemed exhausted and dazed, and Alex looked sad in ways that reached past her eyes—to her soul itself. She was looking back at Cas, anticipating his news.

"Physically, he's perfectly healthy," Cas told them all heavily, watching the scene with weary shoulders.

"Then what is it?" Dean asked, filled with dread.

"It's his soul," Cas said, shaking his head slowly and hiding his utter horror, trying not to give away himself. "It's gone."

"...No soul?" Alex repeated in a soft, stunned voice.

Dean's face registered shock, confusion, and doubt as he came to Cas's side. "...what do you mean, he's got no soul?"

Cas forced himself to look Dean in the eyes—not Alex, who he was loathe to deceive. He was lying by omission to all of them. "Somehow, when Sam was resurrected... it was without his soul."

Dean blinked, rapidly trying to understand it. "So where is it?"

Cas answered truthfully. "My guess is... still in the cage with Michael and Lucifer."

Frustrated, Dean walked off a few steps, composing himself. "Okay, so is he even still Sam? I mean, really." Everyone looked at Sam, as if trying to figure out just that.

Cas in particular looked at Sam sadly, wondering how he could have made such a grave mistake. "You pose an interesting philosophical question."

"Well, then, just get it back," Dean said gruffly.

"Dean—"

"Well, you pulled me out," Dean reasoned. He sounded afraid and confused, and Castiel understood. But...

"It took several angels to rescue you, and you weren't nearly as well guarded," Cas explained, and it wasn't a lie by any means. "Sam's soul is in Lucifer's cage. There's a difference, a big difference. It's not possible." And it wasn't. If it had been, he would have tried.

"Okay, well, there's got to be some way," Dean said, lowering his voice and seeming to be unflinchingly determined to do something. Anything.

"So, are you gonna untie me?" Sam asked, getting restless.
"No," Dean said strongly, immediately, only giving his brother a brief, irritated glance.

"Listen, I'm not gonna—" Sam started.

"Sam, how the hell am I even supposed to let you out of this room?" Dean asked, crossing the room to stand in front of Sam and glare at him. Alex drifted over toward Cas as Dean faced Sam—and while Dean wasn't looking, Cas touched her arm and silently they searched the other's gaze for a brief moment.

"Dean, I'm not some psycho," Sam was appealing, trying to sound genuine. "I didn't want you or Alex to get hurt. I was just trying to stop the vamps, I was just trying to keep myself safe."

"Are you high?" Dean exploded. "You aren't some psycho? Seems kinda nuts to me to let your family get turned into monsters and then hold your own sister at knifepoint!"

Sam sighed like he was irritated. "I'm sorry," he said impatiently, trying to say what Dean wanted to hear. "It won't ever happen again. Please let me go."

"You're kidding, right?" Dean asked, a cynical, sad smile on his face. "'It won't ever happen again'? Seriously? That's all you got?"

"Well, what are you gonna do, just keep me locked up in here forever?" Sam asked, a little snide. Dean raised his eyebrows fractionally. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Okay, fine, look, I get it. Sam was putting on his best performance, but traces of contempt and irritation showed through. "I get it, Dean. I was wrong. But I'm telling you I-I'm trying to get right. It's still me."

"Is it?" Dean asked coolly—not convinced.

"Yes. So just let me go."

Dean's expression didn't even flicker. "No way in hell."

"Dean, maybe we can just—" Alex started, and her tone seemed to set Dean off. He whirled.

"Alex, no! You're psycho too if you're just gonna let him have another chance!" Dean talked with incensed animation, using his hands a lot. "First Sam throws you to vamps, then he uses you as a human shield…? I don't wanna go for third time's the charm in this situation!"

Alex said nothing, but her eyes showed conflict. The room went silent.

Impatient, Sam sighed. "I didn't want it to come to this," he said reluctantly—and then he stood easily, having worked out the restraints Dean had tied around him.

"Nice knots, dumbass," Alex muttered to Dean, who shot her a dirty look. Next to her, Cas had drawn himself up a little protectively and watched Sam carefully.

"You're not gonna hold me, Dean," Sam said calmly, pulling the ropes off his wrists completely and then fixing his brother with a pointed stare. "Not here, not in a panic room, not anywhere. You two're stuck with the soulless guy, so you might as well work with me." He set them with a determined look. "Let's fix this."

"Do you wanna be fixed?" Alex asked hesitantly. She seemed uncertain of the entire situation, especially now that Sam's huge, imposing figure towered over everyone else in the room.
Sam glanced at her and mulled the question over for a quick second, then nodded once. "Yeah. I think so."

Dean narrowed his eyes at his brother, shaking his head, undecided even though what he said seemed decisive enough. "You listen to me. I'm not 'stuck' with you, all right? You may be my brother but it ain't just you and me in this." He lowered his voice, seething. "I got a good mind to leave after the stunts you pulled."

Sam nodded, taking it in stride. "Understandable."

"But you're my brother and I'll be damned if I don't find a way to fix this for us," Dean said in a wavering voice. He wet his lips, becoming intense and deadly. "So this is the deal, and listen up, cuz I'm not gonna repeat myself." He paused, going closer to Sam. "I'm gonna be watching every damn move you make," he threatened, getting in Sam's face now. "You go within ten feet of our sister without my permission and it's adios. Any more crap like that vampire shit and that human-shield shit and it's over, Sam, you hear me? You touch her, you so much as look at her wrong and you're done." He paused. "And we ain't sharing motel rooms anymore, either."

"Fine," Sam said, nodding. "Sounds about right to me."

Dean looked his brother over mistrustfully, uneasy. "Cas, clean him up."

Cas obliged, walked forward and touched Sam on the forehead and healed his broken nose, contusions, bruises, removed the blood. All in an instant.

"All right, if we're gonna figure out what happened to your soul, then we need to find who yanked you out," Dean said, pacing a little further back in the room and frowning harshly. "You say you don't know?"

"No idea."

"Then we start a list," Dean said, then looked to Cas. "If it's so hard to spring someone out of the box, then who's got that kind of muscle?"

"I don't know," Castiel lied, ashamed of himself the entire time and trying to conceal it. He looked at Sam carefully, avoiding Alex's anxious gaze. "You have no memory of your resurrection?" Did Sam remember, at all, that it had been Castiel who had pulled him up from the cage?

Sam shrugged. "I woke up in a field. That's all I got."

"No clues?" Cas pressed. "None?"

Sam thought for a second then conceded. "I've got one. Samuel came back same time as I did, pretty much. I say we go see if he's got a soul or not. Maybe he can point us in the direction of whatever big bad brought me back."

Dean was already pulling his phone out of his pocket. "Yeah. Good," he said. "Lemme call Samuel, see where he is." He retreated further into the room and as he talked on the phone, Alex took hold of Cas's forearm at his side, looking up at him anxiously.

"Can you stay a little while?" She asked in a whisper, gazing up into his eyes with wavering hopefulness. Her request touched him strangely, leaving a feeling of warmth underneath his ribs, a feeling of longing deep in his chest.

Cas glanced at Dean, who was talking loudly on his phone, then looked back at Alex, who waited
for his answer. "Yes," he replied to her softly. "I'll stay." He needed to. There were still many things between them left unsaid. Alex nodded, mildly relieved.

Sam scoffed at the two of them briefly. Castiel looked back at Sam sidelong… knowing that this situation was his fault. Discouraged, Cas looked down, hearing Dean ending his phone call as he did. "Samuel's back at the compound, three hours from here," Dean said, grabbing his jacket and pulling a bag up off the floor. He seemed short on temper. "Let's go."

"I thought he was supposed to still be looking for Jamie," Alex said, both a little surprised and angry.

"Said he couldn't find her," Dean said tersely, tossing another duffel bag at Sam and sparing his sister only a brief, hooded glance. "We got bigger problems right now, anyway."

"Now? We're leaving right now?" Alex asked.

"Yeah, I ain't sitting around to figure this out," Dean said gruffly, heading for the door. Sam followed, Alex and Cas glanced at each other wordlessly, communicating nonverbally.

"Dean, uh…" Alex began, and Cas heard how uncomfortable and nervous she was. Dean had stopped, hand on the door, expression expectant in a way that seemed rude. Cas spoke in Alex's silence so that whatever anger Dean felt would be directed at him instead. He walked forward slightly, putting himself closer Dean than Alex was.

"We'll meet you there," he said firmly, leaving no room for protests. "Call me when you reach your destination. I need to speak with Alex. Privately."

Dean's face took on a strange look and his eyebrows rose, eyes narrowing. He seemed to be judging Cas, and a little, humorless smile crossed his face. "Oh, talk huh?" He asked, then chuckled derisively, drawing something out of his wallet to throw it angrily at Cas, who caught it just barely. "Use a condom this time." Cas frowned down at the strange packet Dean had lobbed at him. What was this?

"Dean!" Alex exclaimed, appalled at her brother, who was leaving in an angry state, seemingly too fed up to put up a fight.

"Bite me," Dean returned.

Alex gave him a cool, sarcastic stare. "A few days ago I would've."

Dean was not amused. "Har har." When Dean slammed the door behind them, the bedside lamplight flickered weakly, like it was dying, like the force of the door closing had done something to it. The room fell silent except for the buzz buzz of the lamp.

"What is this thing?" Cas asked, looking at the strange packet Dean had thrown and turning it over in his hand. He could feel, under the foil, the distinct shape of a circle raised around the edges.

Alex was entirely disgruntled at her brother's actions and crossed her arms, hugging herself and not looking Cas in the eye. She stared at the little packet instead. "Protection."

"How could this possibly be a weapon?" Cas asked, mystified. And why would Dean insist this was necessary for a conversation?

"No—" Alex said, smiling suddenly, just a little, despite how sad she looked. "Protection against pregnancy. It's contraception."
Oh. Castiel understood now and raised his eyes to Alex’s, which met his hesitantly.

Outside, the Impala's engines started and they could hear the tires squeal angrily against the pavement. Alex's eyes slid to that sound and her misery was palatable. Now that they were alone, Cas didn't feel the need to stand away from her. He chanced going closer. Before, he would have taken her into his arms without a second thought, but now, always on the edge of his mind, was a fear of overstepping his bounds. So he hovered nearby, wanting to hold her but feeling afraid to take the chance. The lamp Dean had disturbed kept flickering weakly, making the room dimmer than it had been before.

Cas indicated the packet Dean had thrown at him, holding it in two fingers. He knew what to say about this, at least, now that he knew what it was. "This isn't necessary," he told her somewhat distractedly, setting it down on the dresser beside himself. "I know you've started menstruating again this year, but I'm an angel. I have control over conception." Alex seemed uncomfortable at what he was saying and Cas paused. Maybe he shouldn't have said that. It must be disconcerting for her how he knew about her menstrual cycle. A man wouldn't know that. But Castiel wasn't a man, he was an angel, and he knew things with just a glance that no one else could. He peered at her closer, abruptly noticing something else about her. "Your tongue is hurt," he said, stepping a little closer. There was a puncture deep enough to have drawn blood.

"I bit it," she said vaguely. "I was about to tell Dean about our… the…” she couldn't seem to say the word 'marriage', and for reasons unknown, Castiel felt that familiar sinking feeling inside. She had wounded herself to keep their union hidden and she couldn't say aloud what they had done. Why?

"Let me heal you," he said, and she hesitated then nodded, letting him touch her face to heal her. At the touch of his hand, he saw how she was emotionally affected, and he thought, if possible, his heart went out to her. When he had healed her, she put a hand over his, and their hands stayed there at her cheek. Their anxious gazes held steady and Castiel didn't know where to start. He thought of how many questions she must have, how many things he wanted to know. How much time had been lost, how many secrets and horrible things he was keeping from her. How angry Dean was with them right now. How Alex had hurt herself purposefully to keep from telling him their secret. It wasn't worth that—surely they could explain it to him? Cas paused, thinking hard, trying to decide the right thing. "I should talk to your brother about this," Cas said heavily, searching her eyes, brushing his thumb against her cheek. "Us."

Her eyebrows moved together a little. "Can we talk about us first?" She laced her fingers through his and pulling his hand down, letting their hands remain entwined between them. The look on her face alerted him to her inner turmoil. The tone in her voice let him know that she was very upset about something. The bedside lamp kept flickering like it was dying out.

"Of course," Cas agreed apprehensively. "What is it you would like to discuss?" He was worried and wanting to hold her but he did not move at all. A paranoid feeling grew that he would only make things worse, because making things worse was all he ever seemed to do. His question of what did she want to discuss seemed to overwhelm her and she couldn't find words, though she tried.

Neither of them seemed to know what to do or say and Cas was in a pain beyond the physical. She was close, but not close enough, and he was left aching and hoping. "Is it all right... if I hold you?" he asked, voice awash in apprehension. Should he feel so full of trepidation to ask her that? She looked as though she might crumble when he asked that and he recognized the answer yes in her eyes before she even moved—moved forward to him. He met her and put his arms around her, felt her circle her arms around his middle, inside his trench coat and inside his suit jacket. Her face
buried in his chest. Every cell that was Castiel breathed her name in anxiety and relief altogether, and the rigid uncertainty from a moment ago softened then fluttered away like a petal on the wind.

The war in Heaven, the secrets he kept from her, the things he was doing to try and right the wrongs he'd committed… it all faded away and he didn't think of those things. He thought of this and of her. Here, she was safe with him and he could feel her warmth like the sun, he could smell her familiar scent of soap, sweat, and shampoo. Here, she fit in his arms, small and perfect, and he could protect her forever and things could be as they were before. It was so intense, the things that welled within him at the sensation of holding her like that. And then he realized she was shaking. Crying. And the relief faded into alarm.

He drew back, holding her arms and looking into her face, trying to see what was wrong. Her eyes were shiny with tears and her features showed heartbreaking amounts of pain. He thought of asking Alex aloud what was wrong, but he already knew that everything was. Sam, soulless. Dean, angry. Himself, absent. Her life, scattered to the wind. "Do you think Sam will ever be okay again?" Alex asked, her eyes silently cajoling him to reassure her. "Will he ever be my Sam again?"

**Oh Alex**—her heartache was yet again his fault. As much as Castiel wanted to tell her yes, he couldn't lie purposefully about that to her. "I don't know," he said, guilt-ridden by the knowledge that he had brought Sam back and failed to bring all of him back. Alex would despise him if she knew that. She would despise him if she knew he was working with Crowley and using Sam and Samuel to open Purgatory. But when Cas accomplished these things, Heaven would be secured, free will would reign, and the two of them could be together without fear of consequence. Surely she would forgive him when he told her at last the things he'd done and why? He would tell her, when he was able. If only that time was now. But it wasn't.

"I try and act strong but it's not working," she confessed quietly, seeming so unlike herself in that moment. "I don't understand."

"About Sam?" Cas asked weakly, taking her sadness and mentally adding it to the rest of the things that were his fault.

"About anything." She was mostly composed now but still emotionally raw. "This may be a dumb question but… when we…" she hesitated and wet her lips almost nervously, "got, got married, you were… human. Or a lot more like one than you are now. Now that you're… an angel again… what does that mean for us?"

Cas frowned a little, trying to understand what she wanted to know. "What do you mean?"

Whatever she was about to ask caused her great reluctance and dread. "Just… has anything changed?"

Her question startled him completely. "Why would it?" Cas asked, quickly becoming confused—did she think that because he had been restored to his seraph state that the vows he'd made were null and void? From the way her eyes searched his so anxiously, he thought so and it alarmed him. "Nothing has changed, Alex," Cas said, his confidence wavering as he looked into her ambivalent gaze. "Not for me."

Great insecure sorrow welled in Alex's eyes. "But you're ageless and I'm mortal. You're stuck in Heaven, I'm here on earth. We were apart for a year and it almost destroyed me." Her words were like powerful, devastating blows to his stomach. She faltered, eyes unable to meet his. Her hand in his was loose, not holding fast or steady. "Things… things just aren't what they were before between us."
Cas was silent and taken aback, hurt by her words because they were true—the moment she said them, he couldn't deny it. And not only was he hurt, but he was suddenly afraid. Had she slipped from his grasp already? Had she fallen away from him? Had the hurt inflicted by his absence done irreparable damage? As his alarm heightened and the silence stretched out, Alex appeared to become distressed too. "Say something, Cas," she breathed in a strained voice, begging him—but begging him for what?

"I… I don't know what to say," Cas confessed starkly, feeling a cloying and terrifying sense of finality settling over him. He was out of his element, he was drowning in horrifying emotional helplessness—how could he fix this? Was she telling him, indirectly, that she hadn't the strength to continue with him in this? Or was she asking him to make things as they had been before? He didn't know how to do that. His uncertainty only served to further defeat Alex, who looked down, eyebrows pressing together as gaunt sadness etched itself over her features. Even though she was close to him, she was far away in a way he couldn't describe and Cas's insides writhed painfully in the vicinity of his chest.

"Did… did we make a mistake, Cas?" She asked in a weak voice, looking at him with eyes that broke him. "It didn't feel like a mistake. Not then. But now… I don't know."

It felt as though he were being stabbed through the chest and Castiel sank down to sit on the bed just behind him, slumping all over, staring at her in abject, shocked defeat. She thought they had made a mistake? It was so much worse than he had realized, and he put a hand to his bowing face, not sure how to answer her. He was miserable at the thoughts that overcame him. Did we? Did we make a mistake? How could it have been a mistake? He remembered her calling him husband, he remembered waking beside her and knowing he was in the right place. He remembered watching as she walked to him dressed in white, a shy, anxious look on her face. That day, he'd been a real man because the heart inside his chest hadn't been just an organ of tissue. It had been a thing made of dreams and hopes and love. She'd made it that way. In her arms, he'd learned passion and life, he'd learned how love was something that encompassed every sense. How had that precious bond between them become so broken and frayed? Was it even possible to repair? His emotions were so wretched and desperate that they affected him physically, sending pain throughout his body. His chest hurt, his stomach hurt, his arms hurt. His eyes stung as if they were burning.

His thoughts were interrupted when two arms circled around his neck. Alex stood between his knees and hugged him, a hand cradling his head as she bowed her head down to him. "I'm sorry," she choked out, lips by his ear, apologizing not just with words but with the way she held him and touched him. "I don't feel sure about anything right now—I'm exhausted and I talk without thinking and everything is so bad right now… it's not your fault, it's just me being stupid, I'm sorry…" he felt her trembling hand stroking his hair—he looked up at her, hearing how his heart pounded in his ears sickeningly. She was upset, and he needed to comfort her, but he felt as though he were incapable of doing anything at the moment. The bedside lamp flickered again, abruptly gave a little buzzing pop, then went out completely, leaving the room dark except for moonlight. Cas looked toward the lamp just slightly, dazed.

"I guess all things burn out and stop working eventually," Alex murmured, sounding so sad. Was she speaking about the lamp? Cool silver moonlight filtering in through the blinds made the dark room seem smaller, more intimate.

Cas had a feeling that she wasn't talking about the lamp. And hearing how forlorn she was gave him a surge of conviction. "Not all things," he said softly, anxiously, and he chanced touching her, resting his hands on either side of her waist, trying to tell her, silently, that unlike that lamp, his feelings for her would not fizzle out or break… he wanted another chance, somehow, despite the great odds against them, to be with her, to love her, to live up to what he'd promised to her a year
ago. She turned her attention back to him and petted the side of his head. In the darkness, her eyes were full and searched his with growing earnest longing and worry.

"Please don't be upset Cas," she begged, taking in his pained expression. "I shouldn't have asked you if it was a mistake."

"Of course I'm upset," he told her immediately, his face and voice showing it, too. He knew exactly what he'd done and was beginning to understand why she was questioning everything, even him. "I gave you reason to doubt me. I left you alone. I've hurt you. I've left you uncertain about our union." Miserable facts Castiel could barely face. He should have known better, he should have known that an angel could never be what a human needed. That he would never fully understand how to navigate the treacherous waters of emotion. That he would do nothing but squander her love and affection and let her down no matter how hard he tried to fulfill her needs.

Her eyes were shining with unbearable emotion as they looked at his and he thought maybe she could sense what he was thinking. "I'm not uncertain," she said, voice softening with emotion. She sounded braver than she had before… and somehow, it just made him feel worse to hear how willing she was to overlook what he'd done. "If you're not," she continued, "then I'm not either."

He tilted his head to the side, shaking it a little in a silent no. He knew many things, but most of all he knew he would never be free of the hold she had over him and the way his heart and mind clung fast to her in every instant of every day. "I'm not uncertain about you," he confessed, but it wasn't without heaviness. "How could I ever be?" But he had so many regrets about how things had unfolded. "I wanted us to be something else than what we are right now," he confessed, feeling selfish and dizzy with a pain in his throat and chest. "I made so many mistakes with you, Alex, how can you ever forgive me? I hurt you. All that I have ever done is hurt you."

"No," she disagreed with soft eyes and an earnest tone. "That's not all you've ever done."

Memories of the beautiful moments they had shared together flashed across his mind and he remembered her smile, her laughter, their friendship, their bond beyond the physical. The way he'd always felt at rest with her, at peace. He longed to recapture what they'd been, he was terrified of the thought that perhaps it had been broken beyond repair. She was right in front of him and so beautiful and real, moonlight making her seem more enchanting than what seemed possible—how was it that she could seem so out of reach to him? Her expression seemed so anxious and full of trepidation. "All I want is for us to be together again," she confessed in a wavering whisper. Castiel's heart clenched, twisted, broke from relief at her words and the look in her eyes, the way she drew a little closer to him. "That's all I want," she repeated, trying to convince him.

But he needed no convincing. He believed her, and the way she was studying him made him anxious, restless, needy. He realized he was pulling her a little closer to himself, that every muscle in his body was straining toward her but also hesitating, holding back. Waiting. She drifted closer to him, her eyes asking him before her lips did. "Kiss me," she requested in a husky, anxious whisper. His stomach jumped (a physical impossibility, but he felt it all the same) even as she leaned closer, her nose brushing his as her hands cupped the side of his face. "Just forget everything and kiss me right now," she begged.

He couldn't deny her for even a second, he didn't stop to think it through or examine it with logic. He simply did as she asked, meeting her waiting lips with his in a gentle kiss they both let out a soft sound at. Never, not ever would he get used to the sensation of her mouth on his. He tightened his arms around her even as she pressed against him and they mutually deepened the kiss. Her fingers tightened in his hair. He groaned lowly, because the kiss unleashed a feeling of hunger and need that he had forgotten for a year—but it came barreling back over him immediately, his veins
pounded faster with heated blood that yearned for her. He couldn't hold back on the fervor he felt, the utter despair for her, the yearning to show her how he loved her, what he felt. They kissed each other with not just mouths but with bodies and he ran a hand through her soft, loose hair as she whimpered and slid closer, straddling his lap with folded legs, laving his mouth with kisses that were intense and full of need that he recognized in himself. His body strained to be as close as possible to her, and as a result, their passion only deepened and grew more intense, more demanding, more desperate.

Her plush lips and hot tongue kept sending currents of impossible, tight warmth rising throughout his body as her little whimpers drove him to insanity. He moaned faintly, overwhelmed by physical sensations, by the feeling of her against him like this—he'd forgotten how heady and overwhelming she was, how right it felt to be in her arms, how one touch from her was his downfall and weakness. Even though his body craved more, his mind hesitated. What about how he had damned her soul, doing just this? He planned to rewrite the celestial commandments when he gained the power of the purgatory souls, but until then—should he refrain from intercourse with her? Concern for her wellbeing worried him, causing him to regretfully pull away a little, tilt his chin down. He couldn't risk her soul. She sought his lips, not understanding that he was trying to end the kiss. He pulled away further, his heart hammering painfully. "We shouldn't," he murmured, not sure how to explain it to her and also worrying about the last time she'd been touched sexually. It hadn't been him who had touched her last. And what if Cas's touches made her think of the man who had assaulted her?

Alex, frozen, looked absolutely confused. "Why not?" Cas faltered. He could tell her the shameful, terrifying truth... how what he'd done had cost her Heaven and put her name into the book of Hell... but it was too awful to tell her. He looked down, trying to think of some excuse. Alex, meanwhile, was growing more and more wounded. "Why do you not want to?" she asked softly, her arms loosening and her body shrinking away from him just a little. The worry in her voice made his eyes jump to hers.

"It's not that I don't want to," he told her and swallowed, shifting a little, uncomfortable because his body was already begging him to take her, he was aroused to the point of pain and she was maddeningly alluring to him—he wanted to be with her, closer to her than anyone else had ever been or would ever be, he wanted to give himself over and know her once more... and more than those things, he knew he could make her understand how much he loved her with physical intimacy, he remembered very well how happy and content it had always left her. But fear of eternal damnation made him continue to hesitate. He tried to reassure her feebly. "I do want to, very much."

Confusion continued to fill her crestfallen face. "Then what? What aren't you telling me?" She spoke more and more slowly, fear creeping into her eyes. She still sat on him, but her body didn't press into his anymore. She seemed hurt, disconcerted, upset, unsure of how to respond to what he'd said to her. What irony it was... he'd hurt her... yet again. Castiel's shoulders slumped a little. And then Alex seemed ashamed, no longer looked at him. "It's because I cheated on you, isn't it?" she asked softly, voice strained.

His eyebrows rose, then furrowed. "Cheated?" He repeated, surprised. Wasn't that a slang term for being unfaithful? He saw how much she blamed herself for something he never would, and protective love swelled within him, prompting him to circle his arms around her tighter. "Beloved," he breathed anxiously, the first time he had ever used a term of endearment, and he moved a hand to sweep some hair behind her ear. Alex's eyes jumped to his. "You did nothing wrong," he implored, wishing she would believe him. Pain tightened his voice at the thought of that man violating her in any way. And then he thought of how, if he hadn't left her side, it never would have happened at all. "I'm the one who went against what I vowed," he reasoned sadly. He remembered
promising wherever you go, I will go. And for an entire year, she'd been alone, mourning him. He was a liar, a hypocrite. He was the unfaithful one.

She was resolute despite her pain. It made him love her even more. "You didn't have a lot of choice about leaving. I know that now."

Cas looked at her sadly, wishing things could be done differently, wishing he could take her grief from her. "And does knowing lessen your pain?" He asked softly. His question made her lips part open a little, made her eyes shinier. They were both silent for a moment, and Castiel decided that he should tell her. Not everything, but one thing at least. However, it was very difficult to tell her this, and he hesitated, his voice darkened. "I... found out something very terrible this year."

Apprehension filled her features and she hesitated, maybe dreading what he was going to say. "W-what?"

Castiel looked down, shamefaced. "I already knew that angels and humans were forbidden to engage in sexual relations, but I didn't know the punishment." He raised his eyes to hers, mournful to know he'd defiled her soul itself in the eyes of Heaven. "I learned that any human who sins with an angel is to be cast out of Heaven. Damned for eternity." Her eyebrows rose a little as if in mild surprise. Cas continued to explain, but carefully, not telling her all the details. "I went to Hell and removed your name from the book. You can be sure I will never allow it back in there." He gazed upon her fully, wishing they could be together physically without consequence. "I will find a way to allow us an exception from the laws of Heaven, but until then... I'm very afraid to risk your eternal fate for fleeting pleasure."

Digesting the information, Alex paused, looking at him with great concern. "And what happens to the angel?"

For a fraction of a second, Castiel didn't know what she was asking. Then he realized she was asking what punishment had been prescribed to him. "Cast into exile," he answered, surprised at how calmly she was taking the news, how her first reaction was to ask about his fate. If Raphael won this war, Castiel would be cast out of Heaven and stripped of his wings. Alex would never know paradise. Only Hell. And Castiel would not allow that to happen, ever.

"I don't understand," she said earnestly. "Isn't it kinda already too late for us to avoid all that?" She paused, slightly bashful and rueful. "Many times over?"

Memories of their most intimate moments traveled across his mind, making him swallow a little. She had a point, maybe, but still he resisted, wanting to find some way to protect her from all things... even himself. Irrationally, he thought perhaps if he stopped them now, perhaps the damage could be lessened. Even as he thought about that, he realized how foolish and illogical it was. The damage had been done... and wouldn't withholding himself from her only serve to damage things even more?

Alex was looking at him with care and anxious sympathy. Her eyes studied him with a strange empathy and concern and she thought long and hard. "I didn't realize how much was riding on you winning this war," she said softly, brushing some of his hair back from his forehead. Cas's eyes locked onto hers in surprise at her statement—she seemed to know him, to see his struggles and the weight he carried. "It's too much for one man—" she caught herself "—angel—'s shoulders." She was touching the side of his face and searching his eyes. The vast amounts of love and worry in her eyes humbled him. "How are you doing all of this and not falling apart?" She was the only one who had ever asked him such a thing, the only one who had expressed concern about his inner wellbeing as far as the war. Her question struck a part of him he hadn't explored—the side of him that was stressed and burdened past capacity, the portion of him that couldn't bear even one more
responsibility or hardship.

How was he doing all of this and not falling apart? "I don't know," he answered honestly, not confident. He felt stripped of all pretense, smaller than he actually was, oddly bare. But he was resolute despite his feelings. He had to be. "It's because I have no other choice," he told her, and he was grim, knowing his role as a soldier and commander. "I will do anything to win this war. Anything." His voice softened as he thought of why he fought. "To keep you safe. To fix what I destroyed."

She studied him with that brave, somber expression a little longer. "We're not broken." Her words were like water to a man who had wandered the desert. He wanted to believe her, he could see how she wanted to believe, as well—her face was filled with so much wretched hope, like she wanted him, was afraid to be hurt again, but was flinging herself into his arms again haphazardly, chancing everything in favor of loving him. And it occurred to Castiel how inescapable and imprisoning their love was, to both of them. How it was as unrelenting and certain as the grave—it was all too late to turn back. His face must have shown uncertainty, because Alex leaned a little closer, beseeching him. "Show me we're not," she whispered pleadingly and looked him in the eye. Her gaze dropped to his lips, then flickered to his eyes, then back to his lips and she kissed him cautiously, softly, slowly—oh, how she tempted him with that single action. She drew back a little, breathing out, her warm breath fanning across his lips. It was dangerous, to kiss like this, but Castiel was aching, and he gave in, telling himself just to kiss her once more.

He sought another kiss from her, felt his body reacting predictably at the sensual touching of lips. He drew back just slightly, trying to recover, keeping his eyes closed, but she followed him, kissed him again, hands now on either side of his face, body pushing in against his again. A low sound tore out of Castiel's vocal chords as he opened his mouth to hers and drove the kiss deeper, letting it become more intense. It was maddening, this heavy, passionate, frustrated kiss they were torturing themselves with. He felt her familiar curves against him through the layers of their clothing and his hands and his mouth remembered them faintly, wanted to know them again—he was growing breathless and dazed by desire—but he found it within himself to resist and he stopped the kiss, resolving to end this temptation. But the second he pulled away, he was going back to her again helplessly and with renewed fervor—he needed just a little more, and then a little more, and then a little more still—and the kiss became frantic, Cas's breathing grew noisy and ragged through his mouth and nose as Alex whimpered for him and pressed herself against him.

His hand grasped her waist and pulled her closer and Alex covered his hand in hers and moved it for him—she slid it up to cover the softness of her breast, they both moaned faintly at the feeling, and Alex pressed her hand over Cas's so that he cupped the soft flesh covered by fabric. Cas was left in a stupor of feverish longing. "Ahh—Alex—it's—we shouldn't," he panted, wanting to have the strength to stop them and also hoping she would give him reason to continue.

"I don't care," she replied in a voice thick with urgency and need, and now she moved his hand down, then underneath her shirt and back up to touch her again—this time only the cotton of her bra stood in the way, and Cas groaned as his eyebrows slammed together and his eyes screwed shut.

"I've damned us both," he protested tightly, his fingertips against the compelling softness of her breast. His strength wavered and waned dangerously.

She seemed to accept the sentence, seemed eager to sin with him all over again—she used their hands to push her bra cup aside—then rubbed his palm against the exposed peaking nipple there and they both gaspingly moaned, powerless at each other. "Cas—" she breathed his name out pleadingly, a single word laced with begging desire, need, love, desperation and he couldn't
resist—he heard how much she needed him. And he needed her too. Groaning loudly, Castiel crashed his lips to hers again and pulled hard on the bra, ripping it in half down the middle in his haste to touch her more.

As he pressed his hand against the luscious weight and warmth of her bare breast underneath her shirt, she moved her hand down his body to touch him in a place that inspired Cas to make a very loud and pleasurable gasp—he'd forgotten, he'd **forgotten** how this felt. "Alex—" he protested miserably, because he wanted it and so did she but he was still so afraid of causing further damage to her, he was so afraid of failing to win this war.

When she drew back a little and looked at him with sad, wide-open eyes, the beginnings of rejection showing in her flushed, breathless face… Cas knew he couldn't refuse her. Not now. All of his failsafes were shattered, all of his protests were forgotten, and he resolved to give her what she so clearly desired. He had damned them both and now he would damn them all over again in the sweetest sin that existed—and victory would be his in this war. It **had** to be. He caved in completely and kissed her again, pushing his reservations away. He did not allow them to interrupt again. He let himself feel every sensation, let himself touch her and be touched, let the fire between them grow hotter and hotter, tried to put every ounce of love and devotion he had stored away in her name into what he did next.

He gathered her in his arms and lifted her, turned them, laid her down onto the bed and pressed himself down over her carefully as she wrapped him in herself. She made the most beautiful sounds as his kisses and touches made the inferno they'd lit rage even more. His shoes were kicked off to tumble down to the floor, then her boots followed. Her shirt, his coat and jacket, his tie, his shirt, his pants, her jeans, her ruined bra—all piled up one after the other on the floor, discarded without a second thought.

Cas murmured that he loved her against the side of her neck, Alex was crying out and gasping as he touched her between spread legs with fingers that hadn't forgotten how to make her see stars. Her obvious mounting bliss was the greatest eroticism to Castiel, who wanted her to know ecstasy over and over. She was so beautiful like this—flushed by pleasure and short of breath with eyes dark and heavy-lidded, mouth open, calling to him silently for a kiss which he gave. Her hand slid down his chest and stomach and touched him through the thin fabric of his boxers and he shuddered, amazed at the feeling that her touch brought to him, amazed at how trusting she was, how ready she was. He was ready, too.

She was pushing his last article of clothing away, and he helped her, braced himself onto all fours over her. He got out of his boxers in an ungraceful stumble, almost falling sideways—clothing was very inconvenient at times. Cas heard her laugh so softly when he canted sideways—and his heart lurched in delight at the sound, he looked at her and saw how relaxed, how happy, how beautiful she was—and he loved her and wanted her all the more, pulled her underwear off with too great of enthusiasm, ripping them in his super-human strength hands by accident—she only bit her lip, holding back a fond smile and what sounded like another laugh. He opened his mouth to apologize, then stopped, noticing something that gave him abrupt pause. Her stomach scars were gone—he'd noticed that before, and knew it was from when he had healed her so hurriedly after Nandriel, a few months ago. But now he realized that wasn't **all** that had been healed. He hadn't expected this.

"Alex…" he said, voice rising in slight alarm.

"They're just underwear, Cas, don't worry," she said, craning her neck up to kiss him.

"No, it's—I…" he swallowed, tried to think how to say it. "You're a virgin."

She paused, looking at him strangely, almost amused. "Pretty sure I'm not."
Castiel was embarrassed that he hadn't noticed before and that he'd made this mistake at all. He tried to explain the best he could. "When I healed you so hurriedly a few months ago, I must have… healed everything."

Her eyebrows rose. "Oh." She thought about it a minute, frowning, then seeming to be all right with it… a rueful little smile came over her face as she digested the news. She was beginning to look almost happy about it, like she had some soft and pleasing idea in her mind, and Castiel was confused, until she said what she said next: "Well..." she was smiling more now, eyes soft, reflective, affectionate. "This can be the first time you always wanted us to have."

His heart lurched. He looked at her anxiously. "Are you sure?" He asked, feeling something lodged in his throat.

Her face softened. "You know I am."

She kept watching the way his face worked and then her expression flickered, her eyes filling with so much deep emotion and the sheen of tears. She touched the side of his face, let her thumb brush against his jaw. Her voice was just a whisper now. "I trust you, Cas. I want this." The most beautiful words she could say, words he didn't deserve, words that must have taken so much courage to speak after how he'd violated her trust so thoroughly this year. She kissed him then, melting him all over, easing his anxiousness. He could feel how she loved him, how she wanted him, and his apprehension faded. This time could be different. Better. This time, he knew what to do.

Underneath him, fair, diminutive, lovely, naked and warm, she waited anxiously. Her hands grasped his forearms, she watched as he lowered himself over her, he noticed how her breathing hitched when their chests touched. He searched her eyes deeply in the dark, poised to make them one again. His body strained for her. But he waited. "Ready?" he asked softly, watching her the entire time.

She nodded just a little and told him mmhmm in a murmur, her eyes holding his as he shifted and wrapped his arms around her more closely—putting a hand behind her head and the other at her back, cradling her carefully and then moving his hips forward until he bluntly nudged at her. Their eyes clung and their breathing came shallowly.

Castiel was gentle and careful, going as slowly as possibly, watching her the entire time, not focused on himself, but on her. Alex breathed out loudly as he first inched inside; her body went tense, even as Cas shuddered at the sensation he hadn't felt in a year. She felt incredible to him, beyond gorgeous. He bent to kiss her forehead softly, lingeringly, then he let his forehead rest against hers as he tried to control his staggered breathing. He stopped and held still when he could go no further and looked at her in both absolute bliss at how she felt around him. He saw how her eyes were filling with tears and sudden concern skyrocketed.

She saw his worry and shook her head a little. Emotion wrecked her features. "God I love you, Cas—" she confessed and hugged him tightly, fingers digging into his skin as she hid her face in his shoulder.

"Am I hurting you?" Cas asked anxiously, trying to hold her closer to himself. It had been a long time—perhaps this was causing her discomfort.

She shook her head and turned her head toward him, her nose pushing into the side of his neck. "No, it doesn't hurt. Just... tell me it won't always be like this," she choked out in a whisper, holding onto him as if she thought he was going to fall away. He felt how she was quivering with tears. "Everything in the world against us... everything gone wrong." She pulled back enough to
look him in the eye. "Tell me we'll be all right someday," she begged. "I need you in my life."

Her words struck terror into him and an urgent need to comfort her. Not knowing what else to do, he whispered that he would always be in her life, that everything would be better someday and he kissed her achingly, cradling her head in one of his hands. He had to make it all right, he had to. When their mouths came apart, Alex gave a frustrated sound and rocked her hips against him even as she wrapped her legs and arms around him, pulling him in even deeper than he thought possible. Shocks of euphoric physical pleasure shot through Cas. Alex was whispering for him to take her, oh god please Cas take me, and he moaned breathlessly at her words, put his arms around her tightly, holding her there safely—he let their bodies press down into the bed as he began the careful and blissfully torturous task of making love to her.

She was lost in bliss the same as him, her every touch and movement seeming to tell him silently I love you I need you I love you I need you. It was desperate and earnest this thing they were doing to each other, it was fervent and impassioned and Castiel was overpowered by her in every way. Without a single word leaving her mouth, only incoherent, wanton sounds, Castiel understood that she was nearing the crescendo and he rushed to help her reach it by doubling his efforts. She moaned his name anxiously and clung to him tightly then trembled like an earthquake in his arms as she began to fall apart and reach utter ecstasy. It spelled his downfall, seeing and feeling her like that—anxious, Cas groaned her name and tightened his hands on her as his mind was lost to the wind. He was thrown headlong into exploding stars, he was helpless and nothing, just flesh and blood and hers. He heard someone crying out in surprise and pleasure, realized it was himself. His body spasmed and seized as the apex controlled him and drained him, shook him to his core—they held onto each other as they were wrecked by delirious, ravishing pleasure. And then it was over and they were left to pant in the quiet, dark room, each conquered by the other.

Alex began crying softly then and Castiel touched her head, her face, held her and feared he'd hurt her, asked what was wrong and all she could manage was, "I missed you… I missed you." Cas turned them onto their sides to face each other and he held her, asking for her to tell him why she was crying but she again insisted tearfully that she just missed him so much. She said nothing, just wept and curled into him and Castiel was hurt and confused, terrified that something was wrong. Why wouldn't she tell him what was wrong, he asked.

She told him he didn't need more burdens to bear, and he told her she would never be his burden. She was his treasure. She bowed her head to his shoulder then said she was just sad. Please just hold me awhile, she pleaded heartbreaking. Stay. And he did. For a few moments, they said nothing else. He stroked her hair, trying to comfort her. He silently harrowed his mind for a way to reassure her. When her tears abated, he held her close in the darkness and pressed his lips into her hair. "After the war… after I defeat Raphael… we'll find a way," he told her, having decided that she must be upset about their unknown future. And about how lonely he'd left her all this past year.

"How?" She asked, sounding so small and unsure.

He answered her simply, the only way he knew. "Together."

She snuggled even closer to him then, and Cas thought they were both aware of how precious this moment was, how rare it was, sadly, to have this time together. His heart already broke at the thought of leaving.

"I've heard lots of people say the first year is the hardest," Alex murmured after awhile, sounding sad and thoughtful. "Man, were they right." She attempted an airy chuckle, but it sounded more like a sigh.
"The first year of... marriage?" Cas asked, making sure he followed correctly.

"Yeah." She paused. "Today's May the fifth."

It had been a year. Wait. May the fifth. "Your birthday," Cas realized. "It was three days ago." He hadn't even realized and he frowned slightly. "A gift is customary, isn't it?" He asked, wishing he'd remembered. "What would you like?" He would get her anything she desired.

Her arms circled around him and she said nothing at first, but he sensed that she was sad. All she did was shake her head. "You."

"You have me," he told her tenderly, but he felt the half-truth of what he said even as she corrected him.

"You—all the time," she clarified despondently, and pulled her head back to look at him. "Every time we're together, I'm waiting for the goodbye."

Silent and bereft, Cas touched the side of her face and held her gaze. Neither of them knew what to do, and both of them loved the other enough to die from the feeling bursting in their hearts. She was lonely and alone, and he could do nothing to change that. Not right now. Everything depended on victory in this accursed war he had declared. Castiel felt guilty. So guilty. His allegiances were divided down the middle, and moments like this made him long to rip his grace out completely, crash to her forever. But Cas knew nothing but how to be an angel. He couldn't protect her as a man. He could better love her as a human, but he could better serve and safeguard her being what he was now. It was a miserable dilemma that burdened his heart. And even if he wanted to, he couldn't leave Heaven for her. He had a war to win. So much depended on his victory.

"We won't always be separated as we are now," he told her softly, committed to seeing that his words were proved true. He circled his arms around her again, pulling her close. "Someday we'll be together and there will be no goodbyes."

"Will you be a man or an angel in this 'someday'?" Alex asked softly, sounding nervous to hear his answer.

He thought about it and then answered honestly. "I'm not sure." She said nothing, seeming to think deeply about what he said. "Which one would you have me be?" He asked her, and those hazel eyes darted up to his.

"I... I don't know," she said. Something about her tone of voice sounded untruthful. Like she was hiding something from him. He opened his mouth to ask her if she meant that, but she was already speaking again. "Tell me about the war, Cas? About what it's like. What you've been doing all this time up there."

In the darkness of that motel room, he indulged her. Starting at the beginning and delving into detail, avoiding mentioning Crowley and some of his more questionable actions. Instead he told her of how the heavenly host was torn between following himself and Raphael, how paradise was almost unrecognizable in some places because of the destruction that had transpired. He told her how he was searching for Joshua to try and speak with God but had not been able to locate the angel anywhere. Cas told her how he had a handful of other angels searching the earth for Genesis, the lost archangel.

"Genesis? I don't remember her being mentioned in the Bible," Alex said, frowning in thought. "I've never even heard of her before."
"No, you wouldn't have." Castiel paused. "As punishment for her love affair with the lower-level angel, she was struck out of God's word. That's what they say, anyway. No one remembers."

"No one remembers?" Alex asked softly, sounding intrigued.

"No. She was cast out a very long time ago," Cas said, thinking. "I suppose her lover was, too."

"And who was her lover?"

cas shook his head, feeling as though he knew the answer to that question, but when he tried to remember it, a large blank nothing came to mind. "No one remembers that either."

Cas told her how he was seeking Genesis to see if she would side with him and help end the war in Heaven. But what if Genesis sided with Raphael or didn't know who she was anymore, like Anna hadn't known? Alex asked. Castiel smiled a little ruefully and answered the best he could. He mostly didn't know answers. He told her about how the battles never seemed to end, how he'd learned more and more of betrayal, how he could only trust a select few angels. He told her of the heartache brought on by killing his brothers and sisters. He named some of them. Told her names, stories—one of Eremiel, who had shown Castiel a very special fish in countless years past, one of the evolutionary benchmarks of humanity. "That was when we still walked the earth in our true forms," Castiel said softly, deep in memories. "He was a good angel. A good brother. And he died at my hand because of this war. Because he was blinded by Raphael's lies."

Alex held Cas's hand close, brushed her lips over his knuckles, told her she was sorry, she couldn't imagine. Her touch and words seemed to tighten around him protectively, seeking to comfort him. She said she wished she knew a way to help him, and those words made him smile, just a little despite his pain. He touched her, unable to say with words what he felt. And then Cas reiterated his apologies at how he had just disappeared from her side when she'd needed him the most, the day Sam died in that graveyard, he told her he had never expected things to unfold as they did. He knew she could never forgive him for it, but he explained it at length: Raphael's blackmail, Castiel's own powerlessness to do anything but stay away to protect her. Alex accepted it bravely, saying she understood.

Castiel asked what had happened to break herself and Dean apart for the year. She told him of their fight, the way she had 'lost her mind for a few minutes' she put it: Holding her brother at gunpoint and blaming him for everything. Alex went on to slowly tell Cas what her year had been, how she'd lived the only way she knew, worked a few honest jobs, felt lost and out of place. She didn't say things about how alone she'd felt, but Castiel could hear it somehow. She had been just as lonely as he had. In fact, even moreso, he thought. He held her tighter because of that. Alex asked how all of Heaven knew about their relationship, and Cas shook his head regretfully, because he didn't know how all of Heaven and Hell alike knew of his love for her. Alex asked if Heaven knew of their marriage and he said no, and it would remain that way for the time being. Alex said that was all the more reason to keep it from her brothers, at least for now. "Until we know more about what the future looks like," she said sadly, thoughtful.

Castiel heard her loneliness again and apologized quietly, telling her he was sorry about the way things were for them at present. Alex was valiant despite clear misgivings, telling him that after today, after being with him and speaking with him she felt better—how she'd been so worried after Scotland, after throwing the penny back at him. Cas touched it then where it rested against the space between her breasts. He murmured how he only wanted the best for her. She looked at him intently, the silence spanning for a moment. Then she abruptly asked if he remembered when she'd killed him at Lucifer's hand.

He was surprised at the question. "Yes," he breathed softly, remembering the utter horror in her
eyes, remembering Sam's face but Lucifer's chill. Remembering how she'd screamed as Lucifer had puppeted her into killing him.

"I still have nightmares about that," Alex confessed in a voice that betrayed how tormented the memory still made her, and Castiel grasped her hand in his, held on tightly.

"You didn't do that to me, it was Lucifer," he told her in fierce quietness.

Her eyes looked into his. "I know, but... I felt you die. I watched you die." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I wanted to die, too."

Cas hugged her, kissed her hair, not sure what to say, remembering now how that time had been the worst time of his existence. He remembered how ill she'd been—withered away, a shell of herself, the wrong color, eyes dull and glazed, lips drained of her youth. She had been dying after being possessed, and he'd been a mortal man who was unable to do anything for her at all. "I still blame myself for all of that, you know? Everything that happened that day."

"But why did you? Without telling me, at all?" He asked faintly, his tone tinged with pain. "I woke up and you were gone."

"I know," she murmured remorsefully, heavily. "I was trying to do the right thing and didn't stop to think it through enough. I think I knew I shouldn't, deep down, and I knew you would stop me. So I just left without saying anything to anyone."

"Crowley's a demon. I should have known better than to listen to him." Cas asked, trying not to sound either too upset or too nonchalant.

"The one who told me all the bullshit about how I could kill Lucifer," she said with a sigh. "I thought I was smarter than him and I believed what he said. I dunno. I wanted to be the one who could save everyone, for once, I guess... and I thought if I told
you or Dean or Sam about it, you would just try and protect me." A wan smiled came over her mouth. "Maybe I should have let you, huh?"

Cas tightened his arms around her and was silent for a long moment. He wanted to say they should always tell each other everything, that she should never keep anything from him, not anything—but if he said that and then withheld all the things he was keeping a secret… that would make him a despicable hypocrite.

"Do you remember your time, being possessed?" he asked her softly, thinking back to the day he had faced Alex and she hadn't been Alex.

She became very quiet. "Yes. It was cold. And I was scared." Only a handful of words, but they chilled him. She'd been tricked, used, and left for dead by Lucifer, and Cas was left to shake his head mournfully.

"I would have saved you if I could have," he said, wishing he had been able.

"You did save me," she murmured earnestly. "You brought me back from the dead."

Cas drew back, moving a few loose strands of hair away from her face with his fingertips. He would always try and save her and he didn't understand when she didn't give him the opportunity.

"Why didn't you call me when you were turned into a vampire?" he asked.

The question seemed to shock Alex, embarrass her. "I… I was a monster. I didn't want you to see. I was ashamed," she admitted to Cas's great sadness. "I thought I was gonna die and… I guess I wanted the last you saw me to be something good. Not more of me after something or someone's blood." Her eyes were downtrodden and low.

"Alex." He gazed upon her somberly, grieved that she would think that way. Her eyes met his haltingly. "You should know by now... nothing will stand in the way of my love for you. Nothing." It was terrifying, and it was the truth, and both of them were somehow afraid of how much he meant the words.

After a short silence, Alex quietly told Cas about what had happened with Sam, the vampires, all of it. The details were very alarming to Cas—how Sam had so willingly endangered his brother and sister both, how Dean had run away, how Alex had fed on Sam and then how Dean and Alex had tried to fix the problem themselves with their grandfather Samuel's cure. And then when Cas learned of this woman Jamie Ward's involvement, how she'd saved Alex's life and then been hurt by it then disappeared completely, Cas nodded thoughtfully. "I'll see if I can locate this Jamie Ward, see if she is in fact all right," he said slowly. "I owe her your life after all, it seems."

Alex looked at Cas sort of sadly. "Don't you already have a million other things to do already?" she asked.

"Not a million," Cas said, believing that to be a grand exaggeration. "Several hundred, perhaps," he said, wondering why Alex was smiling like that. The way she always had when she joked. Cas was too busy thinking about something else. "I don't want you near Sam right now," he confessed, trying to convey how crucial this seemed to him. "Not after this week and what he's let happen to you, what he's done."

To his surprise, Alex didn't protest vehemently. Instead, she went quiet for a minute. "But... he's my brother."

"I know," Cas said. "But he's dangerous right now. He has no moral compass, no empathy. I know
that Dean will try to keep you safe, but…” he trailed off. "And I can't watch over you very well right now." Admitting that was difficult and disgraceful, but true.

Alex protested, but waveringly. "Cas, I can take care of myself." She paused, thought about it, seemed to change her mind a little. "Most of the time."

Cas touched her shoulder, looked at her cajolingly. "Please. Consider, for my sake, separating yourself from him for the time being. Until a solution presents itself. I don't want you in harm's way."

At his gentle request, the headstrong and stubborn Alex he knew and loved did not dig in and resist. She surprised him when instead of answering she studied him with tender eyes, looking into him deeply, seeing all of him, it felt like. Finally, she spoke. "You seem so grown up to me right now," she observed in a soft voice. Why did it sound like she felt bittersweet about that? He'd had to—he'd had to step up and do the things required of him. Did that make him more grown up? Alex was still focused on his request. She nodded once. "I'll consider it," she said, seeming sad about it. "Especially if Dean keeps acting like a jerk to me about..." she trailed off and sighed, her eyes falling sideways furtively. "Things."

He heard how she was hurt thinking about her oldest brother. Cas's hand was still on her shoulder and he caressed the skin there, trying to comfort her. "He loves you very much, Alex," Castiel said. "I know he does."

Alex's eyes flitted back to his as she smiled a little ruefully. "I know he does too. He's just kind of bad about knowing where his business ends and mine begins." She sighed, then looked at him with a glint of interest in her eye. "Speaking of that… how much longer can you stay with me?"

Cas frowned, shook his head slightly. To his best knowledge, he wouldn't be called away for at least another hour or two, but he couldn't exactly predict it, either. "I'm not sure," he said truthfully. "Why?"

She answered by leaning in and kissing him softly, sweetly—oh, that's why—and she shifted herself closer to him, close enough that he could feel the heat radiating off her skin, then closer still, until they were chest to chest, stomach to stomach, thigh to thigh—her mouth opened to him, called him forth, and he understood, giving in to her again without protest. The rift that had been lodged between them was slowly closing under the weight of this time together, with every touch and word and gaze. How long did they lay there kissing languidly, side by side, hands exploring each other's hair, each others arms, sides, chests? Castiel didn't know, but after some time, his hand skimmed her arm, then her side, over the soft dip of her waist, the curve of her hip—she was so much healthier now.

"You feel so much softer than you did last year," he murmured appreciatively, and let his hand grasp the firm curve of her behind (she made a gasping, giggling sound when he did that) and then he finally began to roll over onto her, lay her down onto her back. There he took his time to thoroughly, deeply kiss and touch her neck, jawline, collarbone, sternum, breasts, stomach, hips. She clung to his head with her hands as long as she could, curled toward him, not laying down but craning toward him, as if she couldn't bear to be separated from him. Every last part of her was beautiful to him and he wanted to touch and feel her everywhere, show her the extent of his adoration.

He kept dragging his lips further and further downward, to the place where he knew she loved to feel his mouth, to the place he loved the taste of. She reacted with a soft intake of surprised breath as he kissed her there, their eyes met briefly and she murmured a coarse swearword not befitting a lady and Cas felt his mouth grinning crookedly at her strong reaction. Just as he remembered… she
liked this very much. He continued, lavishing affection upon her and tasting her deeply, his hands exploring and caressing her thighs and hips and sides. She was breathing hard and writhing in torment at the work of his mouth, whimpering his name like a prayer.

For almost an hour, the encounter continued—with the kissing of mouths and hands that explored every inch of the other; with whispered words and gentle comforts and then finally deep and slow lovemaking that was intensely appreciative and soulful, almost tantric in nature. It was like being high off of the other, like reaching nirvana. It ended as Cas sat back on his heels with her straddling him. Their arms wrapped around each other and left no distance at all between their heaving and sweat-damp bodies. Their mouths were a breaths distance apart and open so that they breathed the exhales of the other. Slow and powerful bliss came over them like the deepest inhale of sweet mountain air, like a sunrise over the ocean, like salvation itself.

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Lansing, Michigan

"Turn here," Sam said, and Dean did. Under the cover of darkness, the Impala bumped down a rundown gravel road, seemingly to nowhere.

"This place sure is out here," Dean complained, switching hands on the wheel restlessly.

"Yeah, Samuel likes things discreet," Sam said offhandedly, then paused. "So, Dean—"

"Will you shut up already?" Dean was in a sour mood and not exactly excited to be riding around with a soulless douchebag for a brother. "I already told you. Don't wanna talk to you right now."

Sam sighed, sounding so very much like Sam for a second. "Come on Dean," he said levelly. "It's me. If we're gonna do this, hunt together, we have to trust each other."

"Oh that is rich," Dean mumbled. Trust each other. Ha. In the back of his mind, he wasn't too sure about this arrangement at all, about keeping Sam on. He had Alex to think about, too. This sucked, being stuck in the middle—which sibling should he be loyal to? The brother who needed help getting his soul back or the sister who'd just overcome a demon blood addiction and had issues picking her boyfriends?

Dean had seethed for the first thirty minutes of the drive after leaving Cas and Alex in Calumet City. Then he'd gotten pissed at himself for actually going along with Cas's 'I need to talk to her alone' thing. Talk. Right. Now, three hours after leaving them at that motel room, Dean was kicking himself.

What, so he fucks Alex and makes her think he loves her, then disappears for a year and leaves her a brokenhearted mess… then just thinks he can come back and get some more? Dean shook his head, rolled his eyes. Whatever. It was her choice—clearly Dean couldn't stop her. He'd tried last year and just gotten pushed away and alienated. All Dean could think was, really? Cas? Awkward doofy constipated Cas? Yeah, he got that Cas had saved her life and done some pretty amazing things for her, but at the end of the day, Cas had the sex appeal of a nail file. Or that's what Dean thought, anyway.

Dean wasn't a prude by any means—his views on sex were pretty self-centered and he had casual sex, one night stands, you name it. So did Sam and more power to him. But that stuff was below his sister, who was tenderhearted and a romantic at heart. Special. Dean was past hope of having a monogamous, long-term relationship, he was pretty sure about that now after Lisa. But Alex deserved better than he did. Empty sex with strangers, feeling good for a few minutes and then being alone again? It wasn't always a fair trade. And Dean could get by on meaningless sex, but
Alex deserved a guy who would stick around and make her life better, someone who would give her stability and safety. And maybe Cas thought he was that guy but really. How could he be? Cas wasn't emotionally or mentally all there, he was a friggin' angel and wasn't even from the same planet that Alex was. The two of them were messing around with something dangerous, and Dean couldn't shake that thought.

It wasn't even the idea of the two of them having sex that upset Dean the most... although it did disturb him, a lot—there were other reasons the idea of the angel and his sister bothered him. Much more important reasons. Cas was strong and powerful and not human. He was way into Alex. Obsessed, even. And that left Dean uneasy, knowing the angel who had started a war in Heaven was gunning for his sister. What were his intentions? What was he expecting to get out of this 'relationship'? Did the angel view Alex as a person, or a possession? Dean was going to make it his business to find out, and soon. Just as soon as he got over this crisis. He glanced at his brother sidelong. He really missed the old Sam right about now.

"There," Sam said, indicating a chain link fence gate up ahead. "They know to expect us."

Sure enough, the gate began to open as Dean drove up. He drove through and two guys with guns waved them in. Dean steered the Impala into what looked to be a pretty impressive compound—fenced in and guarded, several smaller buildings clustered around a larger one, maybe an old warehouse or factory. A few cars were parked around it. "Park there," Sam said, pointing over at Samuel's familiar black van and Dean did, got out and let out a heavy breath.

"Guess it's time to call the lovebirds," Dean grumbled and gave a windy, disgusted sigh. "Cas. We're here. Wanna get your ass over here, Romeo?"

Sam, leaning his arms onto the roof of the Impala, looked around expectantly. Dean got annoyed, fast, when Cas didn't appear right away. And then, behind him, Cas's unmistakable voice. "Hello Dean."

Dean turned around—there was Cas, looking the same as always—no, he looked a little different. His expression was less I have to poop than usual and his eyes had a glint of assuredness and maybe even satisfaction to them. Beside him, Alex looked the same as she'd looked when they'd left, only—her hair had been brushed (she never brushed it) and her cheeks were rosy, like she'd been for a very vigorous run—her expression was calm. Dean withered and got flustered. He found his voice as he struggled to hide his gaping expression underneath a mask of I am not amused. "Yeah, hi—" he shot a glare at Cas, unable to stop himself from making a comment. "You two have a good talk?"

Cas looked at Alex with a perplexed what do I say expression even as Alex just looked down, shook her head and chuckled and made no reply, further maddening Dean. "Yeah, great. Listen, how about you meet us inside, lover boy?" Dean snapped at Cas. "Look for the huge shiny bald guy. Can't miss him."

"Yeah, hi—" he shot a glare at Cas, unable to stop himself from making a comment. "You two have a good talk?"

Cas narrowed his eyes slightly, discerningly, never seeming to lose the slight smile that curled his lips upward. He glanced at Alex, communicating with her silently, then nodded to Dean. "I'll see you there."

Dean set his sister with an expression that suggested he was dead inside. "You're glowing," he commented flatly.

She gave a soft little chuckle and sigh, walked past him and patted his shoulder affectionately, if a little rough-housingly. "And you're adorable." Great, so she was gonna be a little shithead. Well, at least she wasn't slapping him anymore. She acknowledged Sam with a nod, pointed at the
compound. "Sam? You wanna show us around?"

"Yeah, right this way," Sam said, leading. Grumbling, Dean hurried to follow. He wasn't going to let Sam and Alex too close, and he wasn't going to let them be alone together after what had happened.

Inside the compound was dark with a low ceiling, bare, industrial walls. A few cheap fold out tables lined a big main room where Dean quickly counted about fifteen people—sharpening machetes, loading guns. A few glanced up, recognizing Sam but eyeing Dean and Alex dubiously. "Gramps throw a barbecue, leave us off the e-vite list?" Dean muttered even as a familiar guy came to greet them. Christian Campbell—their third cousin or some crap like that. Dean had met the guy once or twice before, didn't like him much. Christian had a bad attitude and strong, plain features. His light brown hair was slicked back from a receding hairline and he carried himself with an air of pompous swagger.

"Sam!" Christian laughed, then greeted Sam with a handshake and pat on the back. His smile faded as he laid eyes on the other two Winchesters. "Dean. Alice."

Alex corrected him immediately, sizing him up, probably remembering him from a few months ago when she'd seen him before. "Alex."

"Right," he said, eyeing her a little rudely. "My mistake."

"Hello, Newman," Dean snarked. "Where's the man?"

Christian jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. "Down the hall, third door to the left," he said, eyeing Dean suspiciously. Dean set off in that direction, ignoring Christian completely. Third door to the left… Dean counted doors, found the one they were looking for and all but burst into the room, hellbent on this task of finding out if Samuel was soulless, too.

Samuel was seated at a desk in what appeared to be a makeshift office or a study—he'd been studying a slip of paper, but upon Dean's rude entrance, he hurriedly put the paper away into a drawer of his desk. Huh. Interesting. "Come right on in," Samuel commented a little peevishly.

"Need to ask you a few questions," Dean said, getting straight to the point as his sister stood beside him, arms folded. Sam shut the door behind them.

Samuel glanced at Sam, then Dean again. "What's wrong?"

"The day you got back," Dean said. "What happened?"

Samuel's expression showed impatience. "We've been over this," he said, apparently not in the mood to chat.

Beside and behind him, Castiel appeared. "Well, recap it for our wingman," Dean said, glancing at Cas and indicating Samuel look, too.

Samuel swiveled in his office chair, looked Cas up and down, summing him up. If he were startled, he didn't show it. "This Castiel?" He asked, and Cas nodded shallowly. Samuel got a little condescending smile upon his face. "You're scrawnier than I pictured."

"My true form is approximately the size of your Chrysler building," Castiel said without missing a beat, and then for no discernible reason, looked at Alex, who was listening with a frozen expression, like she was trying to keep a straight face.
"All right, all right, quit bragging," Dean muttered, pretty sure Cas meant it the way Dean thought he did. Classy, Cas. He rolled his eyes briefly before he returned his attention to Samuel. "So, you were dead, and…"

"And, pow, I was on Elton Ridge," Samuel said, lackadaisical. "Don't know how. Don't know why. I got nothing to hide, guys."

"Well, you mind if Cas here double-checks?" Dean asked.

Samuel's expression showed confusion. "Double checks?" He asked, then saw how Castiel was rolling his sleeve up. Samuel got a little skittish. "Double checks for what?"

"Your soul," Cas replied.

Samuel's dark eyebrows shot up, and, quick on the uptake, he put two and two together. "Wait… so that means… Sam?" he asked.

"Fresh outta soul," Dean wisecracked blandly.

Sam shrugged. "Whatever dragged me out... left a piece behind."

Samuel looked a little unsettled and then glanced at Cas, nodding. "Yeah, fine. Go ahead and check me."

"This will be very unpleasant for you," Cas said. "You have my apologies." He approached Samuel.

"Usually I have 'em buy me a drink before they get handsy," Samuel said, watching Cas reach toward him with heightening apprehension. And then when Cas reached into his chest, Samuel screamed in pain, writhing, obviously not expecting it to hurt as much as it did. It lasted only five seconds. As Cas withdrew his hand, Christian burst in, a gun clutched to himself.

"Hey, hey!" Alex raised a hand even as Sam moved forward.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Sam held both hands up. "It's okay. It's okay."

"What the hell's going on in here?" Christian asked, staring at Cas, who was rolling his sleeve down, then Samuel, who was doubled over in pain.

"Angel cavity search," Dean quipped.

"I'm fine, Christian," Samuel grunted. "Just give us a minute."

"But—"

Samuel used a firmer voice. "Just give us a minute." Christian didn't look happy about it, but he backed out and shut the door behind himself.

"Well?" Dean asked Cas.

"Unlike Sam, his soul is intact," Cas said, and moved away from Samuel and a little closer to the Winchesters.

"Did you know?" Sam asked Samuel. "About me?"

Samuel's expression was terse. "No, but I…" he trailed off. "I knew it was something. I... you're a
hell of a hunter, Sam, but... the truth is, sometimes you scare me." He shook his head. "So, what's
the deal here? How do we fix this? How do we get his soul back?"

Dean shook his head too. "We don't know yet, but we have to." Cas looked toward the ceiling
quietly, frowning, and Alex was watching him.

"Well, I'm here to help, of course," Samuel said. "What leads you working?"

"A bunch of dead ends and... you," was Sam's reply.

Samuel crossed his arms, resigned and tired. "Well, then, we'll just have to dig."

Castiel spoke suddenly, still staring at the ceiling. "Sam, Dean, Alex... I have to get back. I'm being
summoned."

Alex sounded surprised and reluctant. "Now?" She asked.

He looked at her fully, seeming to apologize to her silently with his gaze. "Yes. I'm sorry."

"You're leaving?" Dean asked, staring—they could use Cas's help on this one.

Cas seemed slightly offended at Dean's flippancy. "I'm in the middle of a civil war, Dean."

Dean wasn't in the mood. "You better tear the attic up, find something to help Sam."

"Of course," Castiel said, his voice dark with surprising sarcasm. "Your problems always come
first, Dean."

Well, I never. Dean was taken aback at the somewhat sassy comment.

Alex, voice softer than Dean's, drew Cas's gaze, which softened immediately. "Cas, just be careful
up there," she said, and there seemed to be deep meaningfulness in her voice.

"Of course," Cas said, the same two words he'd said to Dean, but they were uttered in a gentle,
considerate way. "And I will attempt to find some way of helping Sam." He paused, holding her
gaze, like they were the only two people in the room. "Think about what I asked you to consider." 
Dean's eyebrows rose at that comment even as Alex nodded yes, she would. And then Cas
disappeared completely. Dean looked at Alex closely. What he 'asked her to consider'? What did
that mean?

"Would've asked him to stick around for a beer," Samuel commented wryly, a hand to his torso as
he still grimaced in pain. He glanced at Alex briefly. "Seems to like you pretty well."

"You got no idea," Dean muttered, looking at Alex studiously. "What did he mean, what he asked
you to consider?"

All he got from his sister was a side-eye and a slight shake of the head and a, "Tell you later."

Dean was unenthused. "Yeah great." He looked at Samuel, resigned to keep trying to find things
out from closed off family members. "So, what's with the book club outside?" he asked. There was
had to be a reason there were so many hunters around.

"Putting together a hunt," Samuel replied, pulling an ammo box up off the floor and opening it
distractedly.

"That's a lot of guys for one hunt," Dean commented offhandedly. Alex was eyeing the shelves of
books and taking in the titles silently as Sam narrowed his eyes at his grandfather.

"You found him, didn't you?" Sam asked, sounding mildly excited about it.

"Found who?" Alex asked.

"He's got a lead on the alpha vamp," Sam replied.

"Really?" Dean asked, mildly impressed if that were true. "How'd you track him down?"

Samuel was mildly amused. "We're good."

Dean watched his grandfather carefully. "That's all I get? 'We're good'? Why all the beating around the bush?"

"When's the run?" Sam asked. He sounded awfully eager about it, too.

Samuel hesitated, cleared his throat. "Dawn."

Sam faltered, frowning. "You didn't call me? Why?"

Samuel looked down, didn't answer. "'Cause of me," he said, then glanced at Alex. "And her." He narrowed his eyes at Samuel a little. Alex was pondering Samuel carefully, then glanced at Dean sidelong. From that quick glance, Dean got the feeling she didn't trust Samuel any more than he did. And the feeling was mutual. "You don't trust us very much, do you?" Dean asked his grandfather. "Especially when it comes to big game like this."

"That's not true," Samuel said immediately, probably trying to keep the family peace or some crap like that.

Dean shrugged, smiled easily, testing Samuel. "Okay, well, then, we're in."

Samuel's eyes flickered with unease and he tried to backpedal. "No offense, but—"

"So you don't trust us," Dean surmised.

There was a long pause. "No, I just don't know you two. Not like I know Sam."

Fair enough, Dean thought. But there was something going on here, Dean could sense it. So he kept trying to volunteer them for the little morning run Samuel was planning. "All right, how about this. You call the plays. A hundred percent. I'm here to listen."

Samuel chuckled. "You? Since when?"

Dean played it close to his sleeve. "Since big daddy bloodsucker. I ain't gonna miss that." He could feel Alex's curious gaze on him but he held Samuel's gaze. "I get it. This is your deal, not mine. I'll follow your lead. I trust you."

Samuel didn't look too sure.

"You really gonna turn away a couple extra hands?" Alex asked, drawing her grandfather's cool, unreadable gaze. She must have guessed Dean's plan, because she was putting on the passive aggressive moves like a pro. "We owe you for everything last week. Let us help."

Grudging, Samuel glanced at all the Winchesters in turn, last of all Alex. He snapped his ammo case closed with a loud click. "All right. I just hope you're good with a machete, kid."
"I don't trust him," Dean said definitively as the three of them went back outside and headed for the Impala. Cold incandescent floodlights cast a glow over the gravel lot where cars were parked helter skelter. "Dude's hiding something." Sam gave Dean an odd look as they walked in the chilly night air. Dean was in the middle and shaking his head. "I can feel it," he continued, seeing how Sam didn't have a frigging clue. "And if you weren't Robo-Sam, you'd feel it, too."

"Huh," Sam said in pronounced thoughtfulness.

"What?" Dean asked, stopping to look at his brother, who had a look on his face like he was trying to figure something out.

"Just… you, saying you don't trust family," Sam said, frowning mildly. He turned his gaze to Alex, who stood beside Dean, shoulders almost touching. "What about you, Alex? You trust Samuel?"

She shrugged her mouth downwards, shook her head a little, kept her hands in her jacket pockets. "Not for two seconds."

Again, Sam looked confused, but willing to hear her out. "Why?"

Alex shrugged her shoulders, glanced around as if looking for eavesdroppers. "I dunno, I just don't. Got a bad feeling about him."

Sam narrowed his eyes, looked at her in continuing studiousness. Dean wet his lips, lowered his voice a little, cast glances between his two siblings. "Look, we hang close on this hunt, we blend in, we see what we can pick up. That's the plan."

"You still think Samuel's connected to this whole soul thing?" Sam asked.

Dean was out of answers. "I still think he's the only lead we got." He glanced at the Impala. "Now let's go get our gear and get in on this family reunion, huh?"

Alex wandered back a little further, her boots crunching on the gravel. She was outside, exploring the compound a little as she took in a drag from the cigarette she'd bummed off of one of the hunters inside. Mark, Matt—something like that. She'd spied the familiar cigarette box square in his shirt pocket and asked for one, struck by the sudden desire for one. It had been awhile. She blew out and watched smoke flutter out into the dark night air. It had been awhile for a lot of things.

She'd woken up this morning depressed, without hope, unsure of a million things, scared of everything and nothing in particular. And now she felt centered again, renewed, okay, herself again. Castiel. She smiled a little to herself, warmed when she thought of him. His name relieved her, the things he'd said to her strengthened her bones, the smell of him still clung to her skin. Somehow, they were going to make this crazy thing work, and she believed that now. And as a result, everything else in her life was made better.

She kicked at some gravel errantly, peering around the back of the compound curiously. A couple smaller buildings were huddled there and she drifted toward them leisurely. Samuel had really managed to put together quite a little business here—all the extra hands inside, all the weapons and what she had observed to be a pretty good arsenal of literature in Samuel's library. Impressive or not, Dean was right… there was definitely something off about Samuel and this place in general. It felt like something was being hidden or kept secret. Alex stopped at a little building that was padlocked. Interesting—none of the other buildings had padlocks. Curious, Alex threw a glance
over her shoulder. No one was around. She crept closer and checked out the padlock, peered at the 
lock in the darkness. It would be easy enough to pick. If Samuel was hiding something, she wanted 
to know what. She dug around in her jacket pockets, found a bobby pin, stuck it down into the 
padlock.

"You lost?" Came a female voice.

Alex whirled, heart in her throat. Standing there, a plate of food in hand, was one of the Campbell 
cousins. "Jen," Alex greeted coolly, trying not to look guilty, not sure if she even remembered this 
chick's name right.

"Gwen," the brunette corrected. She was shorter than Alex, had elfish features and wide eyes that 
made her look perpetually surprised and a little crazy.

"Right. Gwen."

Gwen looked at Alex suspiciously. "What are you doing out here?"

Alex held her cigarette up. It balanced easily between two fingers and she cracked a facetious little 
grin. "Getting lung cancer, you?" She looked at the plate of food. It seemed pretty late for dinner 
and pretty early for breakfast.

Gwen didn't seem to like the question. "Look, you probably shouldn't be wandering around out 
here," she stated neutrally, but there was some definite hostility beneath passive tone she used. 
"People might think you were snooping."

"Hm. Yeah. You're probably right." Alex took a drag. "See you inside." She walked off without 
waiting for Gwen to reply, kept going until she got to the corner of the building, kept walking 
loudly… then stopped and doubled back silently to peek around the corner. There she saw Gwen 
unlocking the padlock then entering the hut with the plate of food. All while throwing distinctly 
shifty glances around. What the hell was going on in this place?

"Hey."

Alex almost fell over at the deep, masculine voice right behind her; she turned fast, dropping her 
cigarette and reaching for a weapon… then stopped when she saw who it was. "Christ, Dean!" She 
hissed at her brother. "Don't sneak up like that!"

He looked a little smug that he'd gotten the jump on her. "Don't get snuck up on," he replied.

Alex picked up her dropped cigarette grumpily and then grabbed him by the crook of the arm, 
walked him back toward the front of the compound briskly. "There's something weird going on 
here," she whispered intensely, casting careful glances around and stopping them beside the 
Impala.

"Tell me about it," Dean replied, seeming to share her misgivings. "Just tried to snoop around in 
Samuel's office and Christian cockblocked me. They're hiding something." He eyed her cigarette 
with distaste.

"Don't say it," Alex warned him, recognizing the look in his eye.

"I'm not, I'm not," he said, sounding sullen. But just to humor him, she took a last drag then tossed 
the cigarette down and crushed it with the heel of her boot.

"Where's Sam?" She asked, crossing her arms and looking at her brother carefully. He looked tired
and harrowed, but more than usual.

"Inside, polishing his blade." Dean cracked a juvenile grin that chased away the weariness etched on his face.

"Grow up," Alex said, even though she was amused at the immature quip, too.

"You first," he said, because she was grinning despite herself. She rolled her eyes, trying to be mature and failing. Dean cleared his throat, got quiet and thoughtful, leaned his back against the Impala. It sounded like it took everything he had to ask what he did next. "So—uh… things with Cas. Better?"

His gruff, stiff question sort of shocked her and her eyes darted to him in surprise. Yesterday she'd vomited out a lot of private thoughts and feelings about Cas and how much she loved him and how unsure she was about how he felt about her. All under the truth curse, and all to Dean. She would rather he didn't know that stuff, but… oh well. He did.

She answered him very carefully because she was sort of suspicious of his motivations for asking. "Yeah. Better."

Dean looked like he was trying to swallow a very large emotional pill. "That's… that's good."

Alex gave him a funny look sidelong, because he sounded like he was having to drag the words kicking and screaming out of himself. "You really mean that?" She asked, wishing he would and also knowing he didn't.

He sighed loudly, giving up on trying to maintain the farce. "I dunno." At Alex's look of mild disappointment, he shrugged in chagrin. "Hey, at least I'm honest," he said. Even he sounded a little disappointed in how he was reacting. It was obvious what a hard time Dean had with the idea of Cas and her, but it was a pretty big step for him to at least try and ask her about it like a normal big brother would. Dean was looking at her in a soft, sad way. "He really does make you happy, huh?" He asked, seeming to feel bittersweet about it.

Her heart lodged in her throat as everything inside of her shouted yes! Aloud, she answered him neutrally. "Yeah." Alex wished she could tell her brother everything but he just wouldn't understand. Not yet.

Dean's expression stayed all soft and sad, like he thought he had lost her or something. "Guess I can't be too mad about it then, right?" He asked, trying to joke around, but sounding like he didn't know how to feel at all. Alex didn't know what to say and fell silent, glad that at least Dean wasn't freaking out.

Maybe Cas was right, maybe Dean just needed to be sat down and made to understand some things. But the question was, would Dean ever really get it or understand and let her go? Dean wasn't like normal big brothers—he was better, yes, but he was also admittedly way too attached to herself and Sam—he viewed them as his siblings and also as his children, his responsibilities. He wasn't the only one with unhealthy attachments… Sam and Alex were pretty twisted up in the family dysfunction too, but Alex moreso because of the way she'd been sort of helpless, to an extent, growing up. She'd always clung to Dean and vice versa, more than other brothers and sisters did. The life they lived, there had been little other alternative. Alex tried to remember these facts when Dean got so petulant and psycho over her life and wellbeing. But it couldn't stay this way forever—they couldn't hold onto each other like they had before, and they both knew it. She was growing up and had found something new to hold onto: Cas.
Even though Alex was pissed at Dean for the better half of most days, she would always be there for him when he needed her. And Alex was suddenly aware that maybe this was one of those times. Dean had just broken up with Lisa yesterday and then found out that Sam was soulless—add to that finding out how Cas and Alex had, as Dean so charmingly put it, screwed, and you had one thing: Dean feeling like he was all alone. Why hadn't she realized that before? Maybe Dean looked sad right now because he felt like he had lost everything at the same time. Lisa and Ben bowing out of his life, Sam not Sam without his soul. And Alex with her heart so clearly invested in the trenchcoat-wearing angel.

Alex was suddenly overcome with compassion for her brother and grabbed his arm reassuringly, patted a little. When he looked at her sidelong, a little questioningly, she smiled a little, trying to be hopeful. "Hey. Don't look so bummed out. We're gonna get through this Sam crap, okay?"

He didn't look assured. He tried to sound strong, but she heard how he was scared deep down. "And what if there's no getting through this one?"

Alex didn't want to acknowledge that as a possibility. "We always find a way," she said, then shrugged like it was no big deal. "This time's no different."

Dean took in what she said and nodded, trying to look like he agreed, then swept the conversation aside. He nodded toward the compound. "I need some caffeine, you in?"

She gave him a little smile, told him sure, and they went into the Campbell compound and spent the rest of the night getting ready for the hunt that was happening at dawn.

Alex leaned against a pickup truck, bored and annoyed. Some 'hunt' this was. It was insulting, being left behind to guard the cars. The sun wasn't quite all the way up yet and the day was cool, foggy. Alex looked up and down the road again. It was a rural country location in the middle of nowhere and the alpha vamp was apparently holed up in a house that was about half a mile through the trees to the west. And here she was… babysitting the convey. Restless, she paced across the road and scrubbed at a smudge of dirt on the Impala out of habit. She gave a frustrated sigh and crossed her arms and turned and leaned against the Impala then tapped her foot slowly. This was, in a word, bullshit.

Dean hadn't been given a much better task than she had… he was with Gwen and had been told to hang back and take care of any straggler vamps. Basically, Samuel had made sure to keep them out of the hunt. Dean had wordlessly shot Alex a look that said just do what he says.

But how the hell were they supposed to find out what Samuel was being so weird about if they didn't do any investigation? Dean had said they were supposed to blend in and stick close—what had happened to that plan? A crow called somewhere nearby and a deer or rabbit broke a stick somewhere in the woods behind her. Uggghhhhh… this is stupid. Alex's impatience boiled up and she decisively grabbed her machete and muttered "screw this," then headed off into the woods in the direction everyone had gone. She didn't see or hear how she was being followed. Stalked. Not until it was too late.

She paused when she got a fair distance from the road and turned to look over her shoulder, eyes narrowed deeply when she thought she heard a sound. What was—

Pain exploded and her vision went white-hot as something powerful struck the side of her head, stunning and blindsiding her with enough force to make her spin and stagger a few steps sideways—before she even knew what had happened she was crashing down painfully, unsure of which direction was which. She heard someone groaning nearby. No wait, that was her. Vision
swimming, head pounding where she'd been hit, Alex struggled to maintain clarity and rolled herself over, tried to find her machete with blind, groping fingers, tried to identify and locate her attacker… above her, trees stretched up into the dull gray sky, doubling and tripling and spinning and she panicked, tried to push herself up, then was slammed back down to the ground, hitting the back of her head from the force of the action.

Her wrists were held on either side of her head in vicelike grips by cold, crushing hands and she followed one of the arms, looked up, searching for the face of the person who was doing this. Above her, pinning her down, a familiar and towering blond man with piercing gray eyes. "Hey, sweetheart. Miss me?"

The confusion suddenly ended when she recognized him; her heart clenched in complete terror when she realized Glen Ward had apparently come back from the dead. On his face there was a chilling, triumphant smile.

Works inspired by this one: *Darkest of Your Days* by River_Winters

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