Yare

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Summary

Four years ago Castiel Lord married local mechanic, Dean Winchester, and for two years their relationship flourished, until a decision made by Castiel sent Dean out the front door, and divorce papers were served. Now Castiel is two days from the alter with a new fiancé on his arm, and he's over Dean, he really is, their relationship dissolved for completely valid reasons. Of course, that's a lot easier to believe when Dean isn't standing in his mother's back yard, offering an olive branch in the form of a favor for the Lord household. Suddenly memories of their past are everywhere and Castiel is faced with a choice he never thought he'd get again.

Loosely based on the film, The Philadelphia Story

Notes

Special thanks to my lovely artist, truthismusic over on livejournal, who created these lovely pieces for the fic: http://truthismusic.livejournal.com/19766.html
“I’m afraid it’s a lost cause.”

Anna Milton pushes open the door to her dressing room, and, gathering the folds of her long, periwinkle gown, steps out to model for her brother. “No amount of satin can make me look like a lady.”

Castiel Lord stands and draws closer to her, his head tilting to the side as he considers the new length of the dress, the slightly snugger fit around Anna’s waist, and shakes his head firmly. “You look lovely,” he argues. A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth and he finds himself unable to resist the pull of the emotions twisting around his heart. He wraps his arms around her and tucks his head over her small, pointed shoulder. “Beautiful. I’m glad Inias isn’t interested in women.”

They both give a laugh, but Castiel’s is stilted, contaminated by a wave of embarrassment. There was no maliciousness behind the joke, he didn’t intend for it to be at Dean’s expense, and he doesn’t really believe that Anna would take it that way, but he remembers the snide remarks that his mother slid into conversation more than once and the tension that always resulted. There are many reasons that their marriage dissolved, but Dean’s sexuality isn’t on the list, and there’s still guilt fluttering in his gut as they pull out of David’s Bridal, Anna’s bridesmaid dress hanging from a hook in the backseat.

“Three days,” prompts Anna after a few minutes, and when Castiel looks over she’s grinning, soft and private. He narrows his eyes in suspicion at her determinedly focused gaze trained solely on the road before them. Anna’s never liked Inias Kittredge, a fact she’s never bothered to hide, and though she loves Castiel dearly, and he knows that she would never actively try to hurt him, sometimes he gets the impression that she would be much happier if even now, two years after the divorce has been finalized, he and Dean would be able to patch things up. So he doesn’t particularly like that she won’t look at him.

He can’t tell if her enthusiasm is sarcasm or not, but if it is, he ignores it and replies brightly, “I can hardly believe it myself. Inias told me last night where he’s taking me for our honeymoon. Aspen!” He tries to work in as much excitement as he felt when Inias showed him the tickets, but Anna’s secretive smile doesn’t dim.

“Do you even know how to ski,” she asks innocently.

Castiel sniffs. He knows it’s not her fault that Dean was as charming as he was, or that Inias’ sweet nature can sometimes be construed as saccharine. Anna’s just the type of woman who appreciates strength, and despite the fact that he never did move that grotesque armoire that Naomi gave them as a wedding gift into the basement, Dean’s always had strength – of character, of will – to spare. That’s just how it is with some families, Castiel firmly reassures himself. He used to be certain that Dean’s surrogate sister, Jo, would have cheerfully dropped him off the side of a cliff, if she thought she could get away with it, and he hadn’t taken that personally.

Anna slows as she navigates the familiar, winding driveway of their mother’s estate. It’s been years since he moved out, but the sight of the house still finds a way to hit him with a fresh wave of awe.
He knows, thanks to Naomi’s endless posturing, that it’s been in the family for three generations, though of course it’s impossible to tell. There are no cracks in the paint, no loose floorboards. The large wraparound porch has never needed to be replaced. Today the sprawling front yard is dotted with members of the staff that Naomi hired for the wedding, unloading a large truck filled with lilac and cream linens, but he grew up here, he knows that once it’s cleared, the rich, thick grass will gleam like emeralds.

It’s not until he and Anna have driven around the work truck that Castiel even sees the vehicle parked on its other side, blocking off the entrance to the garage. He doesn’t believe it, has to blink several times before he decides that regardless of the May heat, the black, 1967 Chevrolet Impala is not a mirage.

He inhales sharply, only dimly aware of Anna’s car jerking to a stop as his heart picks up speed in his ribcage. He knows that car, every inch of it. He knows what it feels like to have the slim steering wheel under his hands, the engine rumbling low, like a lion. He knows every track of the cassettes jammed in the box in the backseat, and the soft whine the windshield wipers make when they burst to life. If he concentrates he can still hear the toy soldiers clattering beneath the air vents.

But he can remember other things too – leather, hot, gleaming and sweat sticking to his bare back, arms circled around his waist as he gets pushed back against the seat. The car is big but he remembers how small it feels when you have a six foot male looming over you, eyes black with desire.

He blinks, turns to Anna, pretends that his flush is anger and not shame. “Why is Dean here,” he grits out.

“I don’t know.” But Anna has never been a terribly skilled liar, and Castiel has had thirty years to learn her tells. He watches her tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, listens to her clear her throat, and when his gaze doesn’t waver, she sighs. “It’s not what you think,” she says.

Her voice carries an undercurrent of apology, so he doesn’t needle her for the lie, instead, replying as casually as he can manage, “What do I think?”

“He’s not here to disrupt the wedding.” She reaches for the door handle, gesturing for him to do the same, and as they climb from the car she continues, “Believe it or not, Dean is actually doing us a huge favor.”

“I was unaware that we were in need of aid,” he says.

Anna turns to study the house, and she shakes her head a little to herself, her expression unreadable. He’s always wondered if a part of her regretted her decision to move out to California, but at the shadows in her eyes that he can identify as wariness, he somehow doubts it. “Listen, Castiel, Naomi e-mailed me last week.”

He arches his eyebrows. “That’s a surprise.”

She smiles, her face softening. “It caught me off guard too. But something has happened with Balthazar, and I think she thought I could talk some sense into him.” She laughs softly.

“You always were one of the few that could.”

“Once upon a time, maybe.”
“Anna,” he urges impatiently. “Will you please tell me what is going on?”

“Castiel, I know this is a lot to ask, alright, I do. You and Dean have a history, and it can’t be easy to see him again.”

Castiel bristles but doesn’t interrupt.

“But I promise you, despite my bias in your spousal choices, I would never have condoned Mother inviting him here when you’ll be married in three days unless it was an emergency.” She takes one of his hands in both of her own, her eyes serious and drawn. “So just hear them out.”

For a moment he doesn’t move, then he rolls his eyes and turns on his heel. “Fine.”

They cross the porch and Castiel tries not to hesitate too noticeably before he grasps the golden brass knocker and gives it two resounding strikes. Dean always refused to use the knocker, he suddenly remembers, swallowing hard.

(“Dude, the doorbell is right there, and that gargoyle head is fucking creepy.”)

The door swings open immediately, as though Bartholomew has been waiting on the other side in preparation for their arrival. He probably has. “Master Lord, sir,” Bartholomew greets solemnly, like he has so many times before. He’s a young man, not much older than Castiel, probably, but his spine is ramrod-straight and his dirty blond hair combed and carefully parted. He’s the very picture of high society as he dutifully inclines his head. “And Mistress Lord. Good afternoon.”

Anna glares back and it’s clear from the twitch of her mouth that she’s seconds away from correcting him, but Castiel lays a hand on her arm to stay the argument. His sister has been home a total of twice since her fight with Naomi but even if she had been over every day, reminding Bartholomew of her name-change, it wouldn’t matter. Naomi would never allow him to address her as such in her house. He sees the moment Anna’s face smooths and she nods her acquiescence. “Good afternoon, Bartholomew,” they parrot.

Years of white collar upbringing taught them how Naomi expects them to behave with the ‘help’ but they still exchange uncomfortable glances as Bartholomew wordlessly reaches for Anna’s dress. She certainly pays her staff more than any other woman in the area, but neither Castiel nor Anna have ever found that to be a sufficient offset. There’s a reason Anna lives on the other side of the country and Castiel never moved out of the house he shared with Dean.

(“We just don’t fit. She’s my mother, but we’re nothing alike,” Castiel told Dean after dinner with her one evening, and Dean had rolled his eyes, tugging Castiel’s tie loose.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”)

“Your mother is in the garden,” Bartholomew says, interrupting Castiel’s thoughts. He gestures towards the back of the house before turning his nose up. “With her . . . guest.”

Beside Castiel, Anna snorts.

Together they follow the long hall, passing the living room and dining area, both overflowing with lilacs and baby’s breath, and the dining table where they will have the rehearsal dinner tomorrow evening is already adorned with white china and lavender linens. Six white taper candles of varying
lengths make up a centerpiece that doesn’t quite fit in with the other more lavish décor, but it’s one of the few things Castiel chose for himself and the sight of it warms him.

By the time they’re standing at the back door, Castiel’s nerve has all but evaporated and he tries to tell himself that he knows there’s nothing to be afraid of. He remembers, with crystal clarity, all the times since their divorce that he’s run into his ex, and that they have not had a single fight since Dean walked out. In fact, when they were settling their possessions, Dean had offered up his rights to the small starter home they bought together without so much as a hint of anger. It hadn’t been much, two bedrooms, one and a half baths, wallpaper peeling in the living room, but they hadn’t cared, not really – they’d loved it, poured their hearts and souls into it, and now he focuses on the memory of the fondness that had flickered in Dean’s eyes from across the conference room table.

(“Just promise me you won’t forget to change out the batteries on the smoke alarms,” Dean said gently. “We both know your penchant for grease fires, and it’d be a shame to see that place burn to the ground.”

Castiel huffed out a warm, broken laugh. “You have my word. I’ll pick up a fire extinguisher, if it’d make you feel better.”

“It would.”)

He breathes out as the memory dissipates. Certainly if he and Dean were able to maintain that decorum with their divorce papers laid out in front of them, spending a few minutes in Dean’s company should be within his capabilities. Despite what it costs Castiel to admit it, Dean is, at his core, a good man and he wouldn’t start an argument on Castiel’s mother’s property.

The large patio gives way to a luscious garden, and the fragrance of Naomi’s prized roses drifts through the air and then suddenly Dean Winchester is standing just a few feet away, larger than life and devastatingly beautiful.

It’s been months since Castiel last saw him at, of all things, a Lawrence High School football game. He hadn’t known that Inias’ nephew Dakoda was on the same team as Lisa Braeden’s son, and if he had, he might have tried to get out of going at all. Because he’s over Dean, he is, but when he caught sight of his ex sitting with his ex in the low bleachers in the front, it had been a little difficult to breathe.

Dean’s eyes instantly tick over to find his own, and he’s a little taken aback by the shade of warm green. They seem to glitter in the late afternoon sun, but Castiel easily translates the contained anger hiding underneath. He doesn’t realize he has frozen until he feels Anna’s fingers digging into his back, so he drags himself to his senses and closes the distance, offering a hand he can’t quite school into steadiness for Dean to shake.

Dean’s hand closes around his own, heavy and familiar. “Hey, Cas,” he says, easily, like they’re old friends, just getting together for an evening of ‘spilling beer and shooting the shit.’ It’s how Dean always sounds when he’s trying to be friendly, but anyone who really knows him knows that it’s relentless teasing that really shows the depth of his affection and Castiel isn’t deceived.

He withdraws his hand quickly, letting it fall to his side. “Hello, Dean,” he greets stiffly. “I understand we owe you a debt of gratitude. Though, of course, the subject matter seems to have skipped over me entirely.”

Dean’s eyebrows twitch, his mouth curves into a small smirk, the same one he wore the night he
hauled Castiel into the coat closet and fucked him against the wall while Naomi prattled on to a room full of guests about Katharine Hepburn’s stay in the manor during the filming of some movie or other. The fire in Dean’s eyes as Castiel returned to his mother’s side had been black with possessiveness, and –

And, really, there are few places less appropriate for these kinds of thoughts than the house where he’s going to be marrying another man in just a few days. He clears his throat and slides his eyes to where Naomi stands just behind Dean as Anna crosses to pull Dean into an affectionate hug. Castiel and Naomi roll their eyes simultaneously.

“Mother,” Castiel addresses her, as pleasantly as he’s able. It’s been a long time since he naïvely believed they could have any sort of traditional relationship, but that doesn’t mean that the wounds are anything more than scabbed over, or that he can ever quite hide that note of hostility that worms its way into his voice every time he and Naomi are in the same room. He wonders what she thinks of all this, if she feels any guilt at all at accepting Dean’s help, considering her history with Dean. Somehow he doubts it. “Perhaps you could tell me what is going on. What’s happened with Balthazar?”

Naomi sighs, her thin lips pressing into a frustrated line. There’s not a single strand of silver in the auburn of her hair, not a stray wrinkle tugging at her face, but today she looks every day of her fifty-eight years and some small part of Castiel pities her. “Unfortunately, your cousin has been arrested for embezzlement.” She says it quick, no hesitation, no emotion, and it takes several seconds for the meaning of her words to sink in. Then Castiel frowns.

“That’s not possible.”

Dean laughs, the sound bright and loud and softly cruel, like there’s something funny about Castiel’s instant denial and determination to defend his favorite cousin. Balthazar Rowe is far from perfect – he drinks too much and he cheated on his last girlfriend and he’s never taken speed limits as anything more stringent than advisement – but he was there for Castiel during the divorce and something hot boils in Castiel’s blood at the condescension in Dean’s smile. “He manages a nightclub,” he snaps. “What did he steal? A disco ball and some strobe lights?”

“Money,” Dean answers. “And lots of it, from what I hear.”

“I don’t believe it.” But Anna’s regarding him sadly, and Naomi looks impatient, but more than anything it’s the way that Dean’s expression relaxes to earnestness that dries up his throat and clogs up all the vitriol he planned to spit out. He takes a deep breath that he can only hope evens out his tone, and says, “Even if it is true, what does that have to do with you? Are you planning to break him out?”

“Oh, yeah, you remember, me and Balthazar were best buds back in the day,” Dean says, sarcasm dripping from every syllable. Then he clears his throat. “Cas, you ever heard of Sydney Kidd?” When Castiel shakes his head, Dean grins. “I kinda figured. He’s the editor of The Lawrence Story. It’s one of those magazines about high society lifestyles – like who’s dating who, who donated the most money to the children’s hospital, shit like that. Anyway, he was planning to do a story on Balthazar’s . . . misstep.”

This time Castiel doesn’t argue. If what they’re claiming is true, defending Balthazar’s honor won’t do any good, and it’s starting to look as though the best thing he can do for his cousin right now is pay attention to whatever it is his mother and Dean have to say on the matter. But he still doesn’t think he understands. “And how does you being here help this situation?” He pauses, then adds as
an afterthought, “No offense.”

Dean shakes his head and there’s amusement there, Castiel thinks. “Yeah, none taken.”

“Dean’s friends with Kidd,” Anna answers Castiel. He feels the sudden urge to say something snide about the nature of most of Dean’s friendships, but decides that now probably isn’t the time, considering. “And he managed to convince him to change the story. Do one on – now, don’t be upset.”

“The wedding,” he finishes for her and she nods.

He can feel the three pairs of eyes watching him as he carefully considers the request. He likes Balthazar. He always has, and there’s nothing that Castiel isn’t willing to do for the people he cares about. And regardless of the actual reason behind the story, there’s no denying that the publicity would be good for Lord Enterprises, and as the C.E.O isn’t it his responsibility to take care of his company?

But he hates the idea. Despises everything about it and though he’s spent months desperately trying not to compare the two, he can’t help that his thoughts immediately go to his first wedding. The lights of Las Vegas, the tiny chapel where they exchanged their vows, the line of couples behind them awaiting their turn. Naomi had been furious when they got back sporting a pair of rings and identical smiles, but all her fuming hadn’t been able to change the fact that her son managed to get married without even an ounce of interference from anyone. Castiel had tried to explain, when he could get a word in, that it wasn’t an act of rebellion, that he simply wasn’t interested in allowing his love for Dean to become some sort of publicity stunt, but she still refused to speak to them for two months (something neither man had really complained about, if Castiel is being honest).

It was naïve, Castiel understands now, to think he could ever keep his relationships separate from the business, but this whole thing still leaves a bad taste in his mouth. However, “What exactly do I have to do,” is all he asks. One thing he’s always excelled at is doing what he needs to for his family.

“Nothing much,” Dean assures him. He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Kidd’s sending a reporter, a guy named Chuck Shurley to do the story. Just let him do his thing. He might ask you some questions, try to get some sound bites for the article, but you know, be vague or whatever if you want. Or lie.”

Dean finishes talking, but Castiel still waits several seconds before he realizes that the obligatory, ‘We both know you’re good at that’ isn’t coming. He’s startled, but covers it by offering as genuine a smile as he can. “Alright. Thank you, Dean. I’m sorry if I was rude before, but I do . . . appreciate what you’ve done for my family.”

Dean’s eyes are heavy and clear. “Don’t mention it.”

An awkward silence falls until Castiel realizes that if he doesn’t call Inias now, his fiancé will show up and be caught completely unawares. The least he can do is warn the poor man. Inias has never shown any sort of animosity towards Dean in the past, but something tells him that finding Dean in Naomi’s house might not be the best way to ease Inias into the new arrangement. So he excuses himself and reenters the house, reaching into his pocket for his phone. Then he stills as the door opens and shuts again, and he turns to see Dean following closely.

“Thought we should talk,” Dean says, and Castiel can’t even remember the last time they were alone
together. Naomi and Anna may be just a few yards away, but it could be miles for all the chaperone they’re providing.

“What do you want to talk about?” It comes out rushed, a little nervous, but if Dean notices, he doesn’t address it. Instead, he levels a knowing look at Castiel that sends a shiver up his spine.

“Just wanted to make sure you were cool with this,” says Dean.

Though he’s loathe to admit it, Dean’s always been unnaturally good at reading him, and while he longs to, well, lie, to give the easy answer and derail this conversation before it becomes too self-reflective, old habits die hard and the truth bubbles up inside him. “It’s strange, seeing you here,” he confesses, looking away.

Dean laughs, and there’s a layer of bitterness to it that recalls the flicker of anger Castiel saw in his eyes when he joined him in the garden. “It’s strange, being here.”

“Dean.” Castiel takes in a slow breath, and turns to face him fully. There are a few feet of distance between them, but not enough that he can’t easily spot the smattering of freckles that dot Dean’s cheeks and dance cross his nose and it’s like a kick to the gut when he remembers their taste. “Why are you doing this?”

“I’m a nice guy, Cas.” Dean grins humorlessly. “But maybe you forgot.”

“I didn’t forget. But it’s ridiculous for you to pretend this is out of the goodness of your heart.” He sighs, and it’s deafening in the quiet room. “You’re angry.” He doesn’t miss the way the line of Dean’s jaw tightens.

He expects Dean to deny it. To feign indifference, wave it off, and return to Naomi and Anna. Castiel had to accept long ago that Dean would never be the kind of man to speak openly about his feelings but adjusting to it had been a painful affair, and one that left him swallowing the arguments that rose up in his throat, remaining silent instead of voicing his concerns. He used to tell himself that it was worth it – one less thing to fight about – but really it did little more than leave many things unsaid.

It’s because of all this that he’s stunned when Dean steps a little closer and lowers his voice. “You think I wanna be here,” Dean asks softly, a sliver of contained something slipping into the words. “You think this is fun for me? In case it hasn’t occurred to you, let me be very clear. The last thing I feel like doing is watching you get married.”

“Then why-” But the rest of Castiel’s question dies on his lips when the sound of the knocker echoes through the downstairs. They listen to the front door open and shut, then:

“Good afternoon, Bartholomew.”

Inias’ voice carries down the hall to where Castiel and Dean stand, and Castiel draws away quickly, dropping his gaze. “Let’s just try to get through this unscathed,” he murmurs, and he catches Dean’s slow nod as he steps around him and strides to where Inias stands.

Inias smiles widely the moment he sees Castiel, his lips turning up as though he has no control over it, and Castiel, for reasons he cannot explain, feels a tug of sadness wrap around his heart and squeeze. “Darling,” Inias says, and once he’s within reach, he takes Castiel’s hand and pulls him in to kiss him gently. “Missed you today. Did Anna get her dress okay?”
“Yes. But Inias, there’s something we need to discuss,” Castiel says as they part, and it’s not until Inias’ gaze moves to settle on the man behind him that he realizes that Dean has followed him into the foyer. It takes all of his self-control to avoid glancing back to check his ex’s expression.

Inias stiffens. “Evidently.”

Castiel tries, as succinctly as possible, to explain Dean’s presence, the events that have led to this, though Dean, himself, does not make things easier by constantly interrupting to fill in the missing gaps. There’s a certain gleam in his eye as he describes the subtlety he employed to get Kidd to change the subject of the impending story, something that resembles a challenge hiding there as he locks eyes with Inias. It’s as openly hostile as Castiel has ever seen Dean act in Inias’ presence, and it unsettles him more than he cares to admit.

Inias doesn’t speak as he takes it all in, the small frown on his face growing more pronounced with each word. When Castiel finishes, Inias nods, then wraps an arm around Castiel’s waist before turning to Dean. “Well, thank you for your assistance, Dean,” he finally says. There’s a dismissive edge to his voice that’s hard to miss and Castiel inwardly flinches at the eyebrow Dean raises in reply. “But I’m sure we can take it from here.”

“Because you’ve been doing such a great job up until now, you mean,” Dean returns coldly. He doesn’t wait for an answer. “Well, anyway, I think I’ll stick around, keep an eye on the proceedings, if it’s all the same to you. Cas and I were together for a long time, you know. I’d hate to hear that he got screwed just because I wasn’t around to keep it from happening.”

Inias glares back. “That’s interestingly worded, Dean.”

“I’ve always had a way with my tongue. Isn’t that right, Cas?”

“Castiel, a word,” Inias snaps. He spins around and marches off in the direction of the kitchen.

Castiel sighs as he watches him depart. “Was that really necessary,” he asks, annoyed.

Dean shrugs, feigned-innocence and amusement rolling off of him in waves, and Castiel would never admit it, not even under the point of a blade, but he has to fight a tiny grin. Dean’s always been like this, he remembers, a strange nostalgia settling in his bones. Pushing buttons, irritating the hell out of basically everyone. The kind of job he was second-to-none at, and Castiel knows that more than once he allowed Dean to answer Naomi’s phone calls for no other reason than to watch the grassy green eyes dance with mirth.

(“No, Naomi, Cas can’t come to the phone right now. Why not? Well, see, he literally just blew his load all over me and he needs a few minutes to- Hello? Naomi? Huh. Weird. She must have lost her signal.”)

“Aww come on, Cas,” Dean replies cheerfully, all previous ire forgotten. “How are we going to enjoy this weekend if we can’t have a sense of humor about it?”

“There’s a difference between ‘enjoying the weekend’ and ‘torturing the man I’m going to marry just for kicks,’ Dean,” Castiel retorts.

Dean seems to consider this, his lips pursing, until he shakes his head and shrugs. “I’d say that’s a matter of opinion more than anything else.”
The sun is still high when Castiel slides behind the wheel of his car. It’s five o’clock, a little early to begin an evening of binge drinking, but seeing his mother often sees this result, and he’s repeated it enough times to know exactly where to go. There’s a small bar on the outskirts of Lawrence that opens early on Fridays and his hands itch to stretch around a smooth, cool glass of Scotch. The lighting of The Roadhouse is dim enough to hide his identity – a theory he’s tested many times before – and its clientele not the type to ask impertinent questions. In short, it’s one of Castiel’s favorite places in the city and as he backs out of his mother’s long, winding driveway he’s nearly salivating for the anonymity it promises.

You have a responsibility, Castiel! We’ve been grooming you for this since you were born. Naomi (because at this moment she feels less like a Mother than she ever has before) was always going to react that way, Castiel knows. It was foolish to hope for anything different. And yet, something inside him bristled when she continued: I allowed you to attend a university. You wanted a bachelor’s degree, and I paid for four years of education. Did you honestly think I was going to agree to send you to medical school on top of it? No. That’s quite enough. It’s time for you to take your rightful place at my side.

Rightful place. It’s a phrase he’s heard hundreds of times throughout his life, and at twenty-four he understands what it really means. Loss. Loss of freedom. Loss of change. Loss of the hope that he might find a career doing something he loves. He’s always felt called to help others and in the span of one humiliating conversation with Naomi, that dream vanishes in a cloud of smoke.

There was a moment where he considered flat-out refusing. He’d summoned a memory two years old of his elder sister’s fiery red hair, the stiff line of her spine, the determination in her eyes as she laid out her new plan for her life, a plan that in no way involved Lord Enterprises or Naomi’s increasingly lavish offers to get her to stay. Anna had silently endured the ensuing tantrum, but the scene had still ended with her returning to her small mini-Coop and driving out to California. And to add insult to injury, it wasn’t a month before she changed her last name.

But despite his sister’s example, the words stuck in his throat. He has no money of his own, no friends outside those he left behind at school, and he will never be like Anna, so brave and adventurous.

Now, he takes a deep breath as he slows for a red light, and swallows with some difficulty. He tries to take comfort in the easy familiarity of the grey interior of his car, and later he’ll find irony in the fact that it’s exactly that moment that there’s a sudden, earsplitting POW that shakes the car’s frame.

The car seems to buck and tremble under his hands, and Castiel tightens his grip on the steering wheel as he navigates the Mazda over to the shoulder of the road and cuts the engine. He knows what he’ll see even before he steps out to examine the damage, but though the shredded rubbery ribbons of what used to be his passenger side front tire are not a surprise, he can’t resist letting loose a growl of frustration. Of course. Just another bad event in an endless series of them.

He’s not sure how long he stands there staring, absentmindedly running his thumb along the edges of the cell phone tucked into his pocket. He knows that he is going to have to call AAA to change the flat, but it’s yet another bill that Naomi pays and Castiel’s pride has already taken quite a beating today. He needs a few minutes to work up the energy.

“You okay, man?”
The voice startles him, and he looks up to see that he’s been so wrapped up in his thoughts that he failed to notice the sleek, shining black car that has pulled up next to his own. The driver is a man about Castiel’s age, and he’s leaning over the passenger seat of his own car as he speaks, his mouth twitching as he tries, and fails, to suppress an amused smirk.

“I’m fine,” Castiel answers primly. He’s not in the mood to be laughed at, regardless of how pure his would-be rescuer’s intentions may be. “I’m just going to call AAA.” He turns away, hoping that will be the end of it, and pulls out his phone as he reaches into his back pocket to retrieve his wallet, where the AAA card resides. It’s not exactly the first time this has happened and already he’s inwardly wincing at what will probably be an hour wait. Though it could be worse, he reassures himself. He’s not sure what made him decide to take the back roads, but Beacon Knoll is a quiet neighborhood and if he’s going to be trapped for any amount of time, it’s not a bad—

A heavy, warm hand covers his own, stilling his movement, and the man from the car is staring down at him, the corners of his full, pink lips twisting up. The shadows of the car had done nothing but hide the beauty of its occupant and now, under the bright, unforgiving light of the sun, Castiel can see fully the sparkling green eyes, the thick shoulders straining against his brown Henley. He has a strong, chiseled jaw, long, curling lashes, and jeans slung low, and certainly the man standing before him must be a model. And despite the impossibility of it, Castiel feels his cheeks flush.

“Looks like you’ve got a flat,” says the stranger, and Castiel nods back dumbly. He grins, easy, speculative, with confidence Castiel envies. “I can probably get this taken care of pretty quick, if you want. I’m Dean Winchester, by the way.”

“Castiel Lord,” he answers slowly. He realizes that Dean’s hand is still resting on his, and he takes a step back, inwardly cursing the nervous tremble of his hands. It’s mortifying, he’s not normally taken so aback by good looks, but there’s something about Dean, about the freckles across the bridge of his nose. He makes something in Castiel rattle free, the urge to be reckless suddenly taking hold of him. He swallows, his throat inexplicably dry, and he tells himself that he imagines the slow drag of Dean’s gaze that starts down by his calves, and slides up over his hips, his chest, like it will burn straight through Castiel’s clothes and into the skin beneath. When their eyes meet again, Castiel says, “If you’re sure you don’t mind.” And he’s relieved that his voice doesn’t shake.

“I don’t mind.” Dean flashes another breathtaking smile before striding around to the back of the car, and gesturing for Castiel to pop the trunk. “You got a jack?”

“I think so. That’s the thing that makes the car go up?”

And this time Dean does laugh, throwing his head back and letting loose a long, low chuckle that does something strange to Castiel’s gut. “Yeah, man,” Dean says, shaking his head a little and still grinning. “It’s probably with your spare . . .” Then he seems to spot whatever he was looking for, and tugs hard at the bottom of the trunk before a large, sectioned off piece pops up, and reveals the tire and, yes, jack, beneath.

Dean pulls them from the trunk, glances over at Castiel. “Wanna give me a little room,” Dean asks, his tone light and teasing and it’s only then that Castiel realizes that he’s unconsciously leaned back into the other man’s space. He immediately clears his throat and backs away. As though sensing nothing amiss, Dean continues. “You know, you’re lucky I found you.”

No kidding. “And why would that be?”
“Well, you happen to be in the hands of a fully licensed mechanic, Cas. One that isn’t even charging you for labor.” He stoops to begin the work, turning away, and Castiel is mesmerized by a drop of perspiration that forms at the base of the young man’s neck. “You know Singer’s garage? I’ve been working there since I was a kid. So, you’re in good hands.”

“I . . . appreciate your help.”

“Pleasure’s mine. Where were you headed, anyway?”

“The Roadhouse. It’s a bar, off of Sutton-”

Dean immediately twists his torso to stare at Castiel in surprise. “I know the place. I go there all the time.” He smirks. “Not sure how I managed to miss you, though.”

“I’ve been away at school,” Castiel replies, and the words have escaped his mouth before it occurs to him that Dean might be flirting with him. The urge to roll his eyes at himself is hard to fight, but Dean just huffs out a breathy laugh and Castiel is captivated by the crinkles in the corners of his eyes. His heart flutters.

“What were you in school for,” Dean asks, pulling the ruined tire from the car. He rolls the spare over and, with strength that is more than slightly impressive, slides it into place.

Castiel doesn’t mean to sigh, but somehow the sound tumbles from his lips. “I was on track for medical school.”

Dean whistles low. “A doctor? Your family must be proud.”

“You’d think,” Castiel answers before he can stop himself and there’s no masking the bitterness that colors his tone. Dean makes a sympathetic noise, and he continues, after a beat, “My mother doesn’t approve. She expects me to head the family business.” He raises his eyes, turns to study the horizon. “I can’t blame her though. It’s not like I expected anything different.”

Dean’s silent as he twists the lug nuts into place. “Yeah, I get that.” It’s quiet, like a confession. Castiel isn’t sure whether to press the subject or not, but then Dean swings the conversation back to him. “What’s the family business?”

“Wine,” he replies matter-of-factly, and isn’t at all surprised when Dean chuckles, shaking his head. Then he’s grinning back and Dean’s gaze falls to his mouth. He licks his lips on impulse and relishes the flash of heat that spikes between them. And his brain knows, of course, that there’s no way that anything can happen between them because he can imagine the look on his mother’s face if he brought home a man with dirt under his nails and grease smudged across his temple, regardless of the Adonis he may be, but he still finds himself waiting for something he can’t really identify.

Dean just smirks and gives a half-shrug. “Well, to each his own.” He lowers Castiel’s car, then slides the jack out from underneath, and stands, and as he passes it to Castiel their fingertips collide and something flickers across his face.

Castiel swallows, listens to his mother’s voice echo a none-too-vague warning. It wars violently against the itch in Castiel’s skin to reach out and just touch the man in front of him, in whatever way he can. But he’s been a good son for a long time, and so he simply says, “Please. Let me give you something for the trouble.” It may spare him just a few short seconds more with Dean, but he doesn’t want to say goodbye yet.
And then Dean catches his elbow, his eyes soft and welcoming. “How about you buy me a drink, instead?”

*

There are drops of condensation that feel cool against the palm of Castiel’s hand as he takes the beer bottle from Ellen Harvelle. Ellen’s the owner of the Roadhouse, and Castiel can still remember the surprise he’d felt when she told him as she wiped down the bar, sleeves of her plaid button down shirt rolled up to her elbows, chestnut hair swept up into a messy bun. It was three years ago, back when Castiel still associated business people with three piece suits and Armani briefcases. Ellen had taken every preconceived notion he’d had and blew them right out of the water, and he doesn’t even try to pretend that it doesn’t make him love her all the more.

She smiles at him widely. “Castiel, I’ve got to say, I thought you’d found a new watering hole,” she teases.

“Like anyone would abandon this place,” Dean tosses back. He grins at Ellen with easy familiarity and Castiel is reminded that Dean mentioned he comes here often. Privately, he doesn’t understand how he managed to come here for years without seeing Dean either, but then, Castiel traditionally hides in the shadows, making conversation with Ellen and no one else. He’s not easily recognized, by any stretch of imagination – a winery doesn’t exactly house celebrities – but when it’s happened, it’s always made him deeply uncomfortable, the eyes that roam over him as if he doesn’t quite measure up to the image they expect from a multi-millionaire. Not that he can expect anything different, really, considering the way he first regarded Ellen, but it’s always awkward, nevertheless.

“I’ve been at school,” Castiel answers. “I’ve only just returned.”

For a moment Ellen looks as though she wants to say more, but then her gaze flickers to Dean again and her eyebrows arch slightly. “Well, you say goodbye before you leave,” she says instead, and wanders away from the bar to talk to another patron.

Castiel is alone again with Dean.

He doesn’t know why he agreed to this. He wants to blame the rebellious part of him, the side that despises everything Lord Enterprises has brought into his life, but it isn’t that simple. There’s a draw to Dean and the confidence he exudes, and Castiel can still easily recall the understanding that had bled into Dean’s expression when he explained about his familial obligations. And maybe that’s it, the knowing look in Dean’s eyes because Castiel can barely remember what it feels like to have a kindred spirit. He still talks to Anna – no power on Earth could make him stop – but the fact of the matter is that she has her own life now, and her once-sympathetic ear has turned into monologues of advice telling him that the only thing that will make him happy will be to leave.

He realizes he’s been quiet for an unnaturally long time, and though he’s never been one for filling the silence just for the sake of it, he flounders for something to say. “How do you know Ellen?”

Dean takes a long swig of his beer. His short, clipped nails pick at the label and for a moment Castiel wonders if he is going to ignore the question altogether. Then he shifts his gaze to Castiel, examining him more carefully than he has before. “She’s been a friend of the family for years,” he finally answers, and Castiel knows there’s more to the story than that, but isn’t sure if he should push. He can never tell if he’s coming across intrusive or curious so he lets it lie. “What about you? When did you start coming here?”
“Three years ago, when I turned twenty-one. My cousin, Gabriel, was in town, and he considered it a . . . rite of passage, I suppose, that I lose my alcohol virginity as spectacularly as possible. So he, my sister Anna, and I visited several bars, and this place was our last stop.”

Dean smiles warmly. “The Roadhouse was the last stop? Bet you were feeling pretty good by then.”

“Oh yes. By the time we walked in I was quite convinced of my invincibility.” And so he proceeds to tell Dean the rest of the story, how he accidentally bumped into a man twice his size who was lining up a shot for a game of pool, and how his mistake cost the guy $200. How Anna, who has always known her way around a billiard table, had offered to play the guy again, double or nothing, and how her turn never ended until ‘Eight ball, corner pocket.’

Dean laughs and Castiel, emboldened by the success, offers another story, and talks about his next birthday, and the giant lion statue that his mother bought him for a gift. “That’s how she is,” Castiel concludes, and a melancholy note slips in. “She buys things based on what she, herself, would want. She’s not a bad person, exactly. She’s just . . . I don’t know. Self-absorbed, I suppose.”

There’s a beat and then Dean says, “My dad was like that. So wrapped up in making sure neither of his sons left the ‘family business’ that he pushed Sam right out the door.” He blinks, looking surprised.

“Sam is your brother,” Castiel asks. This is the most information that Dean has offered since they sat down and he can’t help latching on.

“Yeah. He’s younger, he’ll be twenty-one here, soon. God, that’s weird to think about.”

“Are you close?”

“Very.” Dean sighs and shrugs. “I don’t know, my dad was a cop, so he was gone a lot. Working late, crashing at the station. So I was the one cooking dinner and making sure-” He breaks off suddenly, a beautiful red flushing his neck. “Sorry, not sure where that came from.”

Castiel smiles. “There’s no need to be sorry.” They fall silent again, nursing their drinks, but there’s something different there now, a heat that simmers under the surface with each exchanged glance. Suddenly Castiel doesn’t feel like talking and he gets the impression, when Dean’s tongue snakes out to wet his lips that he doesn’t either. “Excuse me for just a moment.”

He slides, somewhat gracelessly, off the stool, and makes his way through the crowd to the bathroom he knows hides at the back. Once inside, however, he ignores the stalls completely, goes to the sink, and twists the tap, letting cool water run over his fingers, watching it flow back into the drain. He’s nervous, he knows. Not about Dean, exactly, it’s just that he’s only been with one other person, in a relationship that ended badly. And that was almost a year ago.

The bathroom door swings open again, and Castiel looks up into the mirror facing him, and isn’t sure whether he’s surprised or not to see Dean standing there. Nerves burn up instantly, giving way to a thrill that ricochets through him like shot, and when Dean comes closer, his chest nearly touching Castiel’s back, he shivers.

Dean grins, rests a hand on Castiel’s waist. “You okay,” he asks, eyebrows arched. A picture of
innocence.

“You’re not really going to kiss me in the bathroom, are you,” Castiel breathes back. His heart hammers frantically, spine tingling at the base, and despite his words, he feels his cock give a twitch of interest.

“Who said I was going to kiss you?” Dean chuckles, low, a little dirty, slides his free hand up the contours of Castiel’s back to rest at the nape of his neck. His fingertips curl, dragging across the sensitive skin there. “Though, if I was going to, this would be a good time to do it. We’re alone in here.”

Before Castiel can actually tell if this is true or not, however, he feels teeth graze his shoulder through the fabric of his shirt, and he tries – and fails, he’s certain – to smother a soft gasp. “Dean.”

“Turn around.”

It doesn’t occur to him to question or argue, and he turns to face Dean. They’re inches apart, but Dean crowds up against him, until the edge of the sink is digging into the back of his legs. Dean’s taller, he realizes dimly, though the haze of desire. Not by much, but enough to loom over him, and he’s not sure why, but his throat dries up at the thought.

Dean gently brushes his thumb along Castiel’s jaw, letting it catch on his lower lip, guiding his mouth open. Castiel tries to remember to breathe. “You’re fucking gorgeous, you know that,” Dean whispers, and it seems to reverberate against the walls. Castiel is sure he’s going to kiss him then, and he does, but the corner of Castiel’s lips, and Castiel groans in frustration. “Wanted you the moment I saw you, Cas.”

“So then kiss me already,” Castiel mumbles.

Dean smirks, his eyes alive and burning. “I am kissing you.” And to punctuate his point, he presses a soft kiss to Castiel’s cheek. Castiel sighs and doesn’t bother to fight it when his hand moves of its own accord to tangle in Dean’s hair. And maybe that was the right move because Dean makes a noise of approval, jerks back to stare into his eyes. There’s so much pupil that the rings of green seem to glitter in the light. “Cas,” he whispers, and then he kisses him.

It’s gentle in a way Castiel had thought that maybe it wouldn’t be. Dean’s mouth moves lightly against his own, wet and hot and he doesn’t remember wrapping an arm around Dean’s middle, but somehow he’s scratching at Dean’s back, aching to touch skin. Every inch of him screams in pleasure.

He doesn’t register Dean’s hands on his shoulders until he’s pushed back, away from the warm line of Dean’s body, and he blinks confusedly. “Wh-What? Are you alright?” Dean’s face is flushed, his lips spit-slick and swollen, and it takes all of Castiel’s self-control to avoid reaching for him again.

“You your place or mine,” Dean gasps.

There’s barely a decision to be made. He’s been staying with Naomi during his summer vacations, and he hasn’t been back long enough to secure an apartment of his own. “Yours.”

“Good answer.”
Dean grabs his hand, yanking him forward and to the door. Castiel expects Dean to drag him though the throng of patrons and to the exit, but he doesn’t, instead making a sharp left and to a corner of the bar that Castiel has never seen. It’s dark on this side, and just as he’s wondering if Dean’s decided to forgo a bed altogether (an idea Castiel is fairly certain he can get on board with—the wall looks comfortable enough to him) he sees that the wall ends, and just behind it, there is a set of stairs.

“There’s an apartment above the bar.” And Castiel would say something about convenience but then his mouth is occupied as Dean pulls him close and kisses him again. He pulls back and shakes his head ruefully. “You’re gonna be the death of me, man.”

Castiel squawks indignantly, and fumbles to make his mind work the way it’s supposed to. “Excuse me, but you kissed me.”

Dean jogs up three steps, then grins down at Castiel. “Oh, right, like I was supposed to resist those stupid blue eyes of yours? Sorry, Cas, but this is on you.”

Castiel tries to glare, but he’s biting back a smile. In fact, he can’t remember the last time he smiled so much. He joins Dean on the stair, and has to kiss him again. “I’ve been accused of worse.”

They make it to the landing, though later Castiel won’t be sure how. Dean trips twice, and it’s only Castiel’s swift reflexes that keep him from falling down the stairs and most likely breaking his neck. But it’s not as though Castiel has any interest in complaining when Dean licks lightly at his mouth.

“See what I mean,” Dean teases, but he doesn’t fool Castiel, who watches with amusement as the other man works to get his key into the lock.

“Maybe it’s upside down.”

“Dude, shut it.”

As the lock clicks, Dean pauses and glances at Castiel, a flicker of nervousness settling into his expression. “It’s not much,” he says warningly.

Something unravels in Castiel at the uncertainty reflecting back at him. He smiles and leans up to brush his lips against Dean’s, light and compassionate. He meets Dean’s eyes with his own, hopes he sees the honesty there. “It doesn’t matter,” he says. “Really. I’m not—” Not Naomi, he means.

If Dean hears the unspoken words, he gives no indication. He twists the handle, and pushes open the door and Castiel gets a glimpse of a small living room and a brown couch before Dean shoves him up against the wall, and collides their mouths together.

It’s hardly a kiss at all as much as mashing of lips, desperation manifesting in touch. It’s good, it’s so good, and Castiel gasps at want that burns in his gut, claws its way to the surface. He’s dimly aware of the hand Dean fastens around his wrist, of the dull pain when that same wrist is slammed a little too hard into the wall, trapped.

“Sorry,” Dean murmurs. Castiel thinks he replies something reassuring, but Dean uses the opportunity to slide his tongue into Castiel’s mouth so odds are he doesn’t hear him anyway. He clutches at Dean’s shirt with his free hand, dragging him closer, then groans frantically when Dean slots a thigh between his legs and pushes up gently, but firmly, into his groin. Castiel chokes.
brokenly, his head falling back into the wall behind him, and Dean follows, pressing wet, open mouth kisses into his neck. He feels blood rush south when Dean bites.

“Cas.” Dean draws away then, and the desire that’s sketched so detailed across his fair features is enough to make Castiel’s mouth water. “Let’s go to bed.”

Goosebumps erupt down Castiel’s arms but he nods and wordlessly follows Dean as he makes his way through the small apartment. The bedroom is at the end of the hall, and they pass a little kitchen and living area that Castiel stares at, because he’s fairly certain that if he looks at Dean again he’s going to wind up pulling his clothes off, regardless of where they are.

The room is dark and doesn’t have much by way of furniture, just a chest of drawers that could be decades old, a T.V. stand with no television, and a large, king-size bed. The bed isn’t made, the navy sheets and blanket twisted into knots at the foot, and heat flares in Castiel’s belly as his mind provides a picture of how exactly Dean would look, spread out and stunning in sleep.

They say nothing else. Dean pulls him close, kisses him long and deep and slow, reaching calloused hands under his shirt and scraping tracks into the skin of his back. Castiel reaches for the button of Dean’s pants, and tugs it free. He can’t resist running his knuckles against the hardened flesh the jeans conceal, and even through the denim he can feel Dean’s body respond. He sucks in a breath, his brain short-circuits and Dean growls impatiently against his mouth. Castiel shifts his grip to the top button of his own shirt, but Dean bats his hands away to replace them with his own.

“Too slow,” he whispers.

Castiel would laugh but he’s struck frozen by the sight of Dean pushing his shirt from his shoulders, the feel of the fabric falling to the ground. When he notices Castiel’s expression, Dean grins. “You with me?”

Castiel blinks, and hooks his fingers around the bottom of Dean’s shirt and sharply tugs it up and it’s wretched having to pull away long enough to free him, but it does come with its reward. Dean’s skin jumps under Castiel’s touch; he runs his thumb over Dean’s nipple and drinks in the sound of Dean’s throaty moan. It can’t be possible that every inch of Dean is as perfect as his face, but the dips of hips as Castiel pushes his jeans down to pool around his ankles beg Castiel to taste them. So he does.

He drops to his knees, lets the heat spreading through him guide his actions, runs his tongue along one side, then the other. Dean tastes clean and warm and his boxers are absolutely infuriating so Castiel jerks them out of the way to nose at the wiry hairs at the base of Dean’s cock, lets his lips catch on the tight skin. “Dean.”

The sound that tears out of his partner is breathtaking, addicting, and desperate to hear it again, Castiel shoots Dean a dark look through his eyelashes, smirks at Dean’s parted lips, the flush down his neck, then leans back slightly and fastens his lips around the head.

Dean chokes and it’s lovely, and Castiel smiles. He takes as much of Dean as he can before wrapping his hand around the rest and sucks Dean off hard and hot and fast.

“Cas,” Dean says, voice just this side of hysterical. Castiel glances upward. “You gotta stop.” He groans, runs his fingers through Castiel’s hair, locks them there and Castiel mourns the loss as he begrudgingly gets to his feet. Dean’s dick is all flushed and leaking and the temptation to take just one more taste is dizzying.
Dean makes short work of his pants and underwear. The feeling of finality the simple action provides spurs Castiel to kiss Dean again, before the other man spins them, and pushes Castiel to the bed. He follows him, settling on top, between Castiel’s knees and does nothing but stare for a long moment. He looks like he’s going to speak, but silence stretches on and finally he reaches to his left to root around in the bedside table. He pulls out a condom and a little bottle and the lid pops open loudly.

Dean takes notice of the tremble that travels down Castiel’s spine, and settles back on his haunches to study him. “You’ve done this before, right?”

“Yes.” He wants to leave it at that, but Dean doesn’t move, still watching him with too-knowing eyes, so he blurs out, “But it’s . . . been a while.”

He half-expects Dean to laugh or roll his eyes at Castiel’s confession, but he does neither. Instead, wrapping Castiel’s legs more securely around his waist, he leans down and kisses him, slow and soft and devastatingly gentle. “We don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” Dean murmurs against his mouth. Castiel blinks and stares up at the man above him and slowly shakes his head.

“I do want to, Dean.”

With those words Dean is on him again, nipping at his lower lip, running his hand down Castiel’s side, using the other to hold himself up. Castiel tilts his head back, exposing his neck, and shudders when Dean’s teeth graze the skin there. He’s tightly wound, he wants Dean so much he can barely stand it, and he’s starting to think that if Dean doesn’t fuck him right now he’s going to lose his mind or die. Possibly both. He attempts to convey this with words, but just as he’s despairing that the high, keening noise that spills from his mouth is not as translatable as he might wish, Dean seems to get the message, and pours the lube onto his fingers.

He expects to immediately feel the pressure of Dean’s touch to his entrance, so he’s surprised when Dean looms over him to kiss him again, a little rougher, a little dirtier than any before, and Castiel’s cock is hard and red and curving up towards his chest. “Dean,” he gasps out. “Please, Dean.”

Dean presses one last, chaste kiss to his cheek and, holding his eyes, pushes the first finger inside.

It’s uncomfortable, there’s really no way around it. It’s not painful, just a little intrusive, and Castiel breathes a long breath to keep from clenching as Dean’s head tilts down to press against his temple. “You okay,” Dean whispers against his ear.

Castiel nods, words far, far beyond him.

Dean adds another finger, his middle, it feels like, and the two digits shift and scissor him open and this part hurts, but he forgets that completely when Dean’s eyes darken and he crooks his fingers, and firmly brushes Castiel’s prostate.

Castiel lets out a loud, wild whine and then Dean does it again, then again, and Castiel gasps and writhes beneath him, and he’s fully hard and leaking and sure he’s going to explode.

“God damn,” Dean murmurs, staring at him with such lust that Castiel’s mind blanks out. He slips in a third finger, and Castiel groans, sweat creeping down his forehead. “Christ, look at you.” He licks lightly at the seam of Castiel’s mouth and gives a soft sound of approval when Castiel allows his lips to fall open. “Gotta – need to be inside you, Cas. God . . . you’re just-”
The words send jolts of pleasure into Castiel’s belly and he nods back brokenly as Dean impatiently tears the condom wrapper open with his teeth and rolls the condom onto his dick. He takes his dick into his free hand, and slowly guides it into Castiel until he bottoms out.

For a long moment neither of them moves, just breathing each other’s air and ignoring the pounding of their hearts. Dean’s watching Castiel so carefully that he notices when Castiel gives a shaky but decisive nod, and Dean nods back before pulling out and sliding home again, this time adjusting his position and hitting Castiel’s prostate once more.

“Dean, touch me. Dean,” Castiel groans mindlessly, and is so relieved when he feels the tight grip circle around his cock that he could cry. Dean pumps him furiously in time with the thrusts of his hips and Castiel can’t even cry out before he’s coming, hot and hard, scrabbling at Dean’s shoulders, babbling incoherently through the pleasure.

The impulse to slump languidly onto the mattress is strong, but Castiel tries to focus as best as he can, and tightens his grip on Dean’s arms, staring up at him as Dean’s eyes snap to his. One hand finds its way to the back of Dean’s neck, fingernails dragging across the hairs at the base, and with one broken, “Ca-Cas,” Dean comes inside of him.

It’s a long time before Castiel’s heart returns to a steady rhythm and his breathing slows. Dean pulls out carefully and they both grunt at the sudden separation. Dean’s warm so he presses closer under the length of his body, allowing their legs to tangle, his arms to slip around Dean’s middle. His eyes droop sleepily as he listens to Dean carefully remove the condom, and throw it into a trashcan somewhere nearby. He’s comfortable.

A beat later Dean’s lips brush Castiel’s hair. He tries to make a sound of acknowledgement, but it’s muffled against Dean’s skin, and the other man chuckles, though there’s a note of uncertainty that makes Castiel look up in confusion. “Dean?”

Dean stares back, something soft in the crinkles of his eyes. He sighs, catches Castiel’s chin with the curve of his index finger, and draws him in to kiss him slow. Then he swallows. “I probably should have mentioned . . . I don’t really do the whole ‘relationship’ thing,” he murmurs, eyes downcast. “It’s just not something I’ve ever been any good at.”

“It’s alright,” Castiel answers, and he refuses to allow himself to feel surprise, or hurt. Things like this happen every day, he’s fully aware, and if it’s not exactly what he had in mind, well, it’s a pleasant enough memory to carry. Of course, it’s not a situation he’s ever been in himself so he offers, stiltedly, “Did you want to me to – I can go, if you’d like.”

“Nah. It’s not necessary. Stay the night. Get some sleep.”

Castiel nods and tilts his head to nip gently at the line of Dean’s jaw before settling. Dean pulls the blanket up over his shoulders to cover them both, and the gesture is oddly tender. Almost out of place.

A couple of hours later, Dean wakes Castiel with his cock down his throat, his fingers digging crescent-shaped indents into his hips, hot and possessive and Castiel barely has time to thread desperate fingers through Dean’s hair before he’s coming for the second time. He makes a feeble attempt to reciprocate but Dean just laughs and shakes his head. “That was all for you,” he says. His voice is gravely, thick, and Castiel is pleased to be the cause.
When he wakes for the second time, the bed is cold. There’s a glass of water on the bedside table, a bottle of aspirin beside it, and tapped to the bedroom door is a short note written out in tiny, meticulous print:

Feel free to use the shower. There are towels in the hall closet.

Thanks for a good time. You ever want a repeat performance, you know where to find me.

-D

Castiel plucks the paper from the door, and folds the strip of tape down so it won’t be sticky. Then he tucks it safely into his wallet. He doesn’t know why he saves it, but he does.

*

Inias is angry. He tries to fake it with half-hearted smiles and stilted conversation, but he declines their dinner invitation and refuses to even look at Naomi, with whom he typically gets along well. He immediately begs off, declaring that he needs to go pick up gifts for the groomsmen, but Castiel saw the monogrammed cufflinks stacked on Inias’ kitchen counter the week before. He doesn’t argue, though, and tries to find comfort in the kiss Inias presses into his temple before walking to the door.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night,” Castiel asks, falling into a step beside him. He hears the concern in his own voice but suddenly confronted with the prospect of being left alone to deal with the reporter, he can’t help that he’s nervous. He’s no better a liar than Anna and he worries he’ll be asked questions he won’t know how to answer.

Inias meets his eyes and smiles and it’s easier to breathe. “Yes, Castiel, of course.” He hesitates before continuing, “I’m sorry I can’t stay.” He looks it, twinges of guilt darkening his features.

“Don’t apologize,” Castiel says firmly. They reach Inias’ car and he halts by the driver’s side door. “I understand. You need to get the gifts.” He refuses to call Inias out on the lie. If being around Dean is too overwhelming for him right now, well, it’s a feeling Castiel himself is quite familiar with, and it’s more than fair if he would like to save face. Inias smiles gratefully.

The sound of tires on cement causes both men to look up, and coming down the driveway is a beat-up, old Accord. Another flutter of fear erupts in his stomach as it pulls up beside them.

“Good luck,” Inias murmurs. He gets into his own car without another word, and as he shifts into reverse he sends Castiel an unreadable look. And then he’s gone.

With nothing left to distract him, Castiel begrudgingly looks over as the newest arrival gets out of his vehicle.

He’s not particularly tall or toned, is the first thing Castiel notices, but he carries intelligence in his watery blue eyes and if his beard and untucked shirt are a little messy, there’s nothing unprofessional in the firm grip of his handshake. “Chuck Shurley,” says the man and then his gaze falls to something over Castiel’s shoulder. When Castiel follows his eyes he is not at all surprised to see Dean striding confidently towards them, a warm, welcoming smile etched across his features.
“Chuck,” he greets when he reaches them. He clasps the reporter’s hand jovially, and Chuck grins back. “Man I haven’t seen you in forever.”

Chuck laughs and there’s no tension there, and Castiel determinedly does not feel jealous. “Two months,” the man corrects. “And you’re the one who keeps canceling.”

“Now that doesn’t sound like me at all. Does it, Cas?”

And, again, Castiel finds himself fighting the urge to say something scathing. Because the fact of the matter is that regardless of how many times Dean may have canceled on this man, whatever the reasons, he doubts it can compare to watching him dissolve a marriage. So, actually, that does sound like Dean.

He gives a noncommittal shrug, though, and pretends he doesn’t notice Dean trying to catch his eye, like he knows what he’s thinking. “Would you like to go in inside,” he says to Chuck.

Chuck makes to do just that, but then Dean reaches out and closes a hand around his wrist. Chuck looks up and when he catches sight of the blatant curiosity Dean shoots him, the guy visibly squirms.

Castiel watches the exchange with interest. There was a time, he can’t help but think, that he knew every one of Dean’s friends. Knew their histories, their stories of youthful debauchery. He learned, with the thoroughness that he learned the alphabet in kindergarten, how Dean and Charlie met, how Jo’s father died, how long she refused to speak to Dean afterwards. Hell, he knew about Lisa and Ben, how Dean had once wanted to be a part of their family so badly that he’d convinced himself he was in love with the mother, because that was easier than admitting that it wasn’t the right fit. And now there’s this man with whom Dean has a standing repartee, and Castiel feels like an outsider.

“Chuck,” Dean says loudly, yanking Castiel from his musings, “please tell me you at least asked Becky out finally.”

“Dude! My employer is right there.”

“I highly doubt that Cas considers himself your employer. And besides which, if the guy writing the article is a big fraidy cat, then I think he deserves to know.”

Chuck turns woeful eyes on Castiel. “It’s really not as simple as Dean makes it sound,” he argues. “The girl he’s talking about, Becky Rosen, she’s always been a little in love with Dean’s brother.”

“Sam,” Castiel asks in disbelief at the same time that Dean gives an impatient scoff.

“How many times are we going to have this conversation? Sam is not going to leave Sarah. Helping Becky get over him is really doing both of them a favor.”

“How does Ms. Rosen know Sam,” Castiel asks in confusion.

“She was a secretary at Sam’s firm for a few months.” It’s Dean that answers, and his mouth quirks up into a smirk at the memory. “It was hilarious.”

Chuck rolls his eyes. “Oh yeah, for Sam too, when Becky stopped putting Sarah’s calls through.”

When Castiel frowns in concern, Dean just nudges his shoulder and assures him, “Don’t worry. Sarah never did. It was just a crush, no big deal.” He doesn’t back away after, though, and their
shoulders stay pressed together, and it feels too intentional to be a coincidence. And Castiel knows that they shouldn’t be touching, not even in such an innocuous way, but it’s as though his own legs are full of lead and for a long moment he can’t find the strength he needs to take a step back. He’s drawn to the warm line of Dean’s body, to the soft hand that gently bumps his own.

Chuck turns away to head into the house so he doesn’t notice when Dean suddenly turns his hand around and lightly threads his fingers through Castiel’s. Castiel freezes at the contact, his heart leaps in his throat, and he thinks he makes some kind of sound of shock, but before he can react, Dean’s already making his way back towards the house, and Castiel is standing in the driveway alone. His hand burns where Dean touched him. His stomach swoops with something he remembers too clearly.

By the time he joins the others in the living room, Anna and Naomi are in deep conversation with Chuck and Dean is, blessedly, nowhere to be seen. Chuck glances up when he approaches. “Your mom was just giving me a little background on the house,” he says. “Is it true that Katharine Hepburn stayed here once?”

“That is the legend,” replies Castiel. “Would you like a tour of the house?”

“Maybe later. Hey, do you think I could get a look at your place too?”

Castiel stiffly lowers himself into a chair to buy himself a quick moment to think. Quite obviously it’s a little early in the process to outright refuse but there is no way Chuck can set foot in the house he shared with Dean. Too many pairs of piteous eyes have been unable to meet his own when they’ve seen the inside, and reporters are hardly known for their compassionate and understanding nature. Dean, himself, hasn’t been there since the divorce and Castiel is fully intending to keep it that way.

He’s saved from responding, however, by Anna, who intervenes, “Castiel, I’m sure Chuck would like to hear a little about Inias.” He sends her a grateful look that she returns with a wink.

Chuck nods and shifts on the couch, giving Castiel his full attention. He holds a small pad and pencil in his hands, poised to write, his wide eyes suddenly narrowed and sharp. He sheds every inch of his disorganization like a dead skin, and Castiel is forced to acknowledge that it’s not that hard to believe that this man is a well-known writer. “So, Castiel,” Chuck begins slowly. He seems to be debating which question to ask first. “Well, let’s start out simple, okay? How did you and Inias meet?”

For several minutes things go on pleasantly enough. Castiel allows memories of his fiancé to overtake him as he talks about their meeting, about the mix-up at the Starbucks. How Inias slipped him his number when he gave Castiel his drink, how he called him that very night because Castiel has never really understood the dating ritual in general and was taken aback when Balthazar later explained about the three day rule. It wasn’t something that had come up when he started his relationship with Dean, but then, getting Dean’s number was nowhere as simple as with Inias. When you have to fake an expired car engine just to chase down the object of your affections, well, there’s really no room for subtlety.

He was so naïve, he knows that now. So struck dumb by the electricity that had sparked between them, he’d become an instant addict, something inside him clamoring desperately to be closer to that connection he’d never felt the equal of. Something bigger and somehow more than lust.

He doesn’t realize that he’s fallen silent until he sees Chuck’s eyebrows rise.
“Sorry,” he says, embarrassedly. “I uh, I seem to have lost my train of thought.”

“You were talking about Inias.”

Dean’s voice drifts over from the doorway to the hall, and Castiel may not jump but it’s a near thing. He glances over to where Dean stands with his arms crossed, leaning against the doorframe, and feels a twinge of guilt he cannot explain. It’s not as though Dean can possibly be surprised to hear Castiel talk about Inias – they’re what the article is about, after all – but nevertheless his mouth snaps shut with an audible click when he translates the silent, palpable fury radiating off of his ex. It’s there in the clench of his jaw and tightness around his eyes, despite his efforts to hide it behind a lifeless smile. “Sorry I missed the beginning, had a give Sam a call, check in.”

It is not possible that Chuck does not detect the change in the mood of the room, but he doesn’t comment, moving on as swiftly as if it was his plan all along. “So, what was it about the guy that grabbed your attention in the beginning?”

It’s awkward enough for Anna and his mother to be present while he answers these questions; it’s another thing entirely for Dean to be there. There’s too much between them to make room for the love he has for Inias and confusion clouds his judgment, makes his mask slip so far he worries that he will not be able to put it back in place. But they’re all waiting on him to speak so he draws a breath and tries to ignore the staccato rhythm of his heart. “I’m not sure, exactly,” he hedges. For a horrifying moment he comes up completely blank, at a loss for any kind of answer. Then his mind clears. “He was kind,” he says, and he nearly sags with relief as the words finally come. “He was patient. He knew about the divorce just from town gossip, and he knew that I hadn’t had many— any “relationships since . . . since. So it meant a lot that he was willing to go at my speed.”

This time he doesn’t let his gaze waver from Chuck’s. He can feel holes where Dean is staring into the back of his head, but he’s terrified of what he’ll see and right now he just can’t risk it.

Chuck nods and makes a note. “And how was the relationship? Was it rocky – turbulent but passionate? Or more of a slow burn type thing?”

“A slow burn,” Castiel answers softly.

“Oh huh. And—”

Whatever Chuck was going to ask is cut off by the arrival of the cook, a woman named Dinah who cheerfully announces that their dinner is ready. Naomi leads the way back out to the patio, explaining that they will have to eat outdoors tonight, as the dining room is already set up for the rehearsal dinner, and though it’s muggy, there are two large fans that make it slightly more bearable.

It’s a little jarring when Dean doesn’t take his customary seat to Castiel’s left, choosing one two seats over and across instead, but he tells himself that it’s just the familiar setting that has thrown him off balance. To distract himself, he gestures for Anna to take the seat, which she does without comment.

The pasta looks delicious, and Castiel tells Dinah so on her way out of the room, firmly ignoring Naomi’s impatient look. It’s the smallest of rebellions, but he takes some pleasure in the way her mouth presses into an irritated line. He doesn’t mean to glance at Dean, but when he does, Dean shoots him a small, approving nod that makes his insides flutter with pride.
“Well, Dean, how is Sam,” Anna asks after a few minutes of quiet, enthusiastic chewing. Dinah’s Alfredo sauce has been a favorite in the Lord household since she joined the staff.

Dean swallows his bite. “Good. Really good, actually. He made partner last month.”

“That’s great.”

“It is,” Castiel agrees.

“Have he and that lovely wife of his given any thought to children,” asks Naomi.

“Mother,” Castiel reprimands sharply, but Dean waves away his concern with a chuckle.

“Don’t worry about it, Cas,” he says. “To answer your question, Naomi, no, kids are not on the menu any time soon. Sarah wants to focus on the gallery right now, and plus, with all of Sam’s additional work . . .”

“It’s not really feasible,” Castiel finishes questioningly. Dean shoots him an indecipherable look, then inclines his head in agreement.

Chuck looks up interestedly from his plate. “Do you know Sam pretty well, then, Castiel?”

The last thing Castiel feels like discussing is his relationship with Dean’s brother. They always got along extremely well, but he hasn’t seen him since Bobby’s funeral, and their final conversation hadn’t been the friendliest. The sadness in Sam’s eyes right before Castiel left is burned into his memory. “Not that well,” he lies. Luckily no one points it out for what it is. “I wasn’t married to Dean for very long.”

“Two years, right,” Chuck asks.

“Yes. A little over.”

Chuck laughs, a bright and ringing thing. “I can’t imagine anyone staying married to this guy for that long.”

The jolt of pain that the joke summons knifes hard at Castiel’s gut and, inwardly, he flinches. Nearly two years later and the wounds are still just scabbed over. A part of him whispers doubts that terrify him, about Inias, wonderings if it’s right to marry a man when he still carries the emotions that he does about his divorce. Anger would be normal, or sadness, even, but not this absolute . . . revulsion, this blinding hatred, not for Dean, but for their divorce, for the papers that ended their marriage; the flat-out heartbreak that makes his skin crawl when he thinks about their happier times. It’s harder to ignore when Dean is here, just a couple of feet away.

“But, anyway, you and Dean must get along pretty well if he’s one of the guests to the wedding,” Chuck continues and Castiel doesn’t trust himself enough to comment. “Not to mention staying here, where you’re having the thing.”

If the situation were anything else, it might be laughable when Anna and Naomi both swivel their heads to check his reaction. They wear mirroring looks of fear and for that instant they look overwhelmingly alike. “I didn’t realize you would be staying with us,” Castiel says slowly. He doesn’t want to lose his temper with Chuck there to bear witness, but he’s starting to feel a little claustrophobic about the wedding. Suddenly everywhere he looks is his ex-husband, and after
spending so long avoiding him, it’s as though he’s forgotten how to hide his emotions well.

“They didn’t tell you?”

“Certainly not.”

Dean, to his credit, looks surprised and mildly uncomfortable. “Yeah, there was a small fire in the apartment below mine, so they were fixing it up, and I was gonna need a place to stay for a few days anyway. So, Naomi offered . . .”

*Naomi* offered? No matter how many times Castiel repeats the words to himself, they don’t make sense. His mother *hates* Dean, she always has. The moment the two met, a mutual loathing had sprung up that had lasted the full duration of his and Dean’s relationship. It’s not possible that both of them have forgotten, is it? But he can’t deny that Naomi has been treating Dean with less hostility than normal. He doesn’t understand the reason, but he can’t question his mother with Chuck present, so he chooses to swallow his distrust for the moment, and says, the way he knows he’s supposed to, “It’s not a problem, Dean. It will be nice having you here.” Here. Where Castiel has been staying these last few days before the wedding. In the house where Castiel asked Inias not to sleep because they have waited this long to be intimate with each other, and it would make the buildup that much better if they see each other less. He gets a migraine imagining the phone call he is going to have to make when dinner is over.

*When the plates are cleared, Castiel is too drained to continue with Chuck’s interview, and asks if they can continue in the morning, when his mind is a bit sharper. The truth is that the more he thinks about the impending conversation with Inias, the more convinced he is that it is a conversation that they need to have face-to-face, especially considering the tension from earlier, and he’s already heading towards the door when Dean suddenly steps in front of him.

“Hey,” Dean says and Castiel immediately frowns in reply. His brain may understand that Dean is not at fault here and that if he wants to lay blame he could do so at Balthazar’s feet, or, even more so, his own, but he’s already worried about seeing Inias again so soon after the previous tension, and some part of him is really angling to fight.

“What is it Dean?” The others are nowhere to be seen. Chuck decided to spend the evening taking pictures of the grounds and he knows that Anna retired to her old room as soon as she was able. Naomi, he supposes is off doing whatever it is she does. They’re alone, again, and he hates how cornered it makes him feel. “I’m in a hurry.”

“Look, about me staying here—”

“If you’re about to ask me if I’m alright with it, Dean, I guarantee you will not like my answer.”

Dean laughs and shakes his head, and Castiel wonders why he doesn’t step away from the warmth of Dean’s body. “No, I kinda guessed that. I was actually going to say that . . . I mean, you don’t have to tell Inias that I’m staying here if you don’t want to.

Now Castiel *does* jerk away, stepping backwards and narrowing his eyes dangerously. There are many things he expects from Dean Winchester, but permission to lie has never been one of them, and now Dean has offered it twice in one day. “I cannot hide this from Inias,” he snaps. “Perhaps that’s how you deal with unfortunate truths in the present, but I don’t believe in making the same mistake
twice.” He doesn’t choose his words thoughtlessly, and finds vicious pleasure in watching Dean’s eyes harden.

“Well how lucky for Inias that you had that practice marriage. You got to work out all the kinks before you got to the real thing.”

He stares back silently, trembling with anger. His blood boils under his skin, anger threatening to take control and guide his curled fists into the perfection of Dean’s face. “Go to hell.”

He sweeps out the door without another word, slamming it behind him. His own car is parked in the garage, and he quickly types the code into the keypad, but it takes three tries before it allows him inside, he’s shaking so violently. He takes a deep breath to steady his hands as he pulls out his car key, and manages to get it into the lock without too much of a problem. He slides into the driver’s seat, and grips the steering wheel as he breathes in again.

He is fully aware that he’s overreacting. That he should have expected things with Dean to get ugly at some point over the weekend, that being in close quarters with him was bound to be complicated. Before today they’ve had exactly two conversations alone since the divorce, so it stands to reason that it would take more than a couple of hours to find some semblance of a groove. And it’s not like Dean said anything that was blatantly untrue. He was married before, he is getting married again. But hearing his marriage to Dean referred to as ‘practice’ ignited something inside him that he hasn’t had to think about since it came to its untimely demise.

It certainly hadn’t felt like practice back then. From the day they met, Castiel would have done anything for Dean, would have laid down his life for his favorite person in the world. There was a time when his love had known no bounds. It had given him the strength to marry Dean in a rundown chapel without his family’s interference, to refuse to promote his cousin Lucifer – Gabriel’s brother – to the level of management at Lord Enterprises despite his mother’s insistence. It was his love for Dean that kept him from succumbing to the pressure of his job, kept him soft when he came home after an afternoon of handing out proverbial pink slips – a simple smile from his husband, his best friend, enough to soothe the side of him that was rubbed raw. They had been happy, at least for a while, deliriously so. Castiel had been absolutely certain that he would never love anyone else again.

But there had been rough patches too. After Sam’s accident, everything began to sour. Their first Christmas, then their second anniversary, littered with shouting matches lasting long into the night. Long hours at the office were harder to endure when he started coming home to a dark house and a husband who’d gone to bed hours ago. Hell, even the start of their relationship was a point of contention, so deep was that initial bout of distrust. And then by the time Dean got back from the six months he spent in California with Sam Castiel had already accepted that their marriage had an expiration date. He’d tried to ignore it, tried to tell himself that they just had find their footing again and everything would be fine, but the deal with Crowley was constantly looming in his mind, and there were days when Castiel had been certain the fear of Dean finding out would kill him.

Mistake after mistake after mistake. Castiel knows he could go in circles all day, but it all amounts to one thing: Crowley and Castiel’s lies weren’t enough to kill the marriage, not on their own. Really, he decides as he finally shifts his car into reverse, they should have known from the beginning that this was a relationship not built to last.

* 

The fact that Castiel makes it four weeks before he contacts Dean again is, in his opinion, quite
impressive. He could have gone back to the Roadhouse at any point over the last couple of weeks, sought out those bright green eyes, fumbled his way through small talk, and probably found his way to Dean’s bed for a second time, and not doing exactly that has been no small feat. And it’s not as though he doesn’t want to – more than once he’s had to stop himself from driving over there to see if the black Chevy Impala is in the parking lot. It’s just . . . Another one night stand isn’t what he wants, and Dean was pretty clear that was the offer.

So Castiel has been fighting the ache in his chest that begs him to go see Dean almost relentlessly, firmly directing his thoughts away from beautiful mechanics with clever fingers and soft, warm smiles to a point where his mind feels muddled nearly all the time and it might be all well and good if he didn’t start work last Monday. Working with Naomi is exhausting even in the best circumstances, exruciating in the worst, and despite the wall that separates their offices, her increasing number of visits to his door to ‘check on how he’s handling everything’ are annoying enough that he craves distraction. And he knows Dean would be excellent at it.

He sighs as he cranks his car, and pulls out of the company parking lot. He’s been learning to appreciate Fridays in a way that he never has before. At least the new salary affords him a nice apartment just a few blocks from the office, and conveniently, fifteen miles from Naomi’s house. His mother’s place is lovely and nestled in a corner of Lawrence that doesn’t get overrun with pollution and graffiti, but it also comes with his mother, so he’d been half-tempted to sleep out on the street if it came to that.

He gets the idea right as he’s coming up on his street. There’s no one behind him so he doesn’t turn, instead slowing to a stop and tilting his head in contemplation. Castiel’s knowledge of cars was demonstrated the afternoon he met Dean, but he remembers Gabriel telling him about bringing his car to the car . . . repair . . . place and how the mechanic had been unable to duplicate the problem, charging him an arm and a leg just for looking it over. So it’s clearly not unheard of for issues to arise that, for whatever reason, do not present themselves to a mechanic’s inspective eye.

His decision is made and he’s driving off in the direction of Porter Road before he can second-guess himself.

Singer’s is a simple place, small, a little run down, with paint chipped off along the side of the building, and a gravel driveway, with a garage off to the right where they presumably do their work. There’s one small window, dirt smeared along the glass that makes peering inside a virtual impossibility, and Castiel can’t help feeling a little uneasy as he climbs from his car. Not about the establishment itself, but, rather, the sudden realization that he has not prepared anything to say to Dean beyond the lie he’s concocted about his car. Not to mention the fact that there’s a good chance he won’t be here at all.

But it’s too late to back out now, he reassures himself, nervously adjusting his blazer before removing it all together and throwing it impatiently into the back seat. He’s here now, and if he’s going to do this then he’s going to do it right, with whatever confidence he possesses. He takes a final, deep breath, steeling himself, and pushes the door to the entryway open.

Castiel has never been to a mechanic before, but the front room looks the same as any other he’s seen on television. There are several black chairs on the left facing a TV set playing some 90’s comedy. On the right, a high counter where a tall, heavy-set man with a ginger beard and light blue eyes is bent over a stack of paperwork. He wears a baseball cap and doesn’t look up as he says, “What can I do for you?”

Castiel glances around as surreptitiously as he can, but Dean is nowhere to be seen. He’s probably
in the garage, working on other vehicles, and it’s only now that Castiel is forced to acknowledge that even if he is working, there’s still a good chance Castiel won’t get to see him at all. It shouldn’t be as disappointing as it is, a heavy weight settling in the pit of his stomach.

The man – Bobby, the nameplate on his desk says – finally glances at Castiel, his eyebrows raised curiously, and Castiel remembers he was asked a question. “Oh. There’s something wrong with my car.”

“Imagine that. What’s seems to be the problem?”

“It’s making a strange sound,” says Castiel. Bobby doesn’t answer, seemingly waiting for more information, and so he adds, “A clanging sound.”

Bobby blinks. “A clanging sound,” he repeats, sounding as though he does not believe Castiel at all. “Where?”

“The car.”

“Yeah, I figured. Where in the car?”

Castiel fumbles furiously for something that won’t sound ridiculous, and doesn’t know whether or not he succeeds when he blurts out, “The engine.” Which, to him, sounds reasonable enough. If there’s a mechanical problem with a car, wouldn’t it originate in the engine? But Bobby looks vastly unimpressed, sliding out of his seat without another word, and disappearing out the door at the back of the room. Castiel frowns. Is he supposed to follow the man? Or assume he’s being disregarded because he’s so blatantly transparent?

It turns out, unfortunately, to be the latter. When the door swings open again, Bobby reappears with a very familiar man in tow.

“I’m telling you,” Dean hisses, and he hasn’t seen Castiel yet, “I don’t tell one-night stands where I work, Bobby. Come on.”

Bobby’s only answer is in the form of a half-nod in Castiel’s direction.

Castiel is watching the exchange carefully, so he sees it the moment Dean recognizes him. His eyes go wide with surprise, disbelief, and something else, something more pleasant. “Cas,” he says, and Castiel’s heart gives a little flutter at hearing his name on those lips he kissed not so long ago. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“There’s something wrong with my car,” he says again, gathering his courage. Dean does not, after all, look displeased to see him, or angry. It must be a good sign. But Dean gives him the same doubtful frown that Bobby did so he continues, awkwardly, “There’s a clanging noise.”

At that the side of Dean’s mouth curls up, and he glances at Bobby, says, “Just give me a few, I’ll take care of it,” then grasps Castiel by the elbow, and drags him outside.

“Dude, what the hell,” he demands, once they’re alone.

Castiel sighs, his façade abandoned in the face of Dean’s annoyance. He had hoped to ease into this conversation, but now that it’s clear there is no way to go but straight through, he relents. “I wanted to see you.”
Dean sighs back, raking a large hand through the locks of his hair. He looks torn between throwing Castiel out and laughing. “Look, Cas, it’s nothing personal,” he says, a note of gentleness creeping in, “but I thought I was pretty clear.”

“You were. And I appreciated the candor. I just-”

“Didn’t care?”

“Wanted to double check,” Castiel finishes. Then he throws Dean an irritated frown of his own, because this is not going the way he planned. “I . . . If your answer is no again, I’ll understand. And I won’t keep bothering you. But I had a really nice time that night, and I don’t see why you wouldn’t agree that it’s worth exploring. I thought, perhaps, we could do dinner this evening, if you’re free.”

The stare Dean levels at him is long and contemplative. Castiel is sure he’s about to be turned down. Then he blows out a heavy breath and cracks a small grin. “Alright, already. Jesus.”

Castiel doesn’t bother hiding his wide, answering smile. “Good. Great. I could pick you up from work if you like.”

“No thanks.” Dean gestures to his oil stained shirt and the grime under his nails. “Shower’s calling my name, and I need to go home for a little while anyway. I could pick you up, though from your place.”

“That would be fine, thank you. Let me give you my address.”

Castiel is jittery the rest of the evening, eyes drifting to the clock more often than his pride allows him to acknowledge. They agreed to meet at eight, and the intervening hours crawl. He tries to distract himself with work, the possible expansion into China, but finds himself, instead, remembering the sound of Dean’s laughter and the curve of his mouth. Embarrassingly, he catches himself smiling lightly over absolutely nothing at all, the words of his reports blurring together into an indecipherable sea of black. By the time 7:00 rolls around, he’s long since given up attempting any guise beyond that of a teenage girl.

He takes a long shower just to pass the time, lets the hot water unwind some of the tension in his shoulders. He finishes getting ready with less than twenty minutes to spare, and he’s pretending to read the paper when the sound of the doorbell echoes through his apartment. Dean’s early, but Castiel isn’t complaining. He takes a deep breath to steady his nerves then pulls the front door open.

It’s not Dean.

Naomi stands on the other side of the threshold, still in her suit from work, not a strand of hair out of place. She takes in the sight of Castiel’s blue button-down and black slacks. Raises her eyebrows. “Good evening, Castiel.”

Castiel blinks back in confusion, his mind groping for any memory of making plans with her, but nothing comes. “Mother,” he says at length. “Should I have been expecting you?”

“No, no. I was on my way home and thought I would stop in. See if you would like to have a late dinner.”
He can count on one hand the amount of times Naomi has ever arrived unannounced and he doesn’t think she’s ever surprised him with an invitation like this one. He supposes he should be warmed by her effort but he doesn’t step back to allow her entry. “I appreciate you coming by, but I already have plans.”

“I can see that. A date?” Her voice holds none of the malice he’d been dreading, just curiosity, so he answers honestly.

“Yes. A man I met recently.”

For all the turbulence ingrained in his relationship with Naomi, coming out to her had been remarkably easy. She hadn’t questioned his history with women, didn’t argue when he told her that he identified as bisexual. She’d taken the news with as much aplomb as if he told her he preferred green beans to peas and now, years later, she doesn’t so much as bat an eye. “Were you planning on telling me,” is what she decides to latch onto instead.

And just like that, ire rises up in him, heavy and confining. “It’s a first date,” he snaps. “That would be a bit premature.”

She opens her mouth, but her argument is stalled by the sudden rumble of a car engine. Castiel looks past Naomi’s shoulder just in time to see Dean’s Impala slow to a stop along the curb by his door. A beat later, Dean kills the ignition, and gets out.

Castiel’s heart rate increases with each step Dean takes up the driveway. He’s foregone the formerly-white t-shirt in favor of a crisp, clean dress shirt, and his ratty work jeans for a clean, dark pair. He’s shaved, but left a light five o’clock shadow that Castiel would desperately like to taste.

“Hey, Cas,” Dean greets when he’s within earshot. Despite Naomi’s presence, his gaze remains trained on Castiel, trailing approvingly over his body.

Excitement courses through him, heady and hot. “Hello, Dean.” Despairing, he glances at Naomi, then back at Dean. Something inside him warns him to keep ample distance between the two of them, but he knows there’s no way to escape an introduction without being rude. “This is my mother, Naomi Lord. Mother, this is Dean Winchester.”

Dean offers a hand that Naomi shakes, and though neither of them says anything, Castiel is quite certain they are sizing each other up. He realizes, at that moment, that he didn’t paint a particularly pleasant picture of his mother the last time he saw Dean, and inwardly flinches.

“We should be going,” Castiel immediately says, once Dean and Naomi have returned their hands to their sides. He turns, removes his keys from their hook, and steps outside, pulling the door closed behind him. Naomi watches the motion, something unreadable in her expression. “Thank you again for stopping by,” he continues. He means it. “Any other time . . .”

But Naomi doesn’t move, watches Dean press fingers to the small of Castiel’s back. The look flickering on her face is one he’s seen her wear dozens of times staring down employees that are moments away from being forced to pack up their desks though he can’t imagine what her issue could be. She’s never been the type to insert herself into his relationships and she knows nothing about Dean whatsoever. “Castiel,” she says, “what’s the hurry? I’d like to get to know your friend.”
If she’s expecting Dean to back off then she must be disappointed because unless Castiel is misreading him, there’s amusement rolling off of Dean in waves and something else, like a spark of challenge. Then he raises his eyebrows questioningly at Castiel. “What do you think, Cas? We got a few minutes we can spare for your mom?”

Really he can’t imagine a worse idea, but he can’t help but chase the mischief in Dean’s smirk and shrugs helplessly before turning back to open the door. He gestures for the other two to follow him inside and the three settle into the living room. It’s not a large space but plenty of places for them to sit, and his heart gives a squeeze when Dean settles close to him on the couch. Naomi very visibly notices but though she presses her lips together, she doesn’t address it. Instead she focuses her attention solely on Dean. “So, Mr. Winchester,” she begins, all business, “what is it that you do?”

Castiel stiffens but once more Dean is all relaxed limbs and confidence. “I’m a mechanic,” he replies. “Lucky for Cas, here.”

“Is that so? And how long have you been working with cars?”

“Long time. I’ve been helping out around the garage since I was a kid, then picked it up full time when I graduated from high school.”

“Oh, so you did graduate high school? That’s admirable.”

And Dean, beautiful, perfect Dean, doesn’t rise to bait, blinks back calmly and without comment. He waits patiently for the next question.

Naomi is a professional at this and smoothly changes topics. “I hope your work doesn’t keep you from enjoying a social life.”

“I go out.” He shrugs. “Not as often as I’d like, but often enough.”

“I see.” Naomi tuts softly, and her expression melts into one of utter disapproval. She pounces on Dean’s words with all the subtlety of a mountain lion. “And if I may ask, is that behavior that will cross over once you are married? Because, you see, Castiel wants children-”

“Mother!”

“And I’d like to see that happen with someone who doesn’t feel the need to spend his nights going out, carousing with the boys, so to speak.” She somehow manages to sound both prim and ridiculous, her mouth struggling around the unfamiliar term. If he weren’t certain he was moments away from expiring from humiliation, Castiel thinks he would probably laugh.

Dean clears his throat, finally taken off guard, and colors slightly. “Well, no offence, ma’am, but if you knew me at all you’d know

Finally Dean takes a breath. “Well, no disrespect, ma’am, but if you knew me at all you’d know
that you don’t need to be worried about that. When I’m committed, I’m committed.”

Naomi opens her mouth to argue, but Dean cuts her off by getting to his feet, and holding out a hand for Castiel to take. He pulls Castiel to his feet, and immediately steers him towards the front door. “Well, Naomi, it was really nice to meet you,” he says, setting a quick pace. “But Cas and I really should be going. You know, places to go-"

“Boys with whom to carouse,” Castiel agrees. It’s difficult not to smile too widely when Dean shoots him a look of proud amusement.

Naomi raises her hand in an abortive movement, perhaps to catch Castiel’s arm, but to Castiel’s surprise she stops and doesn’t argue. “It was nice to meet you too, Dean,” she says instead, following them out. This time when Castiel locks the door she doesn’t give it a second look. “I hope the two of you will be careful tonight.”

“No need to worry. I’ll take good care of your son.”

And with that, Dean grabs his hand again and leads him firmly away to where the Impala is parked. He opens the door for Castiel, but before he gets into the passenger seat, Castiel slides a hand around his neck and yanks him down to kiss him.

It’s hard, but swift, and when he draws back, Dean is looking a little dazed but rather pleased. “What was that for,” he asks as Castiel buckles his seatbelt.

“You,” Castiel says. “And the most successful escape from my mother that I’ve ever seen.”

Dean grins wryly, sliding into the seat beside him. He puts the car in reverse. “Nice to know you appreciate the important stuff.”

*

Dean told the truth: when he’s committed, he’s committed and Castiel has never been happier.

Weeks pass. They date and it’s almost overwhelmingly easy. Castiel meets Dean’s family at his 26th birthday party, and aside from one slightly disarming confrontation with Jo Harvelle, the night is a complete success. To the huge relief of just about everyone, he gets along so well with Dean’s brother, Sam, that the two spend nearly an hour in deep discussion about the Dead Sea Scrolls. Right before Sam leaves, he catches Dean’s eye and arches impressed eyebrows and Dean grumbles back something unintelligible. Cas catches the entire exchange and grins slightly to himself as he helps with the cleanup.

They’ve been dating for three months when they have their first real fight. It is, to no one’s overall surprise, about money.

Dean’s a prideful kind of man, and Castiel understands that. He has no problem whatsoever allowing Dean foot the bill when they go out to eat, or to a movie, and he’s always careful to only suggest outings that he knows fall within Dean’s budget. (Truth be told, Castiel would be satisfied spending his evenings watching Dean read a phonebook.) So when Castiel receives the invitation to a lavish ball masquerading as a way to raise money for charity, he knows it’s going to be a sore subject. He can picture the look on his boyfriend’s face when he tells him just how much one ticket will cost and that it’s a black tie affair. And it’s not as though Castiel particularly wants to go either, but it’s being given by one of Lord Enterprise’s biggest investors, and even as new as he is as head
of the company, he’s well-aware that they cannot afford to lose any backing. Enough of the
investors have no qualms giving voice to their uncertainties about working with someone Castiel’s
age that he doesn’t want to risk offending any of them.

He marks a ‘1’ on the R.S.V.P., and tries not to think about it again.

The night of the Ball, Castiel evades Dean’s questions about his plans, and assures him that he will
check in with him in the morning, and ignores the guilty feeling in the pit of his stomach that twists
up tight at the crooked smile Dean gives him before pressing his lips to Castiel’s jawline. “You sure
you want to go home,” Dean murmurs, tipping Castiel’s head back to catch gentle teeth on his
throat. “I think I can come up with some ideas if you feel like sticking around.”

Castiel hums an agreement, shifts so that their mouths collide. “Be that as it may,” he says as he
reluctantly draws away, “I’m exhausted and something tells me that all of your ‘ideas’ will feature
one or both of us being naked for the foreseeable future.”

Dean grins wolfishly. “Well, when you’re right, you’re right.”

He hates leaving Dean and the warmth of his arms, but he tells himself that if he can get to the Ball
quickly he can escape all the earlier, and hopes that it will soothe the sick feeling in his belly. Once
he’s alone, he takes a quick shower and yanks on his tuxedo with more force than is probably
necessary. He’s been attending these ridiculous functions since he was old enough to engage in
polite conversation, and he knows the guest list and menu by heart. He steers clear of the caviar
(because he’s always hated the stuff) and the mini-quiches (because he knows Dean would love them
and he’s committed enough sins today) and tries to discuss the recession with Mr. Crowley, a fellow
businessman he’s met several times at these such functions, who stands a little too close. He likes to
think that Dean would be proud of the cold glare he levels at Crowley when he lays his hand on his
arm.

“Please don’t touch me,” he snaps, yanking his arm back.

Crowley seems surprised, and throws a glance at Castiel’s left hand. “I don’t see a ring.”

His finger is bare, it’s true, and it’s possible that it may remain that way for the rest of his life. But
his devotion to Dean is absolute, as is his disgust for anyone that would ever attempt to come on to
him when they know he’s involved. It’s not as though he keeps Dean a dirty secret from those that
work with him. In fact, he’s quite sure he’s mentioned Dean to Crowley specifically in the past. “I
do.”

Crowley wanders away without another word and Castiel breathes a long sigh of relief. But his
mood has descended into open hostility and he knows that any more time spent here will do more
harm than good, so he makes an excuse to Roman and bids a hasty goodnight.

* 

Less than an hour later, Castiel pulls into his driveway, and kills the ignition. For several seconds
he doesn’t move, choosing, instead to stare in silence at the Chevy Impala parked beside him and try
to breathe around the weight settling over his lungs. From here he can see the hall light of his
apartment has been flipped on since he left and he tries to see his boyfriend through the window, but
there’s no view into the living room. He still remembers the pleasure that had flickered across
Dean’s face when Castiel handed him a key to his apartment and it’s hard to push out of his mind as
he steps out of the car.
The door’s unlocked. He hangs his keys on the hook, tugs his coat from his arms and hangs it in the hall closet. It’s pointless to prolong the inevitable, he knows, but there’s a good chance this conversation with Dean could end in a breakup, and if that’s the case, well, he’s in no hurry.

When he finishes he takes a deep breath and goes to find Dean.

Dean’s sitting on the couch when he steps into the living room, his arms crossed over his chest, his mouth pressed into a grim line. “Hey, Cas,” he says, but anger darkens his tone. “Where you been?”

There’s a sudden inclination to lie, the hope of a desperate man, but his tuxedo speaks where words fail and Dean gives him a long, careful, look. “Kind of dressed up for bed, aren’t you?”

Finally, Castiel’s brain kicks in, and he steps closer to Dean, closing the distance. “It’s not what you’re thinking,” he says, splaying out his hands.

“No? Because I’m thinking you went out to a fancy party and didn’t tell me about it.”

“Dean, I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” Dean’s on his feet in an instant, closing in, furious. “Are you serious?” He snaps his eyes to Castiel, and unflinchingly holds his gaze. “Is there someone else?”

Despite himself, Castiel feels a nugget of indignation. “Of course not!”

“Well I figured I should ask. I mean, you’re clearly not dressed to the nines for my benefit.” Dean pauses, for what, Castiel doesn’t know, and then all the fight seems to sag out of him, and he looks away. “I’m going to go,” he says.

“No,” Castiel says quickly. “Don’t leave. I can explain.”

But Dean doesn’t give any indication that he hears him at all, and walks around Castiel towards the front door, and Castiel, desperately clinging to anything that will make Dean stay, asks, “What did you even come here for?”

Dean glances at him over his shoulder, shrugs. “I just wanted to see you.”

And he’s gone.

Castiel lowers himself onto the couch slowly, exhaustion dragging at his form like a drug. And he should probably go to bed, he knows that, knows that Dean isn’t coming back, that it’s pointless to sit out here as though he’s just waiting for Dean to retrieve something from his car and return, smiling and full of forgiveness. But going upstairs would be like accepting defeat, and he doesn’t have that in him right now.

Several minutes pass in which he does little more than stare blankly at the shape of his hands, until a slow, terrifying idea starts form. “Did we just break up,” he asks the empty room. Dean didn’t – he didn’t say they were broken up, so they’re probably not. Of course. Because Dean, Dean has never given him grief over his decided lack of social skills, and he would know that if he is going to break up with Castiel, that he needs to do it clearly, without any room for interpretation.
But . . . maybe he thinks Castiel initiated a break up. It’s possible. Castiel is the one who lied, who didn’t even provide an explanation tonight.

It’s after midnight, but he doesn’t allow that to deter him as he all but leaps to his feet, and moves quickly across the apartment to snatch his keys back off the hook. This will terrorize him for the reminder of his night if he lets it, and he’d be better off just going to Dean’s and getting a straight answer. At least, that’s what he tells himself, though his motivation is far more the strong, cold panic clenching around his heart than anything else.

*

The Roadhouse stays open until after two on the weekends, so when Castiel stumbles into the bar, dark hair standing up from running his hands through it, half-trembling, he draws more attention than he might have hoped, but he ignores the inquiring looks and weaves around the crowd to make his way to the back of the bar. The flight of stares is a welcome sight, and he barely notices their feel beneath his feet as he makes his way to the top.

Dean’s door shouldn’t be so intimidating, especially considering the amount of times that Castiel has been here, but his heart is racing frantically, and not from the seven step walk-up.

He knocks against the door with more force than he intends but he can’t regret it when Dean pulls the door open and stares at him with wide, surprised eyes. “Cas.”

Cas breathes out, the sound of his name so gloriously perfect on Dean’s lips, and his hands jerk out without his approval and fasten around Dean’s elbows. “Dean, can I come in, please,” he asks. Desperation colors his tone and he makes no effort to disguise it. “Please?”

The whole journey here Castiel was absolutely convinced that Dean would immediately turn him away, that he’d end the relationship right there, on his threshold, so it’s to Castiel’s astonishment that Dean steps back, not meeting his gaze, but not telling him to go either. Castiel takes the gesture for the olive branch it is, and enters Dean’s home, the door clicking shut behind him.

It’s habit that finds Castiel settling onto the right-hand side of the couch. He’s been sitting in the same seat since the first time he came over to watch Raiders of the Lost Ark, appreciating the way the overstuffed cushions sink into place around him. Dean doesn’t move for seconds that pass like hours, until he sighs and lowers himself onto the opposite end, shifting so that he’s looking at Castiel dead-on.

“Dean,” Castiel says, “I don’t want to be broken up.”

Dean clenches his jaw and blinks back, doesn’t answer.

“I’m sorry about what happened tonight,” he continues after a beat. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I shouldn’t have hid the party from you, I know that. I just didn’t know what to do.”

“You tell me what’s going on, Cas,” Dean explodes, his voice strong and rough. “You always tell me what’s going on. You don’t lie, we don’t lie to each other. We can’t, if this is gonna work.”

Castiel nods. “I know that.”

“So then what happened?”
It’s ironic, Castiel can’t help but think, that he went through all this to avoid this uncomfortable conversation with his boyfriend, and here he is. “It’s about the money,” he finally says. It’s hard to swallow and he drops his eyes. “I had to go to a ball tonight, I didn’t have a choice. Right now, especially, it’s important for me to make a good impression on the investors in the company.”

“I understand that.”

“And I knew . . . that you wouldn’t be able to afford it.” He sees Dean stiffen and wishes there was something else he could offer. He firmly suppresses the urge to demand a response and waits patiently.

Slowly, Dean slides closer, his knee bumping Castiel’s, then he feels the tips of Dean’s fingers under his chin, tilting his face up. “Okay, I’m not going to lie, here,” Dean says softly, “I like paying when we go out. Naomi – I just don’t want to give her more ammunition.”

Castiel flinches at the truth of Dean’s words. “Dean, I don’t-“

“I know you don’t care,” Dean interrupts, “but it doesn’t matter. I do. It’s probably always going to be a problem with us, to be honest. But.” He pauses to take Castiel’s hand, tangle their fingers together. “I want to make this work. I know you’re the one who got this ball rolling, but I’m-“ He runs a knuckle along Castiel’s jaw line. “I’m really glad you did, Cas.”

Castiel closes his eyes against the attention, moves into his touch. “I am too, Dean.”

“The next time this comes up, tell me. We’ll figure it out. I might just have to swallow my pride a little bit, and let you pay for those things. Just.” Dean’s voice sharpens slightly. “You can’t lie to me, Cas, okay?” He kisses Castiel’s forehead gently, tenderly. “So don’t do it again.”

Castiel is too distracted to listen too carefully, too relieved to hear the warning in Dean’s words. He latches onto the forgiveness like a life raft and hangs on tight.

* 

He stands outside of Inias’ apartment and his eyes float up the second floor, where a large, clear window faces the street. There’s a light on and from here he can see the faint outline of his fiancé, sitting at the kitchen table, head bent over a book. For a long moment Castiel allows himself the luxury of just observing, taking in the peaceful sight. Sometimes he thinks that this, here, is exactly why he said yes to Inias: the heavy, thick calm that Inias wears like a coat. He’s the steady hand that Castiel has spent months clinging to, and he reaches for him now, as he pounds up the stairs and bangs impatiently against the door.

Inias appears into his line of vision almost immediately, and Castiel lets relief fill him as he falls into Inias’ arms. Their solid presence around his waist is a firm reminder that that is where they will remain for the rest of his existence. He tells himself that he is stronger, safer, in the arms of the man he loves, but the sentiment feels emptier than it did last week. He closes his eyes against self-doubt, and presses his face into the curve of Inias’ shoulder.

“Castiel,” Inias prompts confusedly, after a minute or two. His grip doesn’t ease, but Castiel pulls back anyway. “Darling, what’s wrong?”

(Dean never used pet names. ‘Sweetie,’ ‘baby,’ ‘honey,’ none of it. It took months for Castiel to
discover that this was strange, and when he’d asked Dean about it, Dean had shrugged the shrug he always used, and cocked his head at Castiel. “Jeeze, Cas, I don’t know,” he’d answered. “Just doesn’t really seem like you, you know?”

He ignores the memory and focuses on Inias’ concern-drenched eyes. “No, no, nothing’s wrong,” he rushes to reassure him. “It’s just, I have something I need to tell you.”

Something flickers to life on Inias’ face, something that makes Castiel’s stomach churn guiltily in a way that he can’t explain. Thanks in no small part to his first marriage, Castiel recognizes suspicion when he sees it, and while he knows, of course, that he has done nothing wrong, it doesn’t make him innocent. So he allows Inias to ask the question, instead of shooting him down with a look.

“Castiel, did you cheat?”

“No,” he answers firmly. “It’s nothing like that.”

Inias must see the truth behind his statement, because his cheeks color and his eyes drop, abashed. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry; I don’t know what came over me. You just look like you feel like crap, and I jumped to conclusions. I apologize.”

“I understand.” he says, because he does. “It’s... Dean’s staying at my mother’s house until after the wedding.”

He’s not sure if he expects Inias to explode, but if so he’s disappointed. A muscle ticks in Inias’ jaw, but to his credit, he simply responds with a mild, “Why?”

“There was a fire at his apartment.” There’s an urge to wring his hands or pick at his nails, but nervous habits have never really been his thing, so he doesn’t fidget, just stands there, stock still, waiting for a judgment.

“Oh my God.” Inias’ eyes fill with sympathy. There’s so much concern in his voice that Castiel feels a small kick in his gut. How his fiancé always manages to find a smidgen of kindness, even for those that don’t spare him any, is a trait that Castiel, himself, wishes he possessed. Frankly, it’s just another reason Castiel doesn’t deserve him and never has. “Obviously Dean is alright, but was anyone else inside?”

“No, there was no one there. They’re saying it’s an electrical fire, but no one in the building was hurt.”

“Well that’s a blessing,” Inias breathes. He shakes his head in disbelief. “Did Dean lose a lot in the fire?”

It’s with a jolt that Castiel realizes that he didn’t even ask. So wrapped up in that feeling of righteous anger, it hadn’t even occurred to him to think of Dean’s loss. It’s like acid settling into the pit of his stomach as he thinks now about the pictures of Dean’s mother that adorned his place over the bar, the miniature Eiffel Tower that Sam brought him back from France from the summer he spent abroad. The little statue sat atop the mantel at both the apartment at the Roadhouse and the place he and Dean bought together, an immobile and constant reminder that regardless of the mounting tension between them, Sam loved his brother immensely. Suddenly he’s wondering about Dean’s vinyl collection, his brown leather jacket, the four Christmas stockings Castiel only saw once and was never brave enough to bring up again. Dean’s only staying at Naomi’s for a few days, so the fire couldn’t have been that bad, but some things must have been destroyed. It’s the way fire works.
“I – I’m not sure.”

Inias sighs. “I hope he didn’t lose too many personal items.” Off Castiel’s surprised look, he chuckles and says, “Look, for obvious reasons Dean Winchester isn’t one of my favorite people in the world. But I wouldn’t wish him ill; he’s not a bad person. I mean.” He pauses to drop a kiss to Castiel’s cheek. “For the first year of your marriage, he took good care of you, and how could I ever hate someone for that? And I like to think that your marriage to him paved the way for a happier marriage to me.”

Castiel smiles because he knows he’s supposed to, but there’s that implication again, that his marriage to Dean was nothing more than a practice run. It’s hard to hold the comment against Inias when he’s displaying such infinite patience so Castiel hides his flinch by pressing his mouth to Inias’. He’s startled when Inias deepens the kiss and slips his arms around Castiel’s waist.

“If Dean being at your mother’s is upsetting to you,” Inias murmurs against his lips, “you could always stay here.”

Castiel immediately freezes, his spine locking up, his hands stiffening where they rest on Inias’ shoulders. Inias notices, but seems to chalk it up to nervousness more than anything else, and whispers instructions to him to, “Relax, Castiel. I’ll take care of you.”

It’s more than nerves that draws Castiel away, but he plasters another weak smile onto his face to hide the surge of guilt washing over him. Well, guilt, mixed with fury aimed at himself, because, dammit, his loyalties don’t – shouldn’t – lie with Dean anymore. There shouldn’t be this prickle in the back of his neck that tries to tell him that he’s a married man, and he shouldn’t allow memories of Dean to keep him from the loving arms of his husband-to-be. But that doesn’t seem to matter because now there’s a foot of distance between them, and Inias is struggling to cover his look of disappointment. “I,” Castiel begins. He has no idea what to say that will explain this awkward moment away, but, once again, Inias comes to his rescue.

“I’m sorry, Castiel. I didn’t mean to pressure you. I would never – I wouldn’t want you to, just because I want you. Castiel, you’re the most important thing in my life. I worship you, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.” Castiel can’t help but believe him, the way his eyes radiate the truth of his declarations.

He should be happy, but all he can think is But . . . I don’t want to be worshipped. I just want to be loved.

*  

Chuck’s questions the next morning seem, if possible, worse than before. Castiel can’t tell if it’s the wounds that were rubbed raw yesterday or if they actually just are more intrusive, but when Chuck asks him where he and Inias will be living once they’re married, Castiel chokes on his glass of orange juice.

He feels four pairs of eyes watching him curiously as he coughs into his fist. For months he’s been carefully side-stepping that question when his mother has posed it to him, primarily because he already knows the reaction his words are going to get. But he can’t exactly tell Chuck to mind his own business, so he’s stuck, and Naomi, Anna, Dean, and Chuck get to hear the answer.

“We haven’t decided.”
“You haven’t decided?” It is, surprisingly, Anna who voices the loudest expression of disbelief. Dean’s eyebrows go to his hairline, but he remains, blessedly, silent, and Naomi gives no reaction whatsoever. “Why the hell not? Do you know that you’re getting married tomorrow?”

“Thank you, Anna,” Castiel snaps. “I’m so lucky to have you here to tell me these things. Of course I know.” He pauses to swallow around a bite of his eggs. He then offers what must be the 100th forced smile this weekend at Chuck, and says, “We just have different opinions about where would make the best home.”

This is somewhat misleading, Castiel acknowledges to himself, because it sounds like a couple’s disagreement holding them up. But he knows that in actuality, the fault remains entirely with him. Inias, in his frustratingly unending patience and love (and worship, apparently) has told Castiel on many occasions that he is happy to live wherever Castiel prefers. Inias’ apartment is more than large enough for the two of them, but there’s a sick streak of terror whenever Castiel tries to envision living anywhere else. When he confided that to his fiancé, Inias had tenderly told him that he understood, that they could move into Castiel’s house if he wants.

And that should have made him happy, relieved that he has found a man who loves him so much that he’s willing to adhere to any and all of Castiel’s desires, but the very idea of Inias sleeping on the bed where Dean proposed, using the oven that once held steaming pecan pies, showering under that excellent water pressure makes him sick to his stomach.

He wonders how other people handle watching someone fill the empty spaces where their ex once resided, and envies them.

He’s so lost in his thoughts that he doesn’t notice the silence that has fallen over the breakfast table, and he blinks as he returns to the present. “What was the question?”

“I was asking about the rehearsal dinner,” Chuck says. “Will the entire wedding party be there? I thought I could get some quotes from them about the happy couple.”

“Right.” Castiel thinks. “Well, both of the best men will be here: Inias’ brother, Ion, and my cousin, Gabriel.”

Dean’s eyes widen with shock, and he barks out a laugh loud enough to shake the ground. “Gabriel is your best man,” he asks, once he’s composed himself. “Are you kidding me? How the hell did that happen? Bribery? Blackmail?”

“There weren’t many to choose from!”

“Really, Cas? Really. For fuck’s sake, Charlie would make a better best man than Gabriel. Or, hell, Anna.”

“Gee, thank you, Dean,” Anna says dryly.

Castiel understands Dean’s confusion but doesn’t know how to respond. How is he supposed to explain that he couldn’t picture Charlie Bradbury, the amazing woman he met through Dean, who so quickly became his best friend, up there, supporting this marriage? Because if he did, then he would have to talk about Charlie’s unwavering enthusiasm for his relationship with Dean, and how she still gets a sulky tone in her voice when he talks about his engagement to Inias. Sometimes he thinks she and Anna would make a good pair.
Which makes him wonder if Dean is constantly exposed to her unchecked verbal bouts of tough love as well.

Naomi clears her throat. “You were describing the wedding party,” she quietly reminds him.

“Oh, yes,” Castiel says. “And then we each have two more members of our wedding party. My cousin Samandriel is one of mine, and he won’t be arriving until in the morning, and then, of course, Anna. Inias’ sister Hester will also get here tomorrow, but he’s picking up his other groomsman from the airport at ten this morning, his cousin, Raphael.”

Chuck stares. “So we’ve got Castiel, Samandriel, Ion, and Raphael? I’m definitely going to want to get with you later and verify the spelling of everyone’s names. This is going to give me a headache.”

“What did you do this morning, Chuck,” Dean asks.

“Oh, I went and took some pictures of Castiel’s house.”

“What?” Castiel moves to push himself from the table before he feels his sister’s hand clamp around his knee, holding him in place. Her grip is firm, her eyes steady when they meet his and he can read her expression clearly as Hang on just a second, little brother. Anna is one of the few people who felt the full brunt of Castiel’s grief over the end of his marriage, so she’s well-aware of his reservations over showing anyone the house. So he lets himself trust her, and doesn’t start raging against Chuck. Despite this, he does say, coldly, “I’m certain I didn’t give you permission to go into my home.”

Chuck freezes, his eyes widening fearfully, then glances at Dean and Castiel has to admit that the whole display is a little amusing, enough that his shoulders lose some of their tension. “No, Castiel,” Chuck says quickly. “Shit, that’s not what I meant. I meant that I was taking pictures of the house. The outside, I mean. And I only needed one good picture, so I wasn’t even there that long. I’m sorry, man, really. Definitely didn’t mean to piss you off.”

Castiel sighs, tries to make it look like impatience as opposed to relief. “No, no, it’s fine. I didn’t mean to act like that. It’s just that I’m very private about certain things, and my residence is one of them.”


Castiel doesn’t know whether it’s an effect of his outburst, or if Chuck’s questions really are running low, but after a couple of simple ones about the wedding itself – the menu, the time, the honeymoon – he brings the interview to a close.

Castiel checks the time as Dinah clears their plates, and sees that Inias should be picking up Raphael soon. He wishes that Inias could come over earlier in the day, but he understands the man’s reluctance. He isn’t particularly close with his brother, but they don’t get to see each other often and he’ll be leaving tomorrow, right after the wedding. So Castiel can’t blame him for spending this limited time with his brother. As he told Inias when they discussed it last week, ‘We have the rest of our lives to spend together.’

There are no preparations for the evening’s festivities left, so the group goes their separate ways. Naomi and Anna wander away together, a sight Castiel thought he’d never see, and Chuck decides he wants to hunt down Dinah and see if she’ll give him the recipe for her alfredo sauce (despite Dean and Castiel trying to tell him that she will not) and, after a moment of standing alone with Castiel at
the table, Dean leaves as well, muttering about retrieving something from his car.

The heat is oppressive today, overwhelming with its humidity, and less than ten yards away, his mother’s pristine pool beckons. Just to the left is the pool house and unless Castiel is mistaken, he left his swimming trunks in there yesterday. His decision made, he heads that way.

The pool house isn’t a particularly large building, around 800 square feet. Just enough room for a main area with a flat screen television, a long leather couch, and a bar at the back, and the changing areas off to the right. The A/C is set to a cool 70 degrees, and is a bit of a shock, stepping in from the outside, and Castiel draws a sharp breath as goosebumps erupt down his arms.

He doesn’t go to change immediately, grabbing a water bottle from the small refrigerator tucked under the bar and taking a couple of swallows. He stares out the large glass doors to take in manor’s backyard, and he can’t help a stab of admiration for Naomi’s careful upkeep. He can see the rose bushes in the distance, as bright as rubies.

Finally he makes his way to the dressing rooms, taking the one he changed in yesterday, and folded neatly on the chair inside are his forest green trunks, freshly laundered, the material soft, dry, and smelling like his mother’s detergent. He rolls his eyes, but puts them on anyway.

Castiel’s always been a good swimmer, so the dive into the water is clean and quiet and when he comes up for air, he’s grinning. He loves being in the water, loves the way his body feels as he stretches out his arms and kicks his legs. He does a couple of laps, lets the mindlessness slowly drive away the clutter of thoughts that his brain has been filled to the brim with since yesterday. For now, in this moment, he’s free and it feels so good.

He has no idea how long Dean’s been standing there when he notices his presence.

Castiel tries to be angry at having his peace disturbed, but the water must buoy up his spirits like it does his limbs, because he smiles instead of leveling the glare that he intends. Dean looks surprised, but pleased, and grins back.

“Hey, man, I’ve been looking all over for you,” Dean says, stepping closer to the pool edge. He stoops in front of Castiel so that they’re eye-to-eye. “Probably should have guessed you’d be here.”

Castiel scrubs a hand down his face, displacing the droplets that he can feel dotting his eyelashes and dripping down into the water surrounding him. “Probably,” he agrees. “Were you looking for me for any particular reason? I can get out, if you’d like.”

Dean shakes his head, though there’s something uncertain there. “Nah, don’t worry about it. I just wanted to give you your wedding present, before all blenders and knife sets start piling up.” He slowly withdraws his arms that Castiel only just realized that he’d had hiding behind his back, and produces a small, rectangular box, wrapped haphazardly with thick, white paper. “The Hallmark people were pretty nice,” Dean continues after a beat. “Even though I didn’t get the present there, they gave me a box and everything. Wouldn’t wrap it, though, so, sorry about that.” He holds it out for Castiel to take.

Castiel reaches beside Dean to grab the bright orange towel he’d thrown there before getting in, and quickly dries his hands. Then he takes the gift from Dean and studies the box. “You didn’t have to get us anything,” he finally says. He can’t decide whether he’s touched or horrified.

Dean shrugs. “It wasn’t a big deal. Go ahead and open it, I’ll be right back.”
As Dean jogs back towards the pool house, Castiel lets his curiosity get the better of him, and tugs the paper loose. He takes a second to ball it up together and drop it off to the side onto the grass and then he carefully opens the box to inspect the inside.

It hits him like a punch.

He recognizes the model car instantly, remembers the hour that he spent in a small, cramped store called the Hobby Lobby trying to decide if the gift he’d chosen for his husband for their first anniversary was stupid or thoughtful. He’d known next to nothing about model cars, allowing the owner of the store to suggest the paintbrushes that would be best for the Impala and recommend the dark scarlet paint that he’d told Castiel would ‘pop’ once the assembly was complete. Castiel had chosen the black paint instead and he remembers that by the time he’d loaded the thing into his trunk, he’d been so excited. The whole way home he’d looked forward to the pleasure he knew Dean would feel when he saw it.

But it hadn’t gone that way at all, had it?

Footsteps announce Dean’s return, and he looks up to see him striding quickly along the cement walkway to the pool.

And he’s naked.

Okay, he’s not really naked, just his chest is, and his calves, but Castiel’s heart begins an offbeat rhythm as though he is. Suddenly, in Castiel’s line of vision, there are miles of dark, tanned skin, a washboard stomach, dusky, pert nipples. The navy swimming trunks are slung low enough on his hips that Castiel’s eyes instinctively go to Dean’s abdomen, absolutely furious with how powerless he is against this onslaught. He doesn’t mean to lick his lips, but the mixture of fear and arousal culminates in him doing exactly that.

He ticks his gaze up to Dean to see if he’s noticed, and he has. He reads Castiel as easily as he ever has, and it hangs between them, heavy and palpable. Castiel wants to say something, anything, really to relieve the tension, but his throat seems to have dried up and when he opens his mouth no sound comes out.

A slow, triumphant smirk twists at the corner of Dean’s lips and he cocks an eyebrow. “You okay, Cas?”

Castiel blinks slowly. He supposes this is probably what being high must feel like. “Think,” he repeats in confusion.
“Yeah, Cas. Of the gift.” Dean gives a short chuckle as he taps a finger on the roof of the model. “I like to at least have my presents acknowledged, you know. I mean, it’s not much but –”

Castiel is shaking his head before he registers the desire to do so. “No, Dean. No, this is. This is a beautiful gesture. When did you finish it?”

“A few months ago,” Dean answers. Guilt dances across his features, marring them in its wake as a sliver of sadness creeps into his voice. “I’d forgotten about it, actually. And then I was cleaning out my storage unit, getting rid of some of the junk, and there it was, packed away, brand new, still in its box from the store.”

It hurts more than Castiel thought it would, the reminder that the little car never managed to see the light of day. Amid everything that came after, the pain of it should be dulled to almost nothing but somehow it’s as though it stands for everything that went wrong in their marriage. However, he refuses to think about that now, when there’s finally a bit of peace between them. “God, she was yare,” he says.

Dean glances over. “She’s not a ship, Cas.”

“I know, but can you think of a better word for her? Beautiful. Bright. Fast. So easily managed.”

“Yeah,” Dean says huskily. Castiel tries to catch his eyes, but he looks away. “Maybe you’re right. Baby is yare.”

Without another word, Dean slides into the pool, the light splash that follows creating waves that lick up Castiel’s arms. Castiel watches, stupefied, as Dean ducks underwater, then comes back up, his wet hair latching itself to the crown of his head, his smooth, chiseled stomach now littered with glistening droplets of its own . . .

This doesn’t seem like a good idea.

Dean doesn’t seem to share this opinion at all, taking the model from Castiel’s hands, and gently setting into the firm ground. Then he gives Castiel a hard push, and shoves off from the wall, yelling over his shoulder, “Race you to the other side!”

Castiel, never one to back down from a challenge, instantly sets off after him.

Dean is the superior swimmer, there’s no denying that, but he’s also inhibited by the guffaws of laughter he releases when he checks behind him to see Castiel closing in fast. He attempts to redouble his efforts, but it’s too late. Castiel still wins by a hair.

Dean grumbles over the loss, but it’s only half-hearted, and the twinkle in his eyes lessens any potential sting of his words as he demands a rematch. This time he beats Castiel soundly, proceeding to gloat and practically caw with pride.

Castiel laughs as they haul themselves out of the pool, and drop into the warm cement. He can reach the miniature Impala from here, so he picks it up again, and tries not think that this is the most connected he’s felt with another human being in years. “What made you give this to me,” he asks, tilting his head at Dean askance.

The sun highlights the line of freckles along Dean’s right shoulder as he leans back, his arms
supporting his weight. “Well,” he says, sending Castiel a sidelong glance, “why do you think?”

“I asked first.”

“You did.”

Castiel waits.

“I think originally I planned to give it to you so that you could see for yourself that I finished it,” Dean finally begins. “Gotta tell ya, I was feeling pretty shitty when I found it in the storage unit. But, then later. I don’t know. I started thinking about how there was a chance that I might never see you again. And for all your horrifying music choices, you did have the excellent taste to love that car.” Then he pauses and something vulnerable flickers to life in his eyes. “Right?”

Castiel aches at the blatant uncertainty there, and nods back firmly. “Right.”

Dean releases a relieved breath, nodding to himself. “And I know that I wasn’t always . . . good to you.” Off Castiel’s token protest, he says, “Hey, it ended in divorce. I don’t think it’s news to either one of us that we made some mistakes. That was one of mine.” He shifts to face Castiel fully and his gaze falls to the four lines of black lettering that run along the skin over Castiel’s ribs.

Castiel’s breath catches as Dean, without an inch of hesitation, extends the hand closest, and runs the tip of his index finger along the ancient words. His abdomen jumps under the touch, but he doesn’t pull away, just watches his ex’s pupils bleed out into the irises until they’re nothing more than thin rings of green. “I remember when you got this tattoo,” Dean mutters softly. “Thought you were gonna turn into one of those douchebags that think they’re hot shit because they can handle a little pain.” Dean smirks. “Not you, though. Doubt you would have even mentioned it if you didn’t think I would have noticed. ‘I did it for me, Dean,’” he mimics Castiel’s deep baritone.

“I did do it for me,” Castiel forces out through his teeth. Dean’s touch is lingering much too long for his sanity. “But as I recall, you were hardly displeased.” In fact, Dean had taken one look at the bandage and gone a little wild. They had sex ten times that week.

“I’d just discovered my husband was a badass.” Finally Dean withdraws his hand but his gaze is no less serious than the heavy fog that’s settled over them. Their eyes fasten together. “It’s up to you, you know,” he says.

Dean could be talking about anything, really. But nevertheless, Castiel knows it’s a lie when he snaps, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He goes to stand, but Dean’s fast, and catches his wrist before he’s even moved.

“Yes, you do.” And he pulls Castiel towards him and kisses him.

It’s probably supposed to be chaste. Just the gentlest brush of lips, and already Dean is moving away. But that thing inside Castiel, that piece he’s felt rattling in his chest for days (years, maybe) finally breaks free and takes complete control of his body. It makes him gasp as the rush of his desire floods through him and he’s following Dean’s mouth, gripping the hairs at the back of Dean’s neck the way he’s done hundreds of times before, and Dean makes a startled noise, but is on board instantly, practically shoving Castiel down onto his back.

“Cas,” Dean whispers, then he parts Castiel’s lips with his own, nothing gentle in the firm, possessive kiss. Dean’s tongue, warm and demanding, maps out his mouth as though they’re
strangers, but he worries at Castiel’s lower lip in a way that speaks of years of familiarity.

He shudders, gasping back, “Dean,” as Dean’s hand slides up his thigh, slipping just beneath his shorts.

“Castiel!”

The sound of Anna’s voice yanks Castiel back to the present and he barely registers that his hands go to Dean’s shoulders and give him a hard shove. Dean pulls off with a grunt but it’s a beat before he removes his hands from Castiel’s hair and thigh. Their loss is painful and they leave cold in their wake, and Castiel only just manages to bite back a complaint.

He can see Anna standing on the patio to the house, but thanks to the dips in Naomi’s lawn, it’d be impossible for her to have seen Dean and Castiel’s impromptu embrace. “I’m coming,” he calls back. He turns to Dean.

“I’m not going to apologize,” Dean says bluntly. “If that’s what you were expecting, you can just forget it.”

Castiel sighs, battling the heat of Dean’s gaze that falls to his lips. “You have nothing to apologize for,” he says when he thinks he can do so without his voice breaking. “I’m the one that’s engaged, I’m the one that’s marrying another man tomorrow. You can’t take responsibility for my actions, and you’re single. You did nothing wrong.”

Dean rubs the back of his neck, another tick he’s had since long before Castiel first met him. “Well, if it helps, I am sorry if you didn’t want that.” Then he smirks mischievously. “Though I doubt I’d believe you if you said you didn’t.”

“Then I won’t waste my breath.”

And he goes to change his clothes.

*

They’re lying in bed together, Castiel resting on the lower half of Dean’s chest, when Dean looks down at him and says, “Marry me.”

Everything around them slams to a grinding halt. There’s no noise from the bar, no streetlights flickering in and out overhead. In this moment there is just the two of them as Castiel’s mind works furiously to decipher Dean’s meaning. “What?”

“Marry me.” Dean takes Castiel’s closest hand, runs his lips along his knuckles. Castiel shudders at the tender gesture. “I love you. You love me. What’s the point in waiting?”

They’ve never talked about marriage. In fact, up until this moment Castiel thought it was off the table completely, because the one time he asked, two months prior, if Dean ever saw something like that in his future Dean had said he doubted it. And that had been that. It was disappointing, but then, Castiel hadn’t really expected him to say yes, and it’s not as though he needs some silly document to prove that they’re committed to each other. He knows that they are. He can see it in Dean’s eyes when he unlocks the door to Castiel’s apartment with his key, feels it when Sam calls his phone looking for Dean. They’re together and Castiel knows without a shadow of a doubt that there will never be anyone else for him.
But now that Dean is offering . . .

“Do you want to marry me,” Castiel asks, careful to keep his voice even. Inquisitive, but he’s prepared to be letdown.

Dean tucks an arm behind his head and shrugs. “I mean, I did ask.”

“It’s just that this is the first time it’s come up.”

“Well I’ve got to keep you on your toes,” Dean teases, then, as though to punctuate the point, he suddenly clamps his hands around Castiel’s wrists and rolls over, pinning Castiel under him, grinning. “Can’t let you get bored.”

Castiel pretends to struggle a bit and laughs when Dean nips lightly at his jaw. “I assure you,” he says dryly, “there is next to no chance of that happening.”

“You know, you still haven’t answered my question.” Dean gives him a pouty look that is so clearly fabricated that Castiel rolls his eyes. “And if you think I’m going to ask again you’ve got another think coming because technically I just asked you twice and –”

“Yes.”

Dean freezes. “Yes?”

“Well, certainly you didn’t propose, expecting me to say no, did you?”

“Yes,” Dean repeats again as a slow smile curls the edges of his mouth. “So you’re saying . . . Yes. We’re going to get married.

Castiel nods seriously, works to hide a grin of his own. “That seems to be the case.”

Then Dean swoops down and they’re kissing long and deep and messy. Castiel’s heart is so full of emotion that he barely registers it when Dean’s mouth moves out of reach to kiss down his chest, his abdomen, and lower still. When he feels Dean’s nose brush his pubic hair, his shivers.

“Christ, Cas,” Dean murmurs, “you’ve really got me.”

They make love that morning with more passion and affection than perhaps ever before. Castiel trembles beneath Dean’s steady hands, digs crescent-shaped bruises in his now-fiancé’s back. He smiles into Dean’s neck and it’s the happiest he can remember being. For the first time in a long time there are no worries on his mind, no lingering frustration after a week of meeting with investors. Somehow – and he doesn’t really understand what it is – he managed to get so ridiculously lucky. No, not lucky. Blessed. The being in his arms is the most breathtaking blessing that’s ever managed to worm its way into his life and he could laugh with the delirium of it.

He falls back into a light doze, but the sweet smell of bacon wafts into the bedroom just a few minutes later, and Castiel has never been able to resist the call of Dean’s breakfast. He pulls on light gray sweatpants, foregoes a shirt altogether, and slips behind Dean and wraps his arms around his waist. He gives a barely-there kiss to Dean’s shoulder blade.

“When do you want to do this,” he asks. Dean offers him a plate that holds four greasy, delicious-looking strips, and eggs, sunny side up, with one hand, and a cup of coffee in the other. Castiel
deposits them onto Dean’s kitchen table then turns to pull the French vanilla creamer from the fridge.

Dean doesn’t answer for what Castiel feels is too long a time, and a cold hand clenches fearfully around his heart. He’s changed his mind already, Castiel is sure of it, and he braces himself to hide his disappointment. He refuses to prompt Dean again, and settles himself into his seat at the table to give himself something to do.

Dean takes the seat across from Castiel the way he always does, and pops a piece of bacon into his mouth. The relaxed limbs and light eyes ease Castiel’s fears. Finally Dean swallows. “I was thinking tomorrow.”

Castiel must have misheard. “Excuse me?”

“Well.” Dean takes a bite of his own egg. “Answer me this: just how excited are you at the prospect of spending the next few months listening to Naomi bombard you with ideas for where to have it, what to eat, who to invite? You know that if she got her way the entire population of Lord Enterprises would be in attendance. And do you really want to see Lucifer and Michael in the same room after that fiasco over the Sales Department Manager position?”

All of Dean’s reasons make perfect sense and, yes, the idea of escaping his mother’s overbearing nature is extremely appealing, but he has to ask, “You don’t want Sam to be there? Or Bobby?”

Dean’s eyes are soft when they meet his over their breakfasts. “I really just want to be married to you. Is that weird?”

Castiel doesn’t fight a smile. “No. I don’t think it is.”

*

“You what?”

Naomi stares at Dean and Castiel and, more specifically, their left hands. They went with simple platinum rings, no frills or engravings or anything but Castiel likes to think that what they stand for says more than words can.

“You heard me,” Castiel answers calmly. Dean’s hand squeezes his own but Castiel is feeling more confident than he normally would under his mother’s thunderous glare. He finds he has the strength to withstand this storm for what he gets in return. He squeezes Dean’s hand back. “Dean and I eloped.”

“When,” Naomi demands angrily. She crosses her arms over her chest, before dropping unceremoniously into the nearest seat. She’s never been one for pacing to alleviate her frustrations.

Castiel sighs and leads Dean to the love seat, where they sit and Castiel splays out his hands. “Last week,” he tells her. There is a twinge of guilt at that. Castiel, personally, believes that they should have told her sometime before this, but there had been something so enticing about keeping it to themselves for a little while. And, of course, forestalling the inevitable outcry had held some appeal as well.

Naomi’s mouth drops open with shock. “Last week?”
“You can be angry if you want to be, Naomi,” Dean interjects from Castiel’s left. “I get it. But what’s done is done. It’s better for everyone if you just accept it, and try to be happy for us.”

Which is ridiculous, Castiel and Dean are both well-aware. And so when Naomi stands and strides to the door, and opens it for them without another word, neither man is particularly surprised and obediently leave the house.

Once they’re in the car, Castiel drops his head against the headrest of the passenger seat of the Impala and he closes his eyes as Dean slowly backs the car out of the driveway. They still haven’t spoken and a solemn mood has fallen between them.

“Well, that went well,” Dean comments. He glances over at Castiel, who huffs out a laugh.

“Yes. It could have gone better.”

“Are you okay?”

Castiel’s gaze falls to his left hand, where the new ring resides. Just the sight of it is enough to warm his insides, and he smiles despite himself. “I think I’ll be just fine.”

Dean takes his left hand with his own right, and pushes his thumb into the smooth steel. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

Telling Sam and Bobby goes a lot better.

It’s a tradition between Dean and Bobby (and Sam, when he’s in town on school vacation) to get together on Sunday nights and “watch football” which, Dean is forced to translate to Castiel about a month after they’ve gotten together, really just means playing cards and drinking beer. (Castiel once asked Dean to explain the rules of the football game they’d had playing in the background, and the blank look he’d gotten in return spoke volumes as to how seriously the men took the game.) So Castiel and Dean stop on the way to pick up a pizza and wings, because after the reaction they got from Naomi, neither man is looking forward to sharing this bit of news with Sam and Bobby when either of them is on an empty stomach.

It’s clear to see from Sam’s expression that he knows something is up, but he doesn’t question them about it immediately, which Castiel appreciates.

They’re into their second slices of pizza when Dean suddenly looks over from his seat on the beat up love seat and Castiel meets his eyes and gives a small nod. This is Dean’s family, so they’ve agreed that he’s the one who has to say the actual words but Castiel nevertheless takes a nervous swallow of beer as Dean takes a breath.

“So, Cas and I got married,” he blurts out.

Castiel takes another swig of his drink.

Sam and Bobby are silent for so long Castiel almost wonders if they even heard him, but then the men exchange looks of utter shock, and Sam jumps to his feet with a cry of joy. “Are you kidding me,” Sam yells at the same time Bobby lets out a bright laugh saying, “For fuck’s sake, boy, I thought the two of you were about to say someone was dying!”

Sam hugs Dean then Castiel, and Bobby shakes Castiel’s hand with a pointed look that makes
“What I don’t understand,” Sam says, once they’re all seated again, “is why, exactly, you guys had to do that under a shroud of mystery. I mean, damn, man, I’d like to have been there.”

“Dude, you know we had to do everything we could to keep Naomi from the proceedings,” replies Dean, with a laugh. He drapes an arm around Castiel’s shoulders, plays with the hair on his neck. “Next time.”

“Such confidence,” Castiel comments dryly.

“So fill us in,” Sam encourages, gesturing broadly with his hands. “Where are you going to live?”

“We’re looking for a house,” Castiel answers. In fact, they’ve been looking for a few days, and nothing promising has revealed itself. Not that Castiel has any sort of grandiose ideas about what they need. He refuses to admit this aloud, but he thinks that, really, it comes down to the feel of the place more than anything else, and so far all he’s seen is houses. Not homes. Not for him and Dean, anyway.

“You gonna be staying here in Kansas,” Bobby asks.

“Lawrence, if we can manage it.”

* 

The ‘if we can manage it’ is just a disclaimer, because they both know that living anywhere else isn’t even an option. It’s important to Dean to be close to Bobby and Ellen, and Sam, when he graduates and moves out here, and Castiel needs to be close to work, so they refuse to search outside the city.

Their realtor, Sarah Blake, is a pretty woman, with long dark hair and porcelain skin. Castiel likes her immediately because of her enthusiasm and the way her face lights up when she discovers that they’re married. Evidently, her cousin is also gay, and she goes on a long tirade about the injustices for “People are just in love!”

Dean rolls his eyes but Castiel appreciates the sentiment.

They’re nearly a month into their search when they finally find their home.

It’s been a long day and they’re both exhausted. They’ve been looking for hours, it seems like. The sun in setting low in the horizon, and they’re about to beg off for the rest of the night when Sarah insists that they check out this one last place before they give up. “It’s definitely a fixer-upper,” she tells them as they get out of their cars. “It’s definitely a fixer-upper,” she tells them as they get out of their cars. “But you guys seem to like houses with character.”

It’s a small place. The outside is a light colored brick, and the front door is red, with paint flaking along the panel. The porch extends from one side to the other, impressive, despite the worn wood and unsteady second step. They walk into a well-lit entry way that leads to a large living room, torn, beige carpet under their feet. They check the guest bedroom first, and Castiel watches Dean’s eyes light up at the huge, bay window facing the street, knows that he’s mentally filling the room with furniture and a college-aged kid bent over textbooks and practice cases during the Christmas break.

The master bedroom is somewhat bigger and there’s a door off to the side that opens into the backyard and Castiel is certain that he feels his heart leap in his throat when he catches sight of the
enormous Weeping Willow at the far end. He’s always had a soft spot for greenery and he knows it’s a long time off, but he can easily imagine Dean hanging a child’s swing from one of the lower branches. It’s so beautiful a picture that it takes his breath away.

It’s the kitchen that seals it for them and at first, it doesn’t seem as though there’s anything terribly special about it. The appliances are outdated, and the pantry door is hanging from its hinges and while Castiel has always found lazy-susans charming, this particular one is cracked in two separate places. When he looks to his husband, however, Dean is staring silently at the wallpaper, something soft and overwhelmed in his expression.

He approaches Dean and rests a hand on his shoulder. “What’s wrong,” he asks, tilting his head curiously.

“Nothing,” Dean says quietly. He reaches out and carefully touches the yellowing wallpaper. “It just . . . My parents had wallpaper just like this, in their kitchen.”

There’s nothing more to be said on the matter. The fact is that Castiel really doesn’t care about where they live. To him, it’s simply a place to exist with his new husband. Already his mind is supplying where they’ll put the chair Dean inherited from his parents, and wondering whether Castiel’s bed (the bigger of the two) will fit in the master bedroom with Dean’s chest of drawers. Dean’s stamp of approval is what they weren’t aware they were waiting for, and they close on the house the next day.

* 

A year later and the house is nearly unrecognizable. In fact, Castiel thinks, as he turns his key in the lock, and pushes the front door open, the only thing that truly remained untouched was the wallpaper Dean recognized from his childhood. Everything else got a major overhaul.

Now the front door is a pale blue. The carpet, torn in places, stained in others, is completely gone, ripped from its foundation by Castiel and Dean’s impatient hands. There’d been a bet between the two of them, whether the work would reveal two thousand square feet of hardwood flooring or white foam padding and much to both of their relief, it was a bet that Dean won. The weeks spent laboring that flooring into something beautiful hadn’t seemed like they would be worth it, but Castiel knows now that they were.

Of course, those aren’t the only changes. The living room walls are now a dark, warm yellow, the bedrooms stormy gray. They replaced all the hardware in the house with mismatched trinkets they found on a recent trip to mountains, and, what Castiel firmly believes is both of their favorite update, in the surround-sound they hooked up to Dean’s record player in the living room. Now, Castiel goes it, pulling a Beatles album from the collection below, and slips it into position. The soft, melancholy chords to “Yesterday” fill the house.

“Dean,” he calls out, though he knows his husband isn’t there. The Impala wasn’t in the garage when Castiel pulled in, but it never hurts to check, and the last thing he wants is for Dean to come strolling out of the bedroom, and ruin the surprise.

Castiel was right, however, Dean is nowhere to be seen, and so Castiel excitedly lays the Hobby Lobby bag down onto the couch. Then he pulls out the gift, the model car that’s an exact replica of Dean’s Baby. Well, granted, it doesn’t resemble the Impala that much right now, but once Dean is done putting it together, Castiel knows it will be a flawless match. He’d talked the shop-owner’s ear off, more worried than the day probably warranted, but then again, he’s never had a reason to buy
an anniversary gift before.

He steals a look at the time, and balks when he sees the late hour. He’d known he was in the store for a while, but hadn’t imagined this much time had passed. Quickly, he retrieves the Scotch tape and scissors from the kitchen, and gets to work.

He’s sliding the anniversary card into its envelope when he hears the familiar rumble of the Impala’s engine approaching, so he gathers up the supplies and neatly wrapped gift, and retreats to their bedroom.

The front door opens and shuts. “Cas?”

It’s silly, Castiel knows, to smile as happily as he does at the mere sound of Dean’s voice, but even today, a year after the wedding, he’s still stupidly, desperately in love. The marriage has had as many bumps in the road as any other, but he is absolutely certain that there’s something special between them. Though he knows that Dean would say that he’s letting his romanticism run away with him. “I’m in here,” he yells back. “But don’t come in!”

He hears Dean chuckle from the other side of the door. “Ya naked? Because that’s not the best reason I can think of for me to stay out here.”

“I’m not naked.” Castiel huffs out a laugh as he stuffs the leftover wrapping paper into their bedroom closet.

He can feel the annoyance in Dean’s glare. “And why not? It’s our anniversary, you know.”

“I’m aware.” For a moment he considers pulling off his clothes right now, if for no other reason than to see the look on Dean’s face, but then the smell of the smell of burgers from Ruby’s Diner drifts into the room, and the idea gets rejected immediately. Sex can wait.

So he chooses, instead, to pull the door to their bedroom open, and smile at his stunning husband. “Happy anniversary,” he says. When he sees the bouquet of flowers in Dean’s hand, he sucks in a breath and his heart flutters with joy. “Dean.”

Dean’s cheeks flush embarrassedly as he holds the arrangement out for Castiel to take. “It’s not a big deal. They’re just flowers.”

Castiel has to kiss him, he simply has no choice. He hooks a hand around Dean’s neck, and Dean descends immediately, as though he’s been considering it himself, and their lips meet. Dean wraps his free arm around Castiel’s waist, and yanks him closer, and holding him in place for long, hot seconds that has them both breathless by the end.

“Happy anniversary to you,” Dean murmurs back, pressing one last, light kiss to Castiel’s mouth. “You hungry?”

“Is that a euphemism?”

Dean smirks, but releases him. “I wish,” he says. Lust and love shine with such ease at Castiel that he still can’t quite believe it. “But we should probably eat. You’re gonna need the carbs.”

Castiel shakes his head wryly as they make their way to the kitchen, where Dean has deposited the bags. Just the sight of the diner’s logo has Castiel’s mouth watering and he immediately grabs a
couple of plates from the cabinets. He leaves one at each of their seats, then searches for a vase for
the flowers, though it turns out, if you don’t have a reason to buy a vase, then you probably don’t
own one, and Castiel is forced to use a chipped water pitcher instead.

As Dean unpacks the bags, they talk about their day. Castiel spent most of his morning mulling over
shipment orders and meeting with potential investors, while Dean tried to tactfully inform a sweet
old woman that her mechanic has been overcharging her for years.

“She took the news okay, though,” Dean tells him, settling into his normal seat. Castiel does the
same. “But it was kind of a long conversation and by the end I knew there was no way I was going
to have time to make dinner.”

“Dean, there is no substitution for your cooking, but Ruby’s does make a very good second choice,”
Castiel tells him seriously.

“Lucky for me you’re so easy to please.”

The burgers are, as they always are, delicious. Castiel introduced Dean to Ruby’s shortly after they
got together, and by now they have the entire menu memorized. Dean knows to get Castiel the
Backyard Burger, with extra pickles and cheese, and Castiel is unsurprised to see Dean dig in to a
Ruby’s Special. The companionship fills Castiel with warmth, and he swallows smile.

Finally, with the food finished, Castiel departs to their bedroom to get his gift for Dean, as Dean
goes out to get Castiel’s from the Impala. Nervousness flutters in the pit of his stomach, and he tries
to tune into the music still softly echoing from the record player. It takes him no time at all to
recognize Hey, Jude and, with an uncertain glance towards the direction of the garage, Castiel
removes the needle and stops the music. He can never tell whether Dean is in the right frame of
mind to listen to his mother’s favorite song, and the only thing Castiel wants today is for his husband
to be happy.

The silence doesn’t last long. Dean is striding back towards him before he can start another round
of second-guessing his gift, a little gold bag dangling from his fingers. “You wanna go first,” Dean
asks, and unless Castiel is mistaken, his voice holds a tremor underneath. So Castiel shrugs and
takes the bag from Dean’s hand.

“It’s not much,” Dean immediately interjects, before Castiel even withdraws the gift. “I mean, I
know we had a spending limit, but I’m pretty sure this didn’t even come close to that, and if you
think it’s stupid, just tell me and I’ll take it back, no problem, or, I mean, I you can just toss it too,
whatever-”

“Dean,” Castiel cuts him off. “I assure you that nothing you give me will be thrown away.” He
studies the slim, perfectly square gold box for just a moment before pulling off the lid. He can feel
Dean’s eyes watching him with laser focus.

The bracelet he withdraws is a plain black cord. Three sterling silver charms are attached and
Castiel inspects each one in turn. The first he recognizes without effort, and he looks up to meet
Dean’s eyes. “It’s my name,” he breathes. “In Enochian.”

Dean rubs at the back of his neck. “Yeah, you know how Sam is when it comes to research,” he
mutters gruffly. “Asked him to look into a couple of other symbols too, you know, so it’s not just
some geeky charm bracelet.” He points to the silver circle, with two arrows facing the center.
“That’s a protection symbol, Native American. And this one-”He gestures to the pentagram
surrounded by waves that look like fire. “Wards off badness. Evidently.”

Castiel is silent for a long time, just staring, so long that Dean starts to shift from foot to foot. “It’s dumb,” Dean seems to decide, reaching out to take it away. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what I was thinking. Like you need protection, right? Jesus, you could probably take me in a fight.”

But Castiel refuses to loosen his grip and when he meets Dean’s eyes a beat later, Castiel has no idea what he sees there, but whatever it is makes Dean lower his hand. “Dean, this is one of the most beautiful, thoughtful gifts I’ve ever been given,” he says honestly. Humility crashes over him, warm and terrifying. He could live to be a hundred, and he would never deserve Dean. “Second only to my wedding ring.”

Dean swallows thickly. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Put it on me?”

After Dean has fastened the bracelet to Castiel’s wrist, Castiel kisses him again. “My gift to you wasn’t as thoughtful,” he tells Dean as Dean takes the box from him. “It’s um- It’s nothing special. I probably should have gone first, you’re going to be let down.”

Dean clearly isn’t listening at all. He tears through the wrapping paper like a child on Christmas, and Castiel thinks that if he wasn’t so scared, he’d laugh.

When Dean’s hands still, Castiel’s eyes dip to the floor. “Look at me, Cas.” Dean’s voice has power over Castiel in a way that nothing else does, and it manages to draw Castiel’s eyes up to meet his. The blinding smile leveled at him sends Castiel’s heart racing for another reason than fear. “Dude, this is awesome!”

“You like it,” Castiel asks doubtfully. “You’re not just saying that?”

Dean doesn’t bother using words to answer. He pulls Castiel into a firm kiss that sends sparks up his spine, that has him gripping Dean’s side with one hand, tangling into his hair with his other. Dean licks into his mouth and Castiel whimpers, a needy, thready thing. Dean growls, backs Castiel up until he slams into the counter, and slips his hands under Castiel’s shirt to rake nails down his lower back. It’s hot, messy. Desperate. Dean gets all of three of Castiel’s buttons undone, before he releases a grunt of impatience, and rips it the rest of the way. Castiel doesn’t even notice, wrapped up in shoving Dean’s over-shirt past his shoulders.

“Up,” Dean instructs roughly, and Castiel catches on immediately, nodding incoherently as Dean half-lifts him onto the counter and his legs wind around Dean’s waist, pulling him impossibly nearer, and even now it stuns him to feel Dean, hot and hard against him.

“Dean,” he whispers back, as Dean’s teeth catch the skin of his collarbone and gives it a harsh bite. “Dean, I-“His hands fall to the button of Dean’s slacks.

“Mine,” Dean murmurs against his neck, before sucking a bruising kiss into the column of his throat. “Every fucking inch. Fucking love you like crazy, Cas, you know that?” He licks lightly at the spot just below Castiel’s ear that makes his breath catch. “So glad you married me.”

Castiel finally gets Dean’s pants undone and wraps his finger around his cock, and gives it a hard stroke, root to tip that has Dean writhing against him, palming Castiel’s dick through his pants. “Wanna fuck you,” he tells Castiel, mouthing at Castiel’s shoulder. “Wanna be inside you, Cas,
feel you all around me."

And Castiel would be fine with that, really, except that he doesn’t want to stop, just wants Dean to touch him, love sending him careening towards the finish. “No time,” is all he can choke out, and Dean releases a muffled curse, tugs Castiel free of his pants. He takes Castiel’s cock, then his own, in hand, and Castiel slips his fingers through Dean’s, gripping their hard lengths and helping him jerk them off, fast and rough.

“I love you, Dean.” Castiel moans brokenly. “Love you so much.”

Dean kisses him again and nips at his lower lip. Sweat dots his forehead and Castiel would swear on his soul that he has never seen anything as breathtaking as his husband is, on the cusp. “Love you. Cas, I need you.”

He comes suddenly, violently, spilling over their fingers and his head snapping back and connecting with the cabinets behind him with a thump that he barely feels. Dean follows immediately, shaking beneath their hands and after a few seconds he gives a satisfied chuckle.

“Well, that was fun.” Dean gently brushes his mouth along the curve of Castiel’s jaw. “As far as anniversaries go, gotta say, this one is off to a great-” He’s interrupted by the sharp trill of his cellphone ringtone and he grumbles as he pulls it from his pocket. He glances down at the number, and Castiel shoots him a questioning look that he returns. “Hello?”

There’s a beat of silence, then Dean stiffens and Castiel’s heart drops into his stomach. All evidence of laughter and lightheartedness vanish from Dean’s eyes, slowly being replaced by something that looks a lot like panic as he steps back from Castiel and turns away. “This is he,” he tells the caller. The caller says something that makes Dean ask “Well, how bad was it?” And then he stalks off in the direction of their bedroom.

Castiel slides from the counter and goes to follow his husband but when he gets to their room he’s stunned to find the door closed and, when he checks the handle, locked. He knocks quietly, not wanting to anger Dean when something is clearly wrong, but various, horrifying possibilities are swimming in his head. Is it Sam? Bobby? Jo? There aren’t that many people that they know that would put that expression on Dean’s face.

Just as he’s considering working the lock open with a butter knife, the door swings open once again and Dean is standing in front of him, his green duffle hanging from his right hand. The phone has been returned to his pocket. “Something happened,” he tells Castiel. “I need to go out of town for a couple of days.” He goes to step around Castiel, as though he thinks that that will be the end of it, but Castiel has excellent reflexes and catches Dean’s arm before he gets to the door.

“Dean, what is it,” Castiel asks. “What’s wrong?”

Dean looks away, his jaw clenched. “Sam was in a car accident. He’s in the hospital.”

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Castiel smiles widely at his fiancé beside him and tells himself that it’s as though the morning swim with Dean didn’t even happen.

It’s hours later and the rehearsal dinner is in full swing. Anna’s summons had come on the heels of Gabriel’s arrival and Castiel was overwhelmingly grateful to have his cousin in the house,
effortlessly pulling all attention away from Castiel with stories about the various cases he’s working on, and the latest lady-love in his life. (Her name is Kali and according Gabriel she’s a goddess.)

Two hours after Gabriel, Inias and Raphael arrived, providing Castiel with yet another distraction from his increasingly detailed memories of what exactly transpired by the pool. Raphael spends the afternoon making thinly veiled, suspicious comments about Dean’s presence that Inias easily side-steps and unabashedly ignores. It’s clear, from the moment Inias and Raphael step inside the door and catch sight of Dean, watching their entrance from the stairway, that whatever jealousy and insecurity Inias had felt before has vanished in favor of his excitement. He kisses Castiel but chastely and manages to curb the urge to smirk triumphantly at Dean. Castiel can’t bring himself to look at his ex.

More time passed, Castiel whiling away the hours listening to Anna and Gabriel’s constant bickering – a never-ending source of amusement – hand secured in Inias’, and becoming quite acquainted with Dinah’s Bloody Mary recipe. In fact, by the time Naomi announced that the entire household needed to get changed for the rehearsal dinner, Castiel was feeling . . . well, pretty good, to be honest.

And now they’re all sitting around the long dining room table that, quite frankly, is probably big enough for a group four times their size, a veritable banquet of delicious food in front of them. There are eight of them in total, thanks to the arrival of the best men, and Castiel, in his slightly altered state, thinks it’s very poetic that he’s taken such a shine to Bloody Marys on the night before his wedding, when the only other time he’s gotten this drunk was while he was married to Dean. Not that he’s drunk but he does find that he’s appreciating Gabriel’s off-color jokes more than probably makes sense. So, maybe that last drink was not the best idea he’s ever had.

But it’s not as though he had much of a choice, he acknowledges to himself, with Dean wandering around the house, looking all beautiful and real and touchable. And when he’d entered the dining room in that deep, rich scarlet dress shirt and the black slacks, clean-shaven and smelling delicious, well, that’s when Castiel reached for his third drink.

Castiel reaches for the platter holding assorted pieces of cake, but misjudges the distance, slamming his hand into someone’s (Dean’s, as it turns out) wine glass and sending it tipping onto its side and staining his mother’s cream colored tablecloth a dark purple. He patiently waits for the sound of his mother’s shout of outrage, but the only sound is the low rumbling of Dean’s chuckle, mixed with the quiet music coming from the CD player Inias brought over for the meal. When Castiel looks up, his mother sighs and rolls her eyes, as if Castiel didn’t just destroy a $200 piece of cloth.

“Well done,” Anna says dryly, grinning. “I’ve always hated this thing.”

Naomi looks scandalized. “What? Why? This is a beautiful table cloth, I’ll have you know.”

“Mom, it has tassels in the corners.” Anna lifts the one nearest to her and holds it up for her mother to see. “And they’re gold.”

“Castiel, are you drunk,” Inias asks quietly, next to his ear as the two women continue their discussion and Dinah appears to refill Anna’s glass

Castiel straightens and frowns. “Of course not.”

“I’m not angry if you are, I just think maybe-”
“I’m not drunk.”

“Cas doesn’t get drunk,” Dean’s smiling something fond as he intervenes, “at least, not drunk enough to admit it around polite company. You should tell these guys about the other time you got this drunk.”

“I am not drunk!”

Dean leans forward, his amusement evident on his face. “Sure, Cas, sure. Like that time on the Fourth?” He looks at Gabriel and Inias, who are both watching the exchange with interest. “So we go down to Bobby’s for the Fourth of July, and we decide to stay the night because we’ve all been drinking, and Sam’s in town for the holiday, and it’s not like I’m about to let anyone – Cas, Sam, or me – drive the Impala drunk. So Cas and I go to my old room to sleep, and I hit the mattress and I’m out.” He glances at Castiel, and it’s only then that Castiel realizes he’s smiling at the story, at Dean. “At least for a little while until I wake up to the sound of my husband, screaming. And so, naturally, I think that someone’s in the house, so I, like, jump to my feet, and look around for the danger, and that’s when I see him: smart, level-headed, Castiel Lord, completely naked, half his body leaning out the window wailing like some kind of banshee in heat.” Dean throws his head back, laughing. “God that was awesome.”

“That’s a charming story, Dean,” Raphael says as he bites into his salad. Castiel, somehow, doubts that’s his meaning, and is proven correct a beat later. “I was under the impression that your marriage wasn’t filled with many of those.”

Castiel narrows his eyes at Raphael. “There were some.”

“But of course, when divorce is the outcome, the more pleasant memories probably tend to get kind of pushed aside,” Raphael continues, tone deceptively mild. “I mean, I can’t imagine that it would be easy to think of those times when they’re tainted by the arguments the pair of you must have had regarding the differences in your social stature.”

Castiel goes cold. He looks down into the bottom of his drink. He can feel the curious stares of those around him, but the only pair of eyes he’s interested in meeting are a vibrant green and when he does they’re soft and knowing. He’s always wondered what story Dean gave, whether he laid out their history, the betrayal when he started telling people they were getting divorced because Castiel, himself, could barely stand discussing it at all. For the first few months Castiel felt as though his guts had been ripped out, like a limb he’d gotten so used to using was suddenly just not there.

Despite this being his fourth cocktail, Castiel is fairly certain that he’s supposed to speak and so he holds Dean’s eyes, allowing them to give him strength. Something wordless flickers to life between Dean and Castiel the way it always has. "It wasn't really that simple," is what he says. Inias squeezes his knee sympathetically. He doesn't know the full story either, just the version that Castiel tells when he's pressed but he wants to be there for Castiel, wants Castiel to draw strength from him. And Castiel understands that, but that doesn't mean that it works. He feels wretched about it, but when Dean quirks up his mouth, just the smallest bit, Castiel finds another nugget of courage. "Dean and I had as many problems as any other couple but none of it was ever about the money. Not the way you mean, anyway." Actually, it's insulting, what Raphael is suggesting, but Castiel is well-aware that it comes from loyalty to his brother, and it's not as though Castiel can fault him for that. But that doesn't mean that Castiel can allow misconceptions to flourish when a reporter is sitting at the same table, watching the entire exchange.

"You mean Dean’s fragile male ego wasn't the reason? I just assumed it was a blow to his
masculinity that you were so much more successful." Raphael smirks, apparently pleased with this line of questioning but Castiel stiffens and even Naomi shoots him a warning glare.

"That's quite enough," Naomi snaps. "Dean is very accomplished in his field and deserves as much respect as anyone else at this table. More than some, I daresay."

Castiel is astonished, and turns to share this astonishment with Anna, but his sister doesn't look at all surprised. She doesn't meet his eyes.

Raphael laughs. "I didn't mean anything by it," he tells Naomi. "I'm sure Dean is intelligent enough to detect sarcasm when it's being directed at him."

For just a second Castiel is expecting Dean to storm out, and not an inch of Castiel would blame him. If he was still Dean's husband he certainly wouldn't stand for anyone to talk about him with such derision. But Inias reminds Castiel without words that he is not Dean's and Dean is not his, not anymore, and Dean doesn't take his leave, and instead, raises his eyebrows contemptuously, as though Raphael is so below him that his words barely register.

"You know, I've always been pretty fluent in sarcasm," Dean says slowly, "and I've got to say, that's not a dialect I'm familiar with. So maybe you could just say what it is that you actually mean."

Castiel tries to tell himself that he doesn't see Chuck furiously taking notes on his napkin.

Raphael sighs, as though weary of this conversation now that it's focused on him. “I didn’t mean anything,” is what he settles on. “I’m simply glad, for my brother’s sake, that your marriage did not work out.”

Castiel freezes, fury and hurt warring inside him as he sucks in air through his nose. It could be the alcohol, and in fact it probably is, but in that moment Castiel is angrier than he can ever recall being. And he doesn’t understand it, but he has heard enough comments about his marriage to Dean, and he gets to his feet, a little unstably, and says, “I need some air.”

And he leaves the room without a backwards glance.

He heads outside immediately, taking solace in the cool, May, breeze and the familiar sight of his mother’s ruby-red roses.

He turns when he hears the door creak, and he’s surprised – though perhaps he shouldn’t be – that Inias is standing behind him, looking beaten and betrayed. “What the hell was that,” Inias asks flatly.

Castiel flinches and looks away. “What should I have done, Inias? Continue to allow him to talk about me like that? This is the night before our wedding and – “

Inias’ eyes harden, the clench of his jaw sharpens as he interrupts, “Yes, it’s the night before our wedding, and you spent it getting into a fight with my brother over Dean Winchester.” Castiel doesn’t answer and Inias sighs. “Look, I understand, I do. This whole situation is a little weird. But I’m the one you chose, Castiel. I’m the one you’re marrying.” He lays his hands on Castiel’s shoulders. “Dean left.”

“I know.” And Castiel tries but he can’t forget the way his heart shattered when Dean walked out. He’d been certain the pain would kill him.
“And I love you, here and now. I would never leave you, Castiel.”

He doesn’t know where the bitter laugh originates from, only that it shakes his frame as he coughs it out. “You say that now. And you’re not the first person to say it.”

“But I could be the last, if you let me.”

Castiel takes a deep breath, but before he can decide what he wants to say, he’s saved by the arrival of another.

“Castiel, can I speak with you?”

He looks up to see Naomi striding towards them, determination sketched across every line of her face. He and his mother might have had their differences, but in that moment he is so relieved to see her he could weep. “Inias will you excuse us?”

Inias nods slowly, paints on a smile and squeezes Castiel’s shoulders. “Yes, of course. Just, get some sleep,” he says. “I’m going to go have a word with Raphael.”

“I broke up the party,” Naomi tells Inias. “So he’s probably in his room.”

“Thanks, Naomi.” He pauses at the door to turn and give Castiel a searching look. “See you tomorrow, Castiel,” he says. And then he’s gone.

Naomi glances at him and the smile she gives him is so kind that it’s disarming. She takes a step towards the garden and beckons him to follow her. There’s a pair of old, iron chairs that sit by the roses and they take seats there, Castiel breathes in the cool, evening air and it feels good against the alcohol-flush of his cheeks. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about.”

Curiosity gets the best of him and he cocks his head, patiently waiting.

“You know, Castiel,” she begins, “I loved your father very much.”

He tries not to act on the disbelief he feels, but his eyebrows arch without his permission anyway. Castiel doesn’t remember much about this father. Of course, the man’s picture is mounted on several different walls in the house, and there’s a collection of home videos from when he and Anna were children in the basement that Castiel watched every night until he turned twelve, but his memories of the man who died when he was six are scattered and few. His favorite, the one that comes to mind the most often, is a feeling more than an actual memory, the certainty that once upon a time there was a pair of strong, steady hands that would lift him high into the air and make him laugh with delight.

Naomi reads his look quite easily, and sighs. “I may not have always showed it in ways that you and Anna could understand, but it is true. Jacob was a good man, kind and honest. He was very good at running the company, and he enjoyed it. In a lot of ways, Castiel, you remind me of him.” She swallows, looking sad. “I know that working at Lord Enterprises was never what you wanted, but you rose to the challenge just beautifully. It more than stayed afloat, it flourished because of you and your work.”

“Thank you, Mother,” Castiel says, gobsmacked.

She nods, then, extending his surprise, she takes one of his hands between her own. “Castiel, I
know that I made a lot of mistakes in your life. I pushed you too hard in a direction that you didn’t want, but I want you to understand that I only did that because I knew that there is absolutely nothing in this world that you can’t do. I knew that I could count on you to carry on your father’s legacy – the legacy of this family – with all the dignity and devotion that the position deserves. And you have. You pulled the company from near-bankruptcy, Castiel, and that’s not something just anyone could accomplish.”

Castiel hates it when anyone brings up his deal with Crowley, and he feels his cheeks predictably flush with shame, but Naomi – in yet another first – seems to know where his mind goes and gently smiles, reaching across the distance between them and stroking his hair from his eyes.

“I know that you feel you made a lot of mistakes that year, and God knows, you had to make some tough decisions. But I’m very proud of you.”

Something twists inside Castiel and he can’t help the confusion and the . . . fear that washes over him. Because it’s not Naomi’s words that are setting him ill-at-ease, but, rather, the absolute sincerity with which they’re delivered. “Mother, what’s going on,” he asks before he can stop himself. “Why are you saying these things? Why is Dean staying here?”

“I’m dying, Castiel.”

So far is it from what he expected her to say that it takes several seconds for her words set in. It’s as though comprehension is dancing determinedly out of reach, and the breath is knocked out of him, and he sobers instantly. “What do you mean,” he finally asks. “I don’t –”

“I went to the doctor on Monday,” Naomi says. “Cancer.” She pauses to give a small, self-deprecating smile and it’s the smile, the way it quivers at the edges, that sends his thoughts into a tailspin. “They expect me to undergo treatment. Can you imagine? Me, in a wig?” She snorts derisively.

“You’re not going to fight it,” Castiel demands questioningly, and he’s on his feet, gripping his mother by the shoulders, and they feel so small under his hands that something primal, desperate inside him breaks free and he shakes her. “You have to!”

Her hands settle over his own, stilling his movement. “It’s alright, Castiel.”

“No, it’s not,” he breathes.

“It is.” She gives his hands a squeeze and guides him back onto the chair and he stares at her, fervently wishing that this last day has just been one long dream. “I wanted to wait until after the ceremony to tell you, but Dean-”

“Dean knows?” Castiel tries to wrap his mind around in what universe his mother would ever entrust Dean Winchester with their personal business, but comes up blank. “How?”

Naomi sighs. “He saw me coming out of the doctor’s office. You know, it’s right across the street from Sam’s firm. Evidently he had had lunch with his brother, and he was on his way back to his car and. He asked me straight out.” She tilts her head at Castiel, light shining into her eyes. “I must say, I think I have a new appreciation for your marriage to that man. It is very hard to lie to those eyes.”

“I remember,” replies Castiel softly, aching.
“He was very kind to me that afternoon,” Naomi continues after a beat. “He didn’t have to be, I’m sure I don’t need to remind you of the reasons why not. But he encouraged me to tell you and Anna.”

“Did you tell Anna?”

“I did, this morning after breakfast. I wanted to wait – give the two of you a few more days without putting this on you, but Dean’s right. It would be cruel, in the end. You’d be furious.”

Castiel nods in agreement.

“As far as why Dean is staying here, well, frankly, I just wanted to do something nice for the man. I know I didn’t make things easy for the two of your, especially at first.” Her mouth twists into a smirk and she shakes her head at herself in amusement. “Sometimes I don’t know what I was thinking. Trying to get him to accept money to break up with you.”

A mirthless laugh escapes past Castiel’s lips. “You should have waited a couple of years.”

“Castiel,” Naomi suddenly says, her eyes sharpening. “I don’t know what’s in store for you and Dean. But, please, hear me when I say that no matter what happens, I will support you, absolutely.”

“Nothing is going to happen,” Castiel answers immediately. “And none of that matters right now. Right now the only thing I’m thinking about is spending some time with my mother.”

So he does. For over an hour he and Naomi talk as they haven’t in years, easy affection bleeding between them as they discuss inane, unimportant things, side-stepping the more complicated subjects. A part of Castiel clamors to know how many more conversations they can expect to have, how much time is laid out before them. But another, much larger, part is too frightened to ask.

Naomi eventually departs for the night, bidding him a soft, “Goodnight, Castiel,” before pressing a kiss to his cheek.

Once she’s gone, he allows himself to feel the despair that rises up in him from a place in his heart he thought had long since shattered and died. There are tears streaking down his cheeks, sobs ripping from him, and he buries his head in his hands as he tries to pull himself together. For days he’s been walking around with no real clue what has been going on with his mother, and a nugget of guilt finds a home in him as well. In fact, the only reason he knows anything at all is –

He doesn’t realize that he’s gotten to his feet until he’s standing outside a second floor guest bedroom, raising his fist up to knock. He just doesn’t have it in himself to fear the man on the other side of the door, or the rejection that he may bestow on Castiel, there’s just no room for it along with everything else rolling around inside him and Castiel is so tired, and he doesn’t want to handle this alone right now.

The sound of his strike feels loud to Castiel’s ears, but then there’s Dean, rumpled hair, green and blue plaid boxers, a black t-shirt Castiel suspects he yanked on as courtesy, feet bare and rubbing the heel of his palm against his eyes. Castiel’s eyes flicker to the overhead light – switched off – and he winces.

“I’m – I’m sorry, Dean,” he stammers out, “I didn’t . . . I’ll just –” He immediately turns to leave, not entirely sure why he came up here in the first place, but Dean reacts swiftly despite his groggy
“Cas,” Dean says pulling him back and into the room. He crosses the room to turn on the bedside lamp, then settles onto the bed, refusing to release Castiel until they’re sitting together. There’s concern in the furrow of his eyebrows, the tight line of his mouth. “What’s wrong?”

“I . . . spoke to my mother,” says Castiel. He fiddles with his fingernails, if for no other reason than to avoid looking at his ex. “She told me about the cancer.”

Dean gives a heavy sigh then he catches Castiel’s jaw and tilts his face until their gazes collide. It’s a gesture that feels so familiar that he doesn’t fight it, lets Dean study him carefully, lets himself get lost in the unchecked sorrow reflecting back at him. “Cas, I’m so sorry.”

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry for.” Dean’s hand slides up so that his knuckles brush Castiel’s cheekbone tenderly, and Castiel’s eyes slip closed as he leans into the touch. It shouldn’t be, but it is, it’s a balm that soothes the frayed nerves inside him and asks for nothing in return and it’s so addictive that Castiel has to muster all the strength he has to pull back, snap his eyes open. They’re still too close but he doesn’t . . . care. Not really. Not as much as he should. “Dean, what you did, that was far more than could have been expected of you.”

Dean chuckles softly, gives a one-shouldered shrug. “What? Being nice to the lady?”

“For start, yes. It’s not as though the two of you were ever very close.”

“Yeah, well.”

“And convincing her to tell me about her illness,” he adds. “If I was in Aspen, traveling with blissful ignorance while she and Anna dealt with this on their own, I would never have been able to forgive myself.”

He’s not entirely sure how it happens, how he ends up reaching across the scant space between them to take Dean’s hand, but their fingers thread together with an ease that can only come from familiarity and Dean’s palm is warm. Both men stare down at where they are joined, and Castiel’s heart pounds desperately against his ribcage when Dean’s eyes move very deliberately to his mouth.

“So, what are you going to do,” Dean finally asks, breaking the long silence. "You guys going to put off the honeymoon, then?"

Castiel tries to imagine going anywhere with this knowledge drilling holes into his stomach but the very idea is ludicrous. For years he’s wanted to find a connection with his mother that would reconstruct a bridge between them, and while there’s a harsh cruelty that it should come with news of a fatal disease, there’s no way he can trade away these next few months with this mother. For what? To go on a trip they can take at any time? "I can't think about that right now," he says.

Dean seems to understand, nodding a little, squeezing Castiel's fingers tightly. Then, an expression on his face that Castiel cannot decipher, he gently tugs him until Castiel slides closer, their sides pressing together. Dean releases his hand to wrap an arm around his shoulders and pulls him to his chest. It's only then that Castiel realizes that he's trembling, and that the wide circles Dean's rubbing into his back are an effort to calm him. "I wish I could tell you everything was going to be alright," Dean murmurs against his hair. "But I will say that Naomi is one of the toughest broads I've ever met. And she sure as shit loves you and Anna like crazy. She'll hold on as long as she can for the two of you."
"She's not even going to accept treatment." Hopelessness is an ugly thing and Castiel resents that he’s spent so much of his life feeling it. He buries his eyes into the line of Dean's shoulder and one of Dean's legs slips under the dip of Castiel's knees so that they're woven together as closely as they can be. And it should feel wrong but Dean's so warm and he's stroking the hair at the back of Castiel's neck, blunt fingernails dragging a small measure of relief from Castiel with each movement. Dean used to say that he was absolutely horrendous at extending sympathy but Castiel finds unmatched comfort in his arms.

Dean just shushes him and Castiel feels a jolt in his belly when Dean presses his lips to his temple. "I've got you, Cas," he whispers. "I've got you."

And Castiel starts to cry.

*

It's a long time before he is able to pull himself together. It’s the stress of the evening, the stress of the impending wedding, the stress of the knowledge that this time with Dean is drawing to a close. And Naomi . . . He’s always thought of his mother as this tower of strength, an unmovable force, thought her lifespan would long outlast his own. So many things are ending and it leaves him feeling claustrophobic and empty at the same time and he doesn’t want to unclench his fists from the front of Dean’s shirt.

Eventually he does though. He allows himself one last deep breath into the curve of Dean’s neck and then he pulls away before he loses his will.

But Dean doesn’t release him. One of his hands remains on the small of Castiel’s back, and the other Dean slips up to slide into place on the side of his face. He rubs his thumb just below Castiel’s eye, so openly affectionate and loving that for an instant Castiel is sure he’s going to break apart. When Dean tugs him close, and their foreheads touch, he shivers.

“You’re going to be okay, Cas,” Dean whispers, his breath dancing across Castiel’s mouth. “You’re so much stronger than you think.”

“I’m not.” He sounds so small, even to his own ears.

“You are.”

That’s one of the things about Dean: when he tells you something, it’s hard to hold onto doubt. He’s not the kind of man to patronize and while it’s been frustrating at times Castiel has always appreciated the candor. So he lets himself believe and nods once against Dean’s brow.

“I should go,” Castiel whispers.

“Yeah.” Dean’s grip loosens, but before Castiel can stand, Dean presses their mouths together, short, but soft, like he’s allowed, and Castiel tries not to think that he is.

He gets to his feet, already missing the warmth of Dean’s body, but before he reaches the door, Dean says, from the bed, “Cas, can I ask you something?”

“Yes, Dean, of course.”
“Why did you come here?”

“What do you mean,” Castiel asks.

“I mean, why didn’t you go to Inias’ room? Or Anna’s?” Dean’s eyes are gentle but assessing and Castiel can’t look away.

He swallows around the lump in his throat. “I didn’t mean to disturb you, Dean.”

Dean huffs a sound of impatience. “Cas, that’s not what I’m saying here. I don’t mind that you came to me, okay? I’m glad, actually. I’m just wondering . . . why? Or, do you even know?”

“I wanted to thank you,” Castiel says.

“You could have thanked me from the door. Or, hell, it didn’t have to be tonight. But instead you came into my room, and you let me take care of you. Why?”

Castiel doesn’t like these questions, doesn’t want to discuss this any more. Because . . . because, well, Dean’s questions are valid and it’s only then that it occurs to Castiel that he doesn’t have any answers for him. Anna is his sister, for God’s sake and Inias doesn’t even know. The very first thing that he should have done was go straight to the man that’s going to be his husband and fill him in and instead Castiel came here. To let his ex comfort him.

“I don’t know,” he finally answers.

Dean’s expression doesn’t change; he doesn’t look surprised in the least. “Might wanna figure that out before tomorrow,” is all he says.

Castiel ignores the implication that lies there, but, then, something sticks out in his mind too, and he tilts his head at Dean. “Why did you let me? You could have sent me away. You could have presented these alternatives when I was standing at your door, and yet you didn’t.”

Dean shrugs, evidently a lot less concerned by Castiel’s question than Castiel was by his. “I wanted to, Cas.” He finally stands and crosses to Castiel, to stare him straight in the eye. “I don’t want you to marry Inias.”

Castiel’s heart drops into his belly somewhere. The words shouldn’t take him so off-guard, it’s not as though Dean has attempted to mask that since he arrived, but nevertheless he finds himself demanding, “Why?”

Dean arches an eyebrow. “Why do you think?”

“No.” It comes out sharper than he intended, but he doesn’t regret it and he tries to step back but his back hits the door. “No,” he repeats. “You don’t get to do this. You don’t get to come back onto the scene and suddenly decide that you want me back. You left me, Dean, or don’t you remember?”

“I do remember,” Dean says. “I was there. But it’s not that simple and you know it.”

“Dean, let me leave.”

“No. We’re having this conversation.”
Castiel grits his teeth. “It’s three years too late,” he snaps.

“I don’t care,” Dean argues. “I have something to say.”

“Fine, then,” Castiel snaps. The least he can do is let Dean have his say, after being so kind to him. “Just say it, so we can get this over with.”

Dean needs no further prompting. “Look, I’m sorry I left,” he begins. His voice is steady, like there’s nothing to be afraid of, but Castiel doesn’t share that sentiment. In fact, Castiel is absolutely terrified. It’s not that he’s scared of Dean, but, rather, his words and the power they will have over Castiel, who has spent years feeding the mixture of anger and guilt he holds about their past just to keep going. But over the last couple of days, the anger has given way to confusion, the guilt to longing, and there are chinks in his armor that are getting harder to ignore. “I overreacted. But there real problems in our marriage, you can’t deny that.”

“So you’re bringing this up just so that you can say that maybe you left me for the wrong reasons, but that it was the right decision anyway? Thanks a lot, Dean, but frankly I could have lived without that.”

Dean glares at him. “Would you just shut up for a minute, please? And think about it. If Crowley had never entered the picture, do you honestly think we could have made it? Tell me I’m wrong.”

Castiel can’t. Obviously, since he was having these same thoughts earlier. He looks down. “There were real problems,” he admits quietly. “But I don’t see the point in discussing this now. I’m marrying Inias tomorrow.”

Dean doesn’t even seem to hear him, barreling on as if Castiel’s answer ended with his acquiescence. “But things are different now. We’re different. I wouldn’t make the same mistakes again. Like with Sam. Would you? Weren’t you telling me just yesterday that you’d stopped lying?”

“And then I ended up in bed with my ex husband.”

“That was totally innocent. And-” Dean seems to steel himself and immediately Castiel knows what he’s going to say, and he’s shaking his head before he even realizes it, but Dean refuses to stop. “And, about what happened after Bobby’s funeral-”

“No!” Dean gives him a look, but now Castiel is the one who can’t hold his tongue. “I don’t want to talk about that. Alright? I can’t. Because, suppose you’re right, about all of it. It still wouldn’t matter. I am marrying Inias. I made a promise to him months ago, and you’re just now bringing all this up, and for what? Why? You’ve had months to say something, and you waited until 24 hours before my wedding.” He means to pause, give Dean a chance to respond to the charges, but now that he’s on a roll, he finds that he can’t stop. “And as far what happened after Bobby’s funeral. You know, when you left, it hurt. But when I walked out of Bobby’s house that day, it nearly killed me. You have no idea what it feels like to feel hope again, real hope, to believe that the one thing that you’ve wanted more than anything else is finally within your grasp, only have it metaphorically spit in your face. You wanted to hurt me, and you did.”

“I was grieving!”

“Well so was I!”
They are at each other for so long Castiel is half-convinced that Dean is going to kiss him again, and half-convinced that Castiel’s going to beat him to it. Finally he drops his gaze and Dean takes a step back.

“Do you still love me?” Dean swallows. “Because I still love you.”

It’s so strange, that this version of Dean should be so like the Dean he married, but so different in other ways. He tries to remember the last time his husband was so open about his feelings and comes up blank. So he can’t lie, it’s not even an option. “Yes.” It rings in the air like a trumpet and he finds some satisfaction in the shock that reflect in Dean’s expression. “Yes, I still love you.” He’s not even sure when he realized it, except that he knows that it’s true. But he barrels on because he can’t bear to watch hope start to bloom. “It’s never been about the love, though,” he says.

“There was always love to spare.”

And Dean, beautiful, brilliant Dean, immediately gets where he’s going and asks, “Do you trust me? Because I trust you.”

Castiel tilts his head at Dean, before giving him a helpless shrug. “I don’t know,” he says quietly. “I want – I don’t know.”

Dean doesn’t answer, his face falling at Castiel’s words, and Castiel turns back to the door so he doesn’t have to see it.

“Thank you for tonight, Dean,” he says sadly. “I appreciate you being here for me.”

He doesn’t look but he swears he hears the darkness in Dean’s eyes. “Any time, Cas. Any time.”

*

It’s been a rough six months, but there is garland on the hearth, three stockings hung by the chimney, and a six foot tall Christmas tree twinkling lights from the living room window.

*Castiel smiles to himself as he takes the last pie from the oven, and sets it on the counter next to the other two. He’s been working at this for days, trimming their house with lights, and setting out candles and cooking a turkey, and baking Dean’s favorites, and trying desperately to turn this place into the Winter Wonderland he thinks his husband would appreciate.

Because Dean deserves it.

The call from the hospital had been exactly the kind that every parent dreaded – the person that Dean had cared for since he was child was lying in a hospital bed, hundreds of miles away, fighting for his life. “He’d been drinking,” the nurse had explained to Dean over the phone, “and the odds are he didn’t see the red light.”

“What about the other driver? Was he injured?”

The nurse had paused uncertainly, before replying, “I’m sorry, sir. I can’t give you information on any of our other patients,” which had told Dean all he’d needed to know.

When he had pulled himself together enough to explain the situation to Castiel, Castiel had immediately gone to their bedroom to get his luggage, but Dean had stopped him with a shake of his head, arguing that Castiel should stay behind, that Dean appreciated that he wanted to be there, but
he couldn’t just leave Lord Enterprises without any notice, not when he still needed to tell Lucifer and Michael that he was giving the Sales Department Manager position to Rachel.

“I’ll call you when I get there,” he’d said as he hoisted his bag over his shoulder. He’d picked up his keys, walked towards the door, then paused, saying, quietly, “Kiss me.”

So Castiel had, gently, and he’d tried to tell himself that Dean would be alright on his own, that if it was what Dean wanted, then he could be supportive.

“So do you want me to call Bobby and tell him what’s happened,” Castiel asked as Dean stepped outside.

Dean nodded gratefully. “Yeah, thanks, man. And would you mind getting me a flight out to California so it can be ready when I get there?”

Castiel had said he would and he had just given Dean as reassuring a smile as he could summon and gone back into the house to do what Dean had asked. Later he would berate himself for not taking a longer look at his husband, drinking in the sight of him because Castiel has not laid eyes on him since.

He understands, of course. He doesn’t blame Dean for staying in California while Sam’s been healing. He’d broken his left ankle, his right arm and wrist, and cracked two of his ribs and injuries like those can take a long time to heal, Castiel knows. Dean’s reluctance to leave his brother’s side comes from a good place.

It has, however, been difficult, there’s no use denying. Dean calls once every few days to give him an update on Sam’s progress, but they don’t talk about much else and never for very long at a time. There’s a distance between them now that has nothing to do with miles, and Castiel wishes he knew a little more about what Dean has been doing. Not that he doesn’t trust Dean – he does, implicitly – but it’s just . . . He misses his husband.

But Dean’s coming back today. He’s rescheduled his return twice already because of his fears of leaving Sam alone, but last week he’d called and told Castiel that he was ready to come home. That Sam’s ankle was healed and he was getting around fine, and so flying home with Dean to spend Christmas in Kansas was more than possible. “I figured, after his break, he’d head back to Stanford and I’d stay there.

Castiel wants to be excited, but there’s more to it than that. There’s something he’s been needing to talk to Dean about for a while, he just hasn’t known how to bring it up when he’s so far away and has been dealing with the situation with Sam. Lord Enterprises hasn’t been doing well. Contract negotiations with their distributors hit a snag when they couldn’t come to an agreement about payment, and for two months not a single product went out while the company continued to pay its bills and employees. They lost . . . a lot of money in those two months, and while, thanks to some fast talking by Lucifer they were able to get the contracts sorted out, it didn’t make up for the weeks they went without payment. Castiel’s been noticing a lot of wariness in their investors’ eyes when they look at him now, and it’s been making him very nervous.

And Castiel just isn’t used to people looking to him for leadership. He doesn’t know what to say that will assuage the suddenly omnipresent feeling of unease that wafts through the halls of Lord Enterprises, but he thinks that perhaps Dean will. Dean’s always been unnaturally good at getting through to people and he’s certainly more socially adept than Castiel. He’d wanted to tell Dean from the beginning, but he’d hesitated at the idea of adding to more to his plate. Dean was already
going through so much, taking Sam to and from Physical Therapy and making sure his little brother was eating something more than food that could be delivered. Until Sam’s hand had healed, Dean had taken to accompanying him to class and taking down his notes for him. And then Castiel and Dean’s conversations started to become strained, and he hadn’t known how to broach the subject.

That’s what he tells himself, anyway. Sometimes he wonders if he’s just too embarrassed to admit that he’s already starting to fail.

He’s going to tell him the day after tomorrow. Tonight they’re all going to have a nice Christmas Eve, and tomorrow will be Christmas, and the next day, he’ll sit Dean down and get his advice and hope that two pecan pies he made from scratch will soften the blow.

His cellphone rings, startling him out of his thoughts and when he sees Dean’s name on the other end, he feels a rush of affection wash over him.

“Hello, Dean,” he immediately answers, a wide smile spreading across his face. Despite everything, he’s overwhelmingly excited to lay his eyes on Dean again, to feel the warmth of his touch.

“Hey, Cas,” Dean says in return, but something’s off in his voice, something that makes Castiel’s blood run cold. He nearly jerks the phone away from his ear so that he doesn’t have to hear what he knows Dean is going to say, but he supposes there’s a part of him that is a masochist because he doesn’t move a muscle. “Listen, something’s come up.”

He takes a deep breath and lets it out. “You’re not coming home,” he says flatly. His shoulders drop, and he turns away from the pies mocking him from the counter.

“Cas, Bobby, Ellen, and Jo are here,” Dean tells him, a little sharply. “They flew in to surprise us.”

Castiel is silent while he thinks this over, but it doesn’t add up the way Dean is clearly expecting it to. “I don’t understand. Why would they go out there when they knew you were coming here,” he asks.

“Don’t fucking ask me,” Dean snaps. “Did you hear me? It was a surprise.”

Castiel isn’t even sure why he continues poking holes in Dean’s story because he already know where this is going, but he suddenly, viciously needs to hear Dean admit it. “Yes, but if you told them you were coming home, and bringing Sam for the holiday, why would they think that you would be there?” And, in case Dean needs a push, “That doesn’t sound smart at all, and we both know Ellen isn’t a fool.”

Silence meets him, but he waits it out. He’s furious, but more than that, he’s heartbroken. He’s been looking forward to this for weeks, trying to make everything right for Dean and Sam’s arrival and now he’s going to be spending Christmas alone, and hell if he’s going to let Dean off the hook. Then, finally, Dean sighs and he lowers his voice, as though hiding his words. “Okay, Cas, fine! I didn’t tell them, alright?”

Castiel crosses his arms over his chest and clenches his jaw. “Why? Why didn’t you tell them?”

“Several reasons, okay?”
“Name them.”

Dean huffs, a sliver of anger slipping into his voice. “Look, it’s not like I’m real thrilled about this either, you know. In case it hasn’t occurred to you, I miss . . . I wish I was home too.”

“Oh, so you are still classifying our house as your home,” Castiel asks sardonically. “That’s a surprise.”

“Maybe I was talking about Lawrence,” Dean throws back, and the cruel edge cuts straight into Castiel. He blinks, shaking his head, and considers hanging up without another word, until Dean quickly adds, “I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry.”

Castiel swallows and leaves the kitchen, unsure why he’s still in there, and he can’t face the Christmas tree, so he goes into their bedroom and sits on their bed. The bed they bought together just a week after being married, because it had seemed right to start with a bed as new as their marriage. “Dean.”

“I don’t know why I didn’t tell them,” says Dean, his tone gentling. “I just didn’t.”

“Perhaps you didn’t really intend to return today,” Castiel says. “May I ask you a question?”

Dean sighs. “Yeah, Cas.”

“Are you packed?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that if, in your mind, you were planning to return today you would be packed. Sam, as well. So. Are you?”

This time the silence is his answer and Castiel disconnects. He hears his phone beep a moment later, and Castiel knows it will be a text from Dean, but he doesn’t look. There is absolutely nothing that Dean can say that will make this better, and if there’s a text message argument on the horizon, Castiel doesn’t want to get into it right now. Instead, he drags himself to the door to his room and back out into the living room. The box that held the Christmas ornaments is stuffed behind the sofa and Castiel stares at it for so long that his eyes blur from not blinking before he moves it to the tree.

Somehow, it takes so much longer to remove the ornaments than it took to put them on, but Castiel is methodic in his work, and doesn’t slow until all that’s left are the lights and tinsel. He packs away the stockings, and the garland, and the pack of candy canes he bought because he knows Sam loves them.

When he’s finished, he moves on to the kitchen, throwing out the ham and potatoes and the sight of them smashed together at the bottom of the trash is extremely satisfying. The pies join them immediately.

He takes a shower just to pass some time, and by the time he’s dressed again and checks his phone, there are already three missed calls. He blinks, surprised, and there’s an embarrassing twinge of hope he tells himself he doesn’t feel until he sees that it was not Dean who called him. It was work.

He calls the number to the main office, and frowns when the secretary, Madison, answers. It’s her standard greeting, “Lord Enterprises, how may I direct your call,” but it speaks volumes to the
severity of the situation that she’s even there. The offices should be closed, the employees on
vacation until the 27th. “Hello, Madison,” he says uncertainly.

“Mr. Lord,” Madison breathes back. “Thank god!”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s one of the vineyards! It flooded!”

*

They won’t know for sure how much money was lost for several days at least, but based on what
they know about the vineyard they think it could reach six figures. He feels sick every time he thinks
about it, trying to calculate how many jobs that will mean, how many departments they might have
to cut. He stays at the office for hours, and doesn’t realize just how much time as passed until his
cellphone rings, and Dean is on the other end of the line.

His words are slurred and he sounds miserable, but then, “Merry Christmas, Cas,” on the other end of
the line is unmistakable.

His heart aches, tears swim in the corners of his eyes. He’s alone – Michael and Lucifer on the
phone with the insurance company and Naomi trying to smooth things over with the investors – so
he gets up and closes his office door, giving himself the illusion of privacy. He checks the time and
wincæs. 12:01 and he had no idea. “Merry Christmas, Dean,” he says. Then, because it’s been
such a terrible day and he hates fighting with Dean, he adds, “I miss you so much.”

Dean gasps, like he’s surprised. “I miss you too, Cas. I’m sorry for all this. I booked another
flight. We’ll be home the day after tomorrow.” Castiel yearns to believe him, so he does. He rubs a
hand over his face and maybe Dean hears it, or something else, because he asks, carefully, “Is
everything okay?”

Castiel opens his mouth to let the events of the day surge out of him, but nothing comes. He doesn’t
want to discuss this right now, he realizes, not when he is finally able to talk to his husband. Dean’s
brother nearly died, and he certainly has enough to handle without Castiel adding more. “There’s
just some problems at work,” he settles on. “I’m sure it will be fine, though.”

“Anything I can do,” Dean asks.

“I wish there was,” Castiel answers honestly. “But no. This responsibility falls to me.”

“You sure?”

“Very. But there is something you can do for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Tell me you had an extra helping of Ellen’s pecan pie. Otherwise there is no justice in the world.”

Dean laughs, genuine, and replies, “There may have been seconds. Or thirds. I lost count after the
fourth cup of eggnog.”

They talk for a while that feels like nowhere near long enough, until Michael knocks on the door and
Castiel uses fatigue as his excuse to Dean. He can imagine the look on his husband’s face if he admitted to spending Christmas Eve at the office. More guilt to be added the already generous supply.

He closes his eyes against Dean’s gruff “Love you,” and tells Dean that he loves him too. Dean’s the reason he does anything at all, and he firmly reminds himself of that when Michael gives him the latest update.

“Crowley is offering to help us out.”

Castiel stares at Michael, incredulous. He hates Crowley, has ever since the party Castiel attended without Dean’s company, but over the past year it’s increased more than he could have imagined it would. When Ellen decided to add a kitchen to the Roadhouse to add a few finger foods to her menu, she’d taken a loan out from Crowley. Six months later she’d had to permanently close her doors, telling anyone who would listen that the deal with Crowley was the worst decision she’d ever made, and that anyone who knew what was good for them would keep Crowley’s hands out of their business.

And it’s this same man, standing behind Michael, back straight, imperiously smirking at Castiel, that is saying he can provide them with the funds to rebuild their vineyard. “You ran Ellen and Jo out of business.”

Crowley shrugs. “What does that have to do with you?”

“Oh, please,” interrupts Crowley, giving Castiel an unimpressed look, “don’t turn this into a personal crusade. If you want to save your company I can help you. If you want to whine about something that happened months ago, then please, feel free to leave a message on my voicemail.” He turns to go, but Michael shoots Castiel a frustrated look, and Castiel finds himself blurring out, before Crowley can get too far:

“Wait.”

Crowley pauses and cocks his head to the side. “Yes?”

Castiel thinks. He thinks about his house, about Dean, hundreds of miles away, about Sam, where they’ll be if Lord Enterprises goes under. Sam’s car insurance paid for a replacement car, but not his medical bills, not when he was the party at fault. He thinks about the countless jobs now on the line, about Rachel’s new promotion, about Haël, still out on maternity leave. Will she even have a job to come back to? And he thinks about his mother and the trust she placed in his hands. “I’m listening,” he says.

*  

Dean keeps his word and he’s back before the first of the year and for a few weeks everything is alright. Dean and Sam are relaxed and smiling and it’s a joy to see. There’s no evidence of the lavish Christmas affair Castiel planned the week before, but they exchange gifts all the same. It’s nice, quiet, and Castiel probably appreciates the peace a little too much.

Because, well, he doesn’t tell Dean.
For the first few days he told himself that he wasn’t prepared to wreck the holiday when Sam and Dean were finally here. It’s been wonderful, catching Dean’s eye from across the room and listening to Sam laugh, bright and carefree. And when Dean finally touched him again, all logical thought had been driven from his mind. He settles into it so deeply that the idea of having this fight scares him beyond what makes sense because he knows that Dean will forgive him. Dean always does, and Castiel always forgives Dean because that’s what they accepted when they took each other on. They screw up, they make it work. Yes, Crowley may be the scum of the earth, but people’s jobs were at risk, what should Castiel have done? And Crowley has been manageable under Naomi’s carefully watchful eye, it’s a deal that seems to be working out, as well as could be expected.

When Sam returns to Stanford a week into January, Castiel knows he’s running out of excuses. Now he and Dean are alone more often than they are not and Dean can sense that something is off, they both know it. He’s always had good instincts and he knows what Castiel looks like when he’s hiding something.

Castiel’s silence starts to weigh on them both. Castiel can barely be in the same room as his husband without feeling sick to his stomach, so he finds himself staying at the office later than necessary. When he is home Dean is short-tempered and mean though Castiel understands that this is Dean-speak for ‘Just tell me, whatever it is,’ but he can’t bring himself to. There are still good days, when the air between them seems to lift, and Castiel sees love shining back at him so strong that it takes his breath away. The nights are harder, Dean touching him like he wants to memorize every detail, like Castiel is moments away from slipping though his fingers and Castiel has to hide his face to hide his emotions. It takes them a while to stop having sex, but in a way he’s grateful when it happens.

Months pass, and though it’s easier to live with his silence, the distance between them starts to grow until Castiel realizes that he’s just waiting in limbo until Dean finds out, that he’ll probably never have the courage tell him himself. He hates himself for it, can barely look himself in the mirror, but it doesn’t change the facts.

And when it finally happens, it’s as bad as Castiel imagined.

“What the hell is this?”

Castiel sucks in a sharp breath at the sound of Dean’s voice, and before he even glances over, he knows what he’s going to see.

It’s his own fault. He doesn’t know what he was thinking, leaving the checkbook in the drawer in his bedside table because there are any number of things Dean could go searching for in there and stumble on the checkbook, wonder why Castiel would keep this one separate. Perhaps, after so long a part of him is ready to get caught. He’ll never really know.

When Castiel is brave enough to look at Dean, his husband is flipping through the carbon copies of the checks Castiel has been writing to Crowley over the last several months, the expression on his face slowly clearing to nothing. His eyes darken with each line he reads, and when he meets Castiel’s gaze the only indication that anything is amiss is the erratic tick of his jaw.

“Cas, I asked you a question,” Dean says evenly.

Castiel blinks back, trying to gather his thoughts, but it doesn’t matter what he says now, he knows. It’s over.
He should have told Dean. It’s easy to see that, now, with Dean standing in their bedroom, holding
the proof of Castiel’s betrayal. It would have been ugly, but they could have come out of this on the
other side together. But now Castiel’s marriage is going to dissolve right in front of him, and there’s
nothing he can say that will make it better. Nevertheless, he has to try. “Dean, I can explain.”

Dean shakes his head slowly, like he can’t quite believe what he’s seeing right in front of him. “No,
Cas. Don’t. Just . . .” He takes a breath as though steeling himself for Castiel’s reaction, then says,
“Look me in the eye, and tell me you’re not working with Crowley.”

“Dean.”

Dean’s eyes drop and Castiel has to watch helplessly as his husband swallows hard. “Son of a
bitch,” Dean breathes.

“Dean,” Castiel tries again, but Dean doesn’t seem to hear him.

“Are you kidding me,” he explodes. He throws the checkbook across the room, and it thuds lightly
against the wall before falling to the floor. “How? How long?”

Castiel doesn’t allow himself to flinch beneath Dean’s ire and answers him honestly. “Since
Christmas.” He hears Dean’s shocked gasp but forces himself to continue. “One of the vineyards
flooded and the cost to the company was more than we could afford to cover. Crowley offered us a
loan and those checks were the payments I’ve been making.”

“How could you do this,” Dean demands. He’s furious, there’d be no point in denying it, but
there’s something else there, something rawer than even anger. Sadness. That’s what Castiel sees
starting to trickle in. Heartbreak. “After everything, how could you? You lied to me!”

Resignation gives way to panic as Castiel watches Dean’s eyes harden, shutter. “Dean,” he starts
again with no idea what to say.

“Cas, you gotta choose,” Dean states, looking away. “You have to give this up, this thing with
Crowley, or-”

“Or what, Dean?”

“Or I want a divorce.”

Right, of course. This is what Castiel has been expecting. But still, he feels surprise at the words.
“You cannot be serious,” he whispers. He splays out his hands, can’t help but draw near to his
husband who’s looking at him like he’s never seen him before. “Dean, think about what you’re
asking.”

For a moment Dean looks as though he’s going to dart away, but he doesn’t, just sweeps a gaze up
Castiel’s body and says, “You’ve been lying to me for months. For months, Cas! How could you
not tell me?”

Castiel has no right to feel any anger. He’s the one that’s in the wrong, and he understands that, he
does, but nevertheless, he snaps back, “You mean because you’ve been so easy to talk to lately?”

“You’re trying to blame this on me?” Dean barks out a harsh, sarcastic laugh. “Right. This is my
“Dean, I can’t stop paying Crowley,” Castiel eventually says. “He’s already given me the money. He’d sue me for breach of contract, and the company would lose everything, Dean, don’t you understand? It’s not just us in this. I have employees who need their jobs, who expect a paycheck every week. What am I supposed to do about them?”

Dean shrugs. “So that’s your decision, then? You’re choosing Crowley?” He doesn't even sound surprised anymore, just eerily calm.

There are tears stinging the corners of Castiel’s eyes, but he blinks them away quickly, before they can be seen. “Dean, I can’t break this deal. That’s not even an option.”

Silence falls between them, thick and heavy. Finally Dean breathes out and says, “Fine. That’s fine.” And he goes to get his suitcase.

He’s gone five minutes later.

*  

Castiel jerks awake and immediately stands, flipping on the bedside lamp and flooding light into the room. He gasps in a breath, then another, and tries to get his trembling under control. He hasn’t dreamed about that last night with Dean in months but the nightmare still sends him reeling. He should be over this by now, he should, but he’s not. Dean being here certainly hasn’t helped matters, but if he’s honest with himself, he’s been expecting something like this to happen for a while now.

He slides on his slippers, and tugs on a gray t-shirt with his black and gray striped pajama pants and creeps as quietly as he can from his room.

It’s just after two in the morning, so the house is dark and Castiel doesn’t see anyone on his trek downstairs. When he reaches the landing, however, he can see that one of the lights in the kitchen is on. His heart beats a little faster as he gets closer, as though his body knows what he’s going to see when he gets there. Maybe it does, because the sight of Dean, slumped on one of the barstools, bottle of Jack in front of him comes as no surprise at all.

Dean looks up when he hears the footfall, and he gives a half-hearted grin. “Hey,” he says. He doesn’t apologize and neither does Castiel. “Want a drink?”

Castiel nods and reaches under the bar to retrieve one of his mother’s scotch glasses. “Please.”

Dean tips some of the drink into Castiel’s glass, and they say nothing as the both work at their drinks. He can feel Dean’s eyes on him, but he doesn’t know what to say. Everything he comes up with sounds ridiculous even to himself and the melancholy settling between them feels too dense for him to pierce.

He’s into his second drink by the time either of them speaks.

“Hey, remember that time we went to the Roadhouse,” Dean says, a wry grin twisting at the corner of his mouth, “and Jo swore she could out-drink you. And you guys lined up those shots and you were five in before you even felt anything?”
Castiel smiles and ducks his head. “I do remember that. It might have been the friendliest she ever was to me.”

“Dude, you earned her respect that night.” Dean brings his glass to his mouth and takes a big swallow, pours himself a refill. “You know, she still asks about you?”

Castiel raises his eyebrows. “I find that hard to believe,” he states seriously.

Dean shrugs, and pours Castiel another drink. “She always liked you more than the others,” he answers. “She never liked Lisa, always knew that one wouldn’t last.” He glances at Castiel, and narrows his eyes when Castiel won’t meet his gaze. “What,” he prompts, nudging Castiel’s shoulder with his own.

Castiel sighs and pours himself another drink and Dean waits patiently. Once the cool liquid hits his throat, he asks a question that’s been burning him up for years. “Did you get back together with Lisa after we divorced?” It’s none of his business, but for reasons Castiel was never able to put his finger on, there was something about Lisa that always left him feeling like he didn’t quite measure up. Perhaps it’s her history with Dean or the air she carries of being put-together and confident, and he’s always wondered if Dean would have been happier settling down with a woman anyway.

Dean looks stunned as he answers, “Of course not. Why do you ask?”

“I saw you with her at a Lawrence High School football game after we divorced, and I just wondered.”

“No, we never got back together,” Dean says. He clears his throat, pours them two more drinks. “After you, there wasn’t really anyone.”

Which isn’t really true, Castiel is well-aware. When someone like Dean becomes single again, the gossip mill flies with rumors of who he’s been seen with, and Castiel has never had any interest in gossip, but he’d been helpless against his curiosity when it came to Dean’s love life. But Dean’s probably not counting the scores of one night stands he left behind. “There wasn’t really anyone for me either,” Castiel admits, after a beat. “Inias,” he concedes, “but only Inias.”

Dean gives him a long look, careful and considering. “Hey, Cas, can I ask you something?” He turns his glass in his hands. “A favor.”

Castiel nods.

“Do you think I could see the old place?”

It’s the one thing he’s been aiming to avoid all weekend, but for some reason it seemed a lot scarier an idea two days ago and he doesn’t shoot Dean down instantly. Instead he thinks it over for a moment before sighing. “Why?”

Something gentle and nostalgic settles into Dean’s features and he shrugs. “I don’t know, man. I just . . . I’ll probably never get to see it again, you know? Figured I’d ask, worst you could say is no.”

Castiel eyes his drink, considering the soft feeling in his head, and the mild sluggishness of his thought process. This is a very stupid idea, probably one of the worst he’s ever heard, so he doesn’t
really know why he gives in. “Can you drive?”

Dean smiles widely, and shoves the glass away. “Hell yeah, I can drive. Let’s go.”

*

Dean doesn’t need instructions reminding him how to get there, and Castiel doesn’t bother making small talk. His mind is moving at a mile a minute as he shifts against the leather seat and he stares out the window and watches scenery that feels all the more familiar from the inside of the Impala. Dean doesn’t talk much either while he drives, and Castiel wonders if there’s any point in pretending they don’t know where this is going. Because he’s weak and in two days he’s lost all semblance of self-control.

They pull into the driveway, and Dean cuts the ignition, and for a long time neither of them move, staring silently at the house they once called their home. “Hasn’t changed much,” Dean says, and Castiel almost laughs, and gets out of the car without a word.

They approach the door together, and before Castiel inserts his key into the lock, he turns to Dean. They’re standing close, the way they always do, and he has the sudden urge to say something to explain what Dean’s about to see, but words fail him.

Dean gives the door a wary look before saying, “Is there anything I need to be prepared for, here? I mean, did you burn down the kitchen or anything? Or, like, install carpet?”

Castiel shakes his head. “No, nothing like that.” He unlocks the door, and pushes it open.

He’s the first to enter the house, primarily because he can’t bear to see Dean’s reaction. Because.

Because it’s all exactly the same.

There’s the rug they bought at the consignment shop uptown laid out across the living room floor, the lamp Ellen gave them as a wedding present still sitting atop the table behind the couch they bought from IKEA. The blanket Sam sent them from Stanford is thrown along the backside of the La-Z-Boy that Dean had tried fucking Castiel in, until the chair tipped backwards, ruining the mood, but sending them laughing for hours.

“Christ,” Dean murmurs beside him, and Castiel has to look. The bright green eyes move across every item, cataloging it all: the coffee table that Castiel had built for the house, the little handcrafted, sterling silver Frodo Baggins they bought at the Renaissance Festival. The basket by the door where they kept old newspapers, and though their wedding photo has been moved from the mantel, the picture in its place is one from that year they spent Easter at the lake. Castiel is standing beside Sam in the picture, laughing at the person behind the camera they both know is Dean. That giant armoire is still shoved up against the far wall.

“Christ,” Dean murmurs beside him, and Castiel has to look.

Dean makes some strangled sound, then takes off towards the kitchen, touching the wallpaper as he goes, Castiel trailing slowly behind. He doesn’t argue as Dean yanks the cabinets open, stares wonderingly at the water pitcher Castiel used when Dean bought him flowers for their anniversary, and the set of yellow dishes Castiel inherited from his grandmother. They used the dishes just once, the Christmas they were dating, and Castiel had broken one of the dinner plates and Dean had spent the better part of an hour reassuring him that Naomi would never find out about the mishap.
A small shout meets Castiel’s ears, and he looks up to see Dean bent over the cutlery drawer, a long, sharp knife in his hand. He grins at Castiel as he holds it out for him to see. “I’ve been looking for this everywhere,” he says. “I can’t believe you wound up with it.” He narrows his eyes teasingly. “You don’t even cook,” he accuses.

“I cook,” Castiel argues, fighting a smile of his own.

“Dude, scrambled eggs isn’t cooking.” Then he pauses and his gaze goes to the hallway. Castiel’s heart begins to race as Dean drops the knife on the counter, and stalks off towards their bedroom.

It did occur to Castiel to change it. When Dean first moved out, and Castiel’s emotions had been all over the place, he’d considered painting the living room red, and yanking out the kitchen wallpaper, and throwing out the couch and the La-Z-Boy. He’d gotten as far as looking at paint samples at Home Depot before he realized that that was the last thing he wanted to do.

“Cas,” Dean calls from the bedroom.

When Castiel joins Dean he’s nearly knocked flat by the sight: Dean Winchester, back in his bedroom, smelling like himself, among all the things that made up their marriage. The navy comforter they had special ordered, the bed they bought together. The Picasso print still hangs over the dresser, and Dean had hated that thing, had teased Castiel mercilessly about it, but still pulled out the level when he hung it.

“Cas,” Dean breathes. “What does Inias think of all this?”

Castiel shrugs. “It’s not as though I pull out pictures of the way the place used to look often. I imagine he thinks most of these things are relatively new.”

“And Naomi? Or Charlie? Or Gabriel? Or, hell, I don’t know. Anyone that saw this place when we were together? I mean, Cas, it’s a fucking museum of our marriage.”

Castiel looks away, tries not to notice how close Dean is suddenly standing. “I’ve heard the word ‘unhealthy’ a great deal,” he says. “I’ve gotten a lot of advice to let go.”

Dean is within touching distance, so when he hooks his fingers underneath Castiel’s chin and tilts his face up so that they’re eye-to-eye it doesn’t take him completely off guard. The way he doesn’t fight it, not at all, kind of does. “For what it’s worth,” Dean murmurs, “I’m glad you didn’t.” He doesn’t know who actually moves, if it’s Dean, or him, or just the force between them, but then Dean’s kissing him, mouth dragging along Castiel’s, hand pushing through his hair.

And Castiel knows, he does, that it’s wrong, unforgivable, but the thing is that Dean remembers. He remembers to kiss him long and deep and devastatingly slow, to cradle Castiel’s face with the length of his thumb. He remembers to draw slightly away, nose at Castiel’s jaw until he can taste his throat, scratch his teeth at the base. He tugs gently at the bottom of Castiel’s t-shirt until it slips up a little, and then Castiel feels a hot hand slide up the skin of Castiel’s spine.

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Castiel remembers this too, remembers to pull Dean closer, to let his fingers clench possessively into Dean’s shoulders, remembers to swallow Dean’s responding growl. “Dean,” he whispers against his mouth.

His back hits the wall and he shivers as Dean slides a hand along Castiel’s thigh, catching the bend of his knee, and wrapping it around his waist. The move bring their dicks colliding together, and
even though the material Castiel groans, seeing stars.

“Never thought I’d see you like this again.” Dean licks a stripe across Castiel’s shoulder in a gesture so deeply possessive that Castiel chokes. “Christ, Cas.”

Dean works his hand between them, stroking Castiel through his pants, and Castiel wants this so much, needs Dean, needs everything about him he can get, that he pushes Dean off him.

Their eyes meet and Castiel doesn’t have to say anything. Dean nods once, slow, and, with one last, chaste kiss, steps back.

But he doesn’t go far. He takes Castiel’s hand, and leads him to the bed, pulling off the AC/DC shirt he’d been wearing, and reaching for Castiel’s pajama pants. “Cas, you sure about this,” Dean asks him, peering closely.

He is. He’s never been surer of anything. He doesn’t formulate an answer above shoving his pants and boxers down to the floor, but that seems to be answer enough for Dean, who pulls him into another bruising kiss.

They don’t speak for a while. It’s been a long time since they’ve touched like this, and they revel in it, the slow heat of their desire, the warmth of love, the promise of something else, something more than before. Once Dean’s naked too, and softly instructing Castiel to get onto his hands and knees, Castiel hears him root around in the bedside table for two items that have always been in there.

This time, however, the condoms and lube are brand new, still sealed. He can feel Dean’s confused frown, but Castiel refuses to answer, instead, burying his head into his elbows. That is, until Dean catches his shoulder and says, “Cas, look at me.”

When he does, he sees the realization dawning on Dean’s face. “I said there was no one else,” Castiel reminds him, embarrassed for reasons he cannot guess at.

Dean freezes, something akin to wonder there. “No one has touched you like this, not since me?”

Castiel blinks back his answer.

“Not even Inias?”

“No, Dean.”

Dean growls again, low and animalistic and Castiel gasps when he feels Dean press one cool finger inside him, moving and shifting, and stroking maddeningly against the walls. Less than a minute later he adds a second, and Castiel shudders.

“You okay,” Dean mumbles, mouthing at the base of Castiel’s spine.

There’s sweat coursing down Castiel’s brow, his legs are shaking, and he can barely breathe. In short, he feels glorious, and he says so.

When Dean decides that he’s prepped enough, he asks Castiel, “On your back, alright? I wanna see you.”

Castiel shifts into position, and Dean slides into the space between his legs, and he’s so overcome
with emotion that his hands fall to Dean’s shoulders and grip firmly, desperately. “Dean, please,” he
gasps. “I need you.”

There’s no more talking as Dean pushes inside him. They groan as a pair once he’s fully sheathed
and Castiel is trembling, but Dean pulls him close, and kisses him so gently that he shudders under
the attention. After a beat, there’s the feeling of sudden emptiness, and then, before he can mourn,
Dean shoves back inside him again.

It doesn’t take long until Castiel feels that familiar heat coiling inside him, and when Dean shifts his
angle just slightly, Castiel lets out a wild howl, wraps his legs tighter around Dean’s waist and
comes, untouched, all over his and Dean’s stomachs. He can’t find it in himself to be annoyed,
though, not when Dean looks so utterly wrecked.

Castiel reaches out to touch Dean’s face, brushing the hair from his eyes. “Dean, come for me,” he
whispers in the dark, the way he has so many times before. “It’s alright, Dean, just come.” And
Dean does, hard and fast, biting the curve of Castiel’s neck with a strength that will leave a mark.

For several heartbeats neither of them move, but then Dean pulls out and ties off the condom,
dropping it off the side of the bed. Castiel lays his head on Dean’s chest, his ear pressing over his
heart to listen to its low thump.

“Don’t marry Inias,” Dean says, like he’s continuing their conversation from earlier. “Please, man,
I’m asking you here.” He takes Castiel’s hand again, threading their fingers together. “Do you
really not trust me?”

“I don’t trust me,” Castiel replies softly. He doesn’t want to fight, not when they’ve finally stopped
dancing around each other, so he lets himself be honest, and tries to put faith in the possibility that
maybe they have both changed for the better. “Dean, I make a mess out of everything. And I don’t
want to mess this up again.”

Dean seems to consider that as he folds his free hand behind his head. “Cas, I get why you’re
scared,” he says at length. “But in case you’ve forgotten, I wasn’t exactly innocent in all of that. I
know I didn’t make it easy on you to talk to me about what was going on.”

“That doesn’t make it alright.”

“No, but it helps.” Dean kisses his forehead. “You screwed up, I overreacted. If you promise not to
do anything like that behind my back again, then I promise not to give up again. Cas, it’s been years,
and here we are, two days after seeing each other again, hooking up. I think that say something
about us, Cas. Something good.”

He’s right, Castiel decides. He knew, from the moment he saw Dean again, that everything would
end up here. So, careful not to jostle Dean away, Castiel shifts so that he can reach the bedside table
drawer, and pulls it open. He rummages around for the small red bag he knows is inside, and when
his fingers close around it he withdraws it. He opens it, then tips it over, for the small, platinum ring
to fall into his other palm. He holds up his wedding band, for Dean to take.

“I promise that I will never do anything like that behind you back again,” he whispers.

Dean huffs out an amused sound. “This would have been a lot better if I was carrying my ring
around.”
“That’s alright,” Castiel reassures him. “You can just make your vows at our next wedding.”

*

Things much better the second time around.

They have a real wedding. Naomi is in attendance, as is Sam, Anna. Ellen and Jo, Gabriel and Charlie. Seeing his friend smiling at him in approval, like she knew all along that they'd get to this point is slightly amusing. Dean huffs at her a couple of times, but he's smiling in his eyes where it counts. Castiel looks out into the crowd and he thinks that this is the way it should have been all along. Declaring his love and devotion in front of everyone he can call family. He still aches at the empty space where Bobby should be, but he likes to think he's looking down and though Dean never says so, he thinks Dean agrees.

Naomi lives for just under two years, longer than any doctor predicted. For those two years she's a better mother than she ever was before and her children aren't the only ones to cry at her passing. Dean blinks away tears of his own and Dinah's never quite the same. A month before she dies, Castiel and Dean adopt a baby boy that they name Andrew and the love Naomi bestows on their child, the memories they make, are what Castiel holds onto when he's feeling low and missing her so much it's a physical pain. Dean develops a sixth sense about these nights and holds him without comment.

They're happy, deliriously so. The distrust is gone, lost in the choice they make, to fight for their marriage, their relationship, what they have. They make it work and they don't look back.

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