Ben, Sam's ex from "Sunshine State," falls in love with Dean.
Illustrations by ileliberte, peach_gurl, vengefuldemon69, and gnatkip!
scene one

A few years of school haven't made him a doctor, but a few weeks working in this clinic made him certain he was doing the right thing, despite being run so ragged he'd need new sneakers every three months and being so exhausted he'd learned to sleep standing up and with the lights on. He stands on one foot in front of the coffee machine, turning his free foot in tight circles, watching the steady drip of dark liquid. His pager goes off and he grabs the half-full cup and pours out all but a mouthful so it won't spill as he jogs down the hall.

He opens the door to exam room 3. The guy sitting on the table is taking in the bland beige walls, the dusty sky-blue floor, one foot tapping restlessly against the cabinet. "Could really use a spot of color in here, doc," the guy says, smiling at him in a way that he doesn't quite trust; "how's this?" He gestures to his bloody nose, the two black eyes blooming against the pallor of his face. "Broken," he self-diagnoses authoritatively.

Spectacularly broken is more like it, and Ben can't find his professional voice, not when this guy is joking through the pain. He leans in a little closer to assess the damage and can see freckles peeking out from under the spatter of rust-colored gore. "What's your name?"

The guy's mouth opens and closes quickly like he hadn't been expecting that question, or maybe not that tone of voice. "Dean."

"Alright. Hang on, Dean, I need to check something out." He reaches forward and cradles Dean's face in his hands, thumbs sliding as gently as possible over his cheekbones, then shifting so his fingers can probe cautiously. Dean doesn't flinch once, just lets the weight of his head hang heavy in Ben's hands and keeps his eyes on Ben's. Big, green-gold eyes with long lashes that sparkle gold at the tips. "You're right, it's broken. I'm going to have to set it; that's probably going to hurt worse than the break." At least it hasn't started to heal already. He doesn't think he'd be able to take a hammer to that face.

Dean just nods, eyes steady. "Do what you gotta do, doc," he says, trying to grin.

"I'm not a doctor," he says. "Not yet."

"I know. You're just a baby," Dean says, sitting back and looking him over consideringly.

"I'm almost twenty-five," he says, knowing the minute he says it that the "almost" is a dead giveaway.

Dean leans back and laughs, his long, strong throat on display. "Almost? Really? Will there be cake and streamers and balloons?"

"If I've been a good boy, there will be," Ben smiles back, unable to read any meanness in that easy laugh, the teasing words. "And if you're a good boy and sit very still while I set your nose, you might get a treat too."

And for the first time Dean blinks warily and looks self-conscious and sits up straight. "What's your name?" he asks, sounding confused.

"Ben," he says, holding out his hand. Dean's hand is rough, his grip firm.

Dean nods as he lets go. "I'm ready."
"Ben," he hears as he's about to leave the clinic after a long shift. "I want Ben." The voice is ragged, no undertones at all, honed into one level pitch. He doesn't recognize it, but the need in it, flat and unhinged, calls him. He turns and walks back to the check-in desk. There’s a guy half-slumped over it, keeping his right arm raised so that the blood drips from it a little more slowly. "Ben. Please."

"Patsy," he calls, starting to jog down the hall; "I'm here. What's going -" He cuts himself off when the guy turns and he sees that it's Dean, his generous mouth thinned to a tight line, his eyes glowing with pain. "Dean! I've got him, Patsy," he calls over his shoulder as he puts one hand on the small of Dean's back, steering him down the hall, toward exam room 3. He opens the door, turns on the lights, and watches Dean seat himself on the exam table.

Dean rolls up the right sleeve of his plain black t-shirt and points his elbow out, exposing an ugly, jagged cut in his tricep. "I know, I know; we gotta stop meeting like this," he cracks, but Ben is not in the mood. He just steps close and sees that the cut has been made even uglier by a clumsy stitch, the black thread still dangling.

"When -" he asks.

Dean cuts him off. "Three hours ago." No other explanation, no admission of pain.

There's that untrustworthy stoicism again. He needs to know how this happened; he needs to catch Dean off-guard. He looks at the wound again, frowning. "Are you right-handed?"

"Ambidextrous, actually," Dean flashes a cocky grin at him. "Just couldn't get the right angle to do it myself."

He lets Dean see the anger in his eyes at that for a long moment, then doesn't look back up as he cleans the cut and sews it up, neat little stitches. Dean smells like sweat and blood and he wants to trace all his veins with tender fingers, bury his nose in his bright hair. "Ben -" Dean says quietly. He turns away, buzzing for a saline drip, still not looking up. "Ben," Dean tries again, but then Noreen comes in with the stand and the pouch and the sheathed hypodermic. In the second it takes her to deposit the stuff on the counter and leave, he can feel Dean shift from stillness to defeat.

"I don't want to see you hurt, Dean," he manages to say, and Dean can't quite pull off a smile, but his eyes go soft and he accepts the needle sliding under his skin without a murmur.

He hangs the bag and takes a step back, rubbing his eyes. He feels with his foot for the chair somewhere behind him, turning a bit to spot it. When he turns back around, Dean's mouth is on his, soft and slow, and his eyes are open.

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Noreen and Patsy are standing at the check-in desk, arms folded across their chests like they're bouncers. "Go home, Ben. I don't want to see you here until the day after tomorrow," Patsy says sternly.

Neither one of them is looking at Dean, but the disapproval they're radiating is strong enough that Dean just bows his head until his chin touches his chest and murmurs, "Yes, ma'am," sounding completely sincere and more than a little cowed.
He holds the door open, matching Dean look for look, until Dean heaves a disgusted sigh and goes through the door first. He can see Dean shiver a little when the wind knifes through the thin cotton of his torn shirt, and they both pick up the pace. "This is me," Dean says suddenly, stopping by a behemoth of a car, a shiny black beast that he touches with delicate fingertips. He can see a bloodstained towel on the seat, flung over a brown leather jacket, and he really has no idea who this man is who's looking at him with soft green eyes. "Which one's yours?" Dean asks without breaking his gaze.

"I don't have a car," he answers. "I walk or take the T."

Dean looks like he's having trouble processing the notion of public transportation, digging in his pocket for his keys with his left hand. "But you know how to drive, right?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Great," he hears, and then the keys are arcing toward him and he plucks them from the air without thinking. He looks at them in his hand, more surprised that he caught them than confused about their purpose, and takes a step toward the driver's door, only to find himself pressed right up against Dean, who's warmer and even stronger than he looks. He flushes a little, takes half a step back, and ducks his head slightly. Dean's voice is an amused drawl in his ear. "So it's not just me then. Good to know."

He looks back up in disbelief. "What are you . . . I kissed you back," he protests. Dean can't quite raise just one eyebrow, but he comes pretty close; Ben knows he shouldn't find even that endearing, since it's a deliberate goad, but he does. "You wanted me to spread you out on the exam table and climb on top of you?" he challenges and Dean breaks out in a lecherous grin that somehow comes off as adorable, and Ben is in big trouble now. He waits, but Dean apparently has just enough maturity to refrain from making a crack about sterile environments. He pokes him, hard, and reminds him, "With the IV trailing from your arm? No way." Hearing his own words reminds him that he should actually be angry at the stunt Dean pulled, and he turns, unlocking the car with swift, sharp movements.

He shrugs Dean's hand off his shoulder. He sees Dean shift out of the corner of his eye and realizes that the hem of Dean's shirt is ragged because that's where he got the thread for the stitches he attempted. He turns back to face him. "Just . . . what the hell were you thinking?"

Dean's not smiling or playing cute now. "I needed to get out of there and I needed to stop bleeding." His face has gone severe, mask-like, and Ben wonders if that's from the strain of answering unwelcome questions or just pain from the wound. Some doctor he's going to make, keeping someone in Dean's condition out in the cold. He nods and gets in the car, reaching across to unlock the passenger door and slide the towel and jacket out of Dean's way.

Dean crumples into the car, letting the seat cradle him. Ben feels him shaking a little, but then he's shaken too when he turns the key and the car rumbles to thunderous life. He doesn't have to adjust any of the mirrors; he and Dean are within an inch of each other's heights. He turns on the headlights and drives.

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Dean's frowning, not all the way conscious, turned slightly toward him, and Ben's wishing he hadn't let himself accede to Dean's unspoken wish to do without painkillers, because some Demerol in the IV would have let Dean rest a little easier. He finds a space in front of his building - one of the perks of living in an unfashionable neighborhood - and takes his time maneuvering the car, bigger than anything he's ever handled and a stick shift besides, into it.
The lines on Dean's forehead seem a little shallower now, but the streetlamps could be playing tricks with his eyes. Or maybe it's just wishful thinking, now that he's got Dean silent for once, not trying to dazzle or distract. He wedges his hand between Dean's left shoulder and the seat. "Dean. We're here. Wake up." He keeps his voice firm, unassuming. Dean murmurs incoherently but seems to like the warmth of his hand against the chilliness of his own skin, insinuated against the impressionable leather. "Dean," he says again, and Dean's throat clenches tightly like he's trapping a scream. He runs his thumb over the strong jut of Dean's jaw and puts his mouth close to Dean's freckled ear, his lips tickled by the short hair sticking out in sleepy spikes, and says, "We're home. Come on."

Dean's eyes open on a hollow gaze and he stares like he's never seen Ben before. Ben's cursing himself out for not insisting on the Demerol and trying to look reassuring at the same time, and Dean blinks wearily, his head lolling against the seat. "Motel," Dean says, not quite slurring the word but not biting it crisply off either.

He catches himself before he starts arguing with Dean, who's muzzy from small snatches of sleep and probably out of his mind with pain anyway. "Come on," he says, getting out of the car and going around to Dean's window. He doesn't want to open the door and let the cold air in until Dean looks like he's ready to move, like his legs will hold him, so he just bends so that they're face to face. But Dean has slid toward the driver's seat, and his shaky hands curl familiarly around the steering wheel, settling into their accustomed places. Ben opens the passenger door and rests one knee on the seat, holding his hand out against Dean's sudden skittishness. "Come upstairs with me," he asks and Dean's knuckles go white as he shakes his head.

"I'm telling the truth," Dean says raggedly.

"What truth?" he asks, crawling forward to get one hand around Dean's wrist, closing gently over thin leather bands.

Dean's almost panting now, pain or panic, but he tries to answer. "Truth about me. About my life."

"Can't you tell me inside?" he cajoles but Dean's as stubborn as he looks and Ben capitulates. "Okay. So tell me now. What do I need to know about you?"

Dean twists uncomfortably to show off his wound again. "This? From a rawhead. The broken nose? Malevolent spirit."

Startled, he meets Dean's scared gaze, holding his wide eyes for a long moment; he thinks they're both holding their breath. He closes his eyes and feels Dean's wrist sag in his grasp. He thinks about the jagged tear in Dean's tricep, how he couldn't begin to guess what would slice the skin so cleanly while making such a mess of the muscle beneath. He thinks about trails of Dean's bright blood, spilling heedlessly on quiet earth. "How did you get away?" he asks, looking back up, and Dean's eyes blaze.

"Exorcized the spirit. Electrocuted the rawhead," Dean whispers.

"Come upstairs," he says again and Dean slides across the seat.
He grabs the bloodstained towel, the leather jacket, and a duffel from the car's wide back seat, leaving Dean to take the smaller bag and lock up the car. He fishes his own keys out and leads the way up the stone steps, down the hallway, up the stairs, and into his apartment. It's cold and dark, and he flips every switch so that Dean can get a feel for the place; he'll worry about his electricity bill later. He drops the duffel by the bed and turns to face Dean, indicating with a nod that he can set down what he's carrying.

Dean follows him to the bathroom, sitting tiredly on the closed commode. He watches in disbelief as Dean opens a battered dopp kit and fishes out a toothbrush that's seen better years; the bristles are all askew and the handle's cracked. He plucks it from Dean's fist and chucks it in the trash. Dean smiles and closes his eyes. "You might as well stick a hedgehog in your mouth," he chides, and Dean looks up at him with a serious gaze.

"You are into some kinky shit, man," Dean says, holding a straight face for a second, then letting his smile crinkle the pretty, dappled skin around his eyes as he takes the new red toothbrush loaded with a stripe of Crest. Dean stays seated, so he takes advantage of the sink space to wash his hands and remove his contacts. He strips and gets into the shower; the hammering of the water on his neck and shoulders reminds him exactly how long he's been going, and he just lets it pour over him. The bathroom's clouded with steam when he's done, and he steps out of the stall to find Dean contemplating his new stitches approvingly in the streaked mirror. It takes a little maneuvering, but Dean pulls his clothes off with one hand and gets in the shower, sighing contentedly when the blast hits his back.

He shuts the bathroom door carefully behind him so that the warmth won't dissipate and dresses quickly, cursing his landlord for being so cheap with the heat. He pulls his extra blankets from the top shelf of the closet, wrapping himself in one and sitting at one of the kitchen chairs to wait. Dean emerges from the bathroom wearing only a pair of navy blue sweatpants. "Thanks," Dean says, and even in the darkness he can see that under the freshly-scrubbed pink, Dean's skin is actually tinged grey from pain and fatigue. He gets up to shepherd Dean into the bed and watches Dean take note of the two bottles - water and painkillers - he's left on the bedside table next to the alarm clock. Dean sits gingerly. "Can you . . ." Dean asks, gesturing vaguely at the bigger duffel, so he unzips it and pulls out a soft flannel shirt; Dean won't have to raise his right arm to get into it. He can't find any socks in the bag, buried under jeans or weapons, so he throws a pair of his own over to Dean.

He'd planned to let Dean have the bed and just sit in one of the chairs, get some reading done and keep an eye on Dean at the same time. But watching Dean dress slowly and crumple tiredly against the pillow triggers his own weariness and he yawns mightily. Dean rolls over to face him. "C'mere," Dean says. "And bring that blanket with you." He goes, barely remembering to leave his glasses on the bedside table, and crawls over Dean, who flips the blanket up over them both.

The sensation of being warm is so odd that it wakes him. The tip of his nose is cold but the rest of him feels coddled, still pleasantly drowsy. He rolls over and sees Dean.

Even this early, there's enough light coming through the windows so that he can at least make out colors, though he can't hope for clarity. Dean's face is soft but not slack; the faint slate-colored bruises that linger around his eyes look worse because of the thick shadows cast by his long lashes.
There's detail on the broad, beautiful planes of Dean's face that he's missing, so he braces himself, shifting carefully to reach across Dean for his glasses.

Suddenly there's a hand clamped fiercely around his throat and two strong thighs squeezing his waist punishingly tight. He goes still, startled by the way Dean jumped from vulnerability to vigilance, and waits. Dean blinks up at him and then he can feel the rush of heat, the wave of embarrassment, surging up from Dean. The hand on his throat slides around, caressing the back of his neck and cupping his cheek. "Guess I got a little overeager," Dean mumbles, like it wasn't a hunter's instinct that prompted him to move, as if the press of their bodies has anything to do with love or romance.

"Don't," he says, one hand on Dean's thigh, the other pressed against Dean's pillow. He doesn't want Dean to pretend his confession never happened. He wishes he had his glasses so he could see the moment it all clicks for Dean, but maybe it's better this way, with nothing between them, nothing for him to shield his eyes behind, so that he's open to Dean's assessing gaze. "Last night. What you told me. I believe you."

Dean closes his eyes and opens his legs, setting him free. "Why?"

He dips his head, the tip of his nose nearly skimming the slashes and gouges littering Dean's chest. There's proof there, but he doesn't need it. "Why would you lie to me?"

"That's a dangerous place to start," Dean warns, his voice nearly strangled in his throat.

"Well, that's where I'm ending up. We're both safe here," he says, and Dean looks at him for a long moment, fingers curling in his hair, before handing him his glasses.

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The sunshine is bright and hot against his face and he peers out the window at the people milling around the neighborhood in short-sleeved shirts and sunglasses. "Indian summer," he says, turning to smile at Dean, whose face lights up in response.

Dean lifts his arms carefully over his head, stretching his muscles. Dean loosens his entire body with a fierce discipline, then pulls a beat-up pair of sneakers from the smaller duffel. Tying the laces in neat double-knots, Dean asks, "Want to go for a run?"

He sets an easy pace at first, but Dean shows no signs of fatigue or hesitation, and soon they are at the point where breath comes sharp and fast and the mind is clear and open. His knee is completely healed and he feels strong, bursting with rude health and thankful for it. The sun dazzles his eyes as it shines on the bright bronze of Dean's hair, as it flirts with the space between Dean's powerful, bowlegged limbs.

He doesn't go for guys like Dean, guys who are heavy with muscle, preposterously square-shouldered. Dean slants a sideways grin at him. He doesn't go for guys with strong, even features; he's always preferred the exotic, the striking. Dean is as All-American as they come, he thinks as he watches Dean strip off his tee and tuck it into the waistband of his sweatpants. And now he can see the freckles, pale like old gold, that are spattered carelessly along Dean's broad back, marking him, making him look strangely delicate. They keep running, staying easily in stride with each other.

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"You know, you really aren't my type," he says after emerging from the shower to find Dean lying on the bed and reading his musculature textbook.

"Back at you," Dean says, apparently impossible to offend when he's concentrating. "You've got a
dick." He laughs and Dean looks up and flashes a grin at him, revealing dimples tucked away under the stubble on his cheeks. "But dude, quit lying to yourself. You got me in your bed the minute I came up here."

"Dean," he says patiently, not even a little distracted by Dean's vision of him as an evil, albeit subconscious, genius. "Look around. There's nowhere for you to be except the bed. This isn't exactly a large, well-furnished luxury apartment."

Dean closes the text and drops it on the floor, bypassing the spindly bedside table. "Now that's just not fair," he drawls. "People lining up around the block for this fine ass and you got it in your bed because you can't afford a couch?" He shakes his head as if he's mourning the cruel injustice of the world and possibly sending a private message of love to each of the deprived.

But his mouth has gone dry despite Dean's levity. "Is that what I get? Your fine ass?"

By the way Dean goes still, he can tell he didn't do a very good job of keeping his voice light. He's not going to push but he's not going to take it back either. He just lets Dean look at him, lets him take his time, and Dean relaxes and says, "Yes."

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Dean doesn't seem to care that the dusky light is painting him all sorts of colors as he strips and gets into bed, shivering a little in the chilly air. "Ben," he says questioningly, his voice still hoarse from the laughter that had overtaken them as they ran home.

He can see that Dean's not afraid, not uncertain. Dean's just new to this, so he surges forward and kisses him, deliberately dirty, and feels Dean relax, one hand sliding up his neck to cradle his skull. Dean's fingers are strong, his palm wide, and his body sweetly pliant despite its firm muscles. He lets his weight press Dean into the bed, his hand resting on the clean line of Dean's jaw, and relishes Dean's soft, willing mouth and eager tongue.

They roll, hands and legs draped over hips while they keep kissing, mouths parting and meeting again inevitably. He pulls back and laughs a little as he traces Dean's mismatched eyebrows with his finger, and Dean mutters, "Shut up, you fucker," before he laughs too, his eyes scrunched up into little crescents. "Not that you deserve this," Dean says, lifting his chin for another kiss before sliding down.

And there is stubble scratching high against his inner thigh as Dean noses at his cock and trails relentless fingers down his abdomen. "Dean," he calls when Dean takes him into his mouth, the flat of his tongue perfectly rough and hot, and he can feel himself sinking into the mattress, his head thrown sharply back. His hands find Dean's hollowed cheeks and pull him free; he wraps his legs around Dean and gets Dean on his back.

Dean says, "Yeah," and then just keeps breathing it; he finds himself listening for the incoherent word as he kisses and strokes and licks Dean's skin, as he goes down on Dean, who writhes and rolls his hips helplessly. It's only after he's torn an orgasm from Dean and slid inside his heat that he realizes that the word Dean keeps repeating is his name.
He comes home after class knowing there's plenty he should be doing, but he doesn't have the drive to tackle any of it right now. He's feeling a little lost. Not so lost, though, that he misses the huge black car parked in front of his building, shining like molten glass, with Dean tucked safely inside. Dean raises his head and smiles brightly, a twin to the grin Ben can feel stretching his own mouth joyously.

"C'mon, c'mon," he's already saying as Dean opens the door and swings himself out of the car. He gets one hand up to cup Dean's cheek, thumbing away the smear of dirt that clings to his skin. Dean closes his eyes and rests his forehead on Ben's for a moment before he grabs his duffel and locks the car up tight. They take the stairs at a brisk clip, Dean close enough behind to seem like a shadow, never tripping over him even when they're impossibly tangled. He opens the door to his apartment and turns his head, murmuring, "Hang on a sec," one foot keeping the door from closing on them while he rummages in the old backpack that hangs from a hook and functions as a utility drawer. He eventually comes up with his spare set of keys and he presses them into Dean's hand. "I know you can probably break in whenever you want, but I don't need my front door scratched to hell."

"So now I'm a homewrecker?" Dean asks, his lips quirking up in a shy-looking half-smile. "Never had anyone put quite that spin on it before."

He gets his fist in the leather of Dean's jacket and pulls him in. The duffel drops at their feet. He shuts his eyes and gets lost in Dean's soft mouth.

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It turns out they're both pretty particular about what makes a good sandwich, and they end up making their midnight snacks side-by-side; Ben would tease Dean for taking mental notes but for the fact that he's memorizing the way Dean likes to layer meat and cheese and spread spicy mustard on his tomato slices. Dean's talking about his latest hunt, looking all lit up, and he listens as he watches Dean's hands, strong and scarred and beautiful; they're the hands of someone who is living in a terrible world but fighting to make it better. He leans in close and kisses Dean behind his ear, pulse beating strongly beneath thin and tender skin. Dean just turns and licks at Ben's lower lip. "Food first, then fun," he says, taking both plates and setting them at the kitchen table.

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"I need a haircut," Dean grumbles the next morning. They knock shoulders as they get into the shower.

"I like it this length," he says, dumping the last of the shampoo on top of Dean's wet head, tossing the bottle over the stall door, and swiping some into his own hand.

"I already know what you think, Grabby," Dean says, tilting his head to keep shampoo out of his eyes. His amulet gleams brightly against his flushed skin. "I just don't like it this long. Makes me itch."

"You'll like my barber," he says, conceding the fight; "he's got a million and one stories." He scrubs his hair and looks at Dean.
"What?" Dean asks, the scar from his stitches visible under the layer of water slipping down his skin. All of his scars are highlighted by the play of water and light, and Ben needs to look away.

"Just wondering when you were going to start singing," he teases after he gets his throat back under control.

"Just so you know, I don't take requests," Dean says, launching into a rousing rendition of "Las Palabras De Amor."

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"Feel free to shut up any damn time," Dean hisses, and Ben tries, he really does, but he just can't stop laughing.

"You look fine," he says eventually.

Dean gives him a dirty look. "Liar. Fuckin' Joe really went to town on me."

He runs his hand over Dean's too-short hair, the bristles tickling against his palm. "It'll grow back. Bet in a few days it'll be exactly how you want it."

Dean's quiet after that, and Ben peers at him as they cross the square. A big grin blossoms on Dean's face when they get inside the building. "So you're saying I have to stay inside your apartment for a few days?"

"That's right," he says, slapping Dean's ass; "you need to hide your shame."

"Too bad I've got none," Dean says. He unlocks the door and grabs Ben, tossing him on the bed. "Let me show you what I mean."

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He already knew, from hearing about the grains of rice that Dean mixes with rock salt to keep the mineral from clumping as it's poured into hot, empty shotgun shells, that Dean's got a creative and unconventional mind. But the way he's rubbing his shorn head against Ben's body, scraping provocatively, his rough and callused fingers sometimes leading and sometimes following, proves he's a diabolical genius. Ben can hear himself moaning, and he wants Dean inside him, splaying him open, holding him spread out and frantic and replete with his scarred and golden body.

He arches up against Dean, biting his lip, and Dean keeps moving over him, through him, hot hands and strong hips bringing them closer together until they fit just right and Dean slides home.

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Dean's cell goes off early the next morning, and Dean makes sleepy noises of protest and tries to bury his face in Ben's shoulder. Ben can feel drool on his chest and he eases out from under Dean to snag the phone from the kitchen table. He holds it next to Dean's ear and Dean growls at him before flipping it open. "H'lo?" he mumbles. "Hey, Dad."

He freezes. It feels weird to be in bed with Dean while he's on the phone with his father, ex-Marine and Boss of the World, if Dean's stories are anything to go by. But Dean's voice is rough only with sleep, not tension. "Boston. I'm still in Boston," he says, cranking one eye open and crinkling his nose at Ben, rolling on his side to make the sign for coffee now. He waits, and Dean opens his other eye and makes them as beseeching as he's ever seen, and he needs to remember that Dean doesn't believe in playing fair. He rolls out of bed, pulling the topmost blanket off and wrapping it around
himself, and shuffles over to the coffeemaker and starts it up.

"What, again?" Dean asks exasperatedly into the phone, flipping Ben off as he tries to cover up his nakedness with the remaining bedcovers. "Guy's paranoid. It was probably just kids getting some late Mischief Night kicks out of their systems. Yeah. I'll take care of it, Dad. See you in a couple weeks, okay?" Dean ends the call and looks up, his hair rampant.

He's pulling on his socks because the floor's freezing when he hears a loud thunk against the door. Dean goes suddenly tense, but he just smiles and rearranges his makeshift toga. "Paper's here." He opens the door and scoops it up, yelling his thanks to Marjorie down the hall, who fetches his while she's getting hers from the lobby. Dean's already pulling the paper apart, dropping the shiny inserts and sale pages at the foot of the bed with a nauseated look on his face. "Hey," Dean says, the front section resting on his drawn-up knees as he peels off the mailing label, "how do you pronounce your last name?"

"Rhymes with 'the car,'" he says, the old formulation he's had in place since kindergarten tripping off his tongue. It's clearly the best way to explain to Dean, who grins widely at the thought of his pretty baby waiting patiently on the street below. "Here," he says, pouring the contents of the coffee pot into a mug roughly the size of his head, and Dean wastes no time in throwing aside his phone and the remnants of the Sunday paper and reaching for it with the desperation of a baby bird. Dean's on his third greedy swallow when his phone plays its voicemail notification, and Ben takes the opportunity to snatch the mug back and drain it dry.

He dumps the mug in the sink and gets back under the covers next to Dean, who says, "Dad said he'd forward the guy's voicemail. You have to hear him - the guy's convinced his own shadow's out to get him now." He leans against Dean, who holds the phone between them, and hears Dean's dad's rumbly voice saying, "Son, get this guy off my back. Meet you in Philadelphia by the 24th." There's a click and then a new voice, thin and panicked and impatient comes through. "Mr. Winchester, it's Terry Coolidge. I've got another . . . problem. It's a poltergeist, I'm sure of it. I need you to get rid of it right away." Dean cuts the message off, rolling his eyes hugely, but Ben can't smile back.

He unsticks his throat long enough to ask, "Your last name is Winchester?" This has to be a coincidence, a joke. There's no way this can be real. Dean nods offhandedly, frowning because Ben's not playing along. "You're Dean Winchester. You're Sam's brother."

Dean's smile is all surprised delight, and he closes his eyes against it. "You know Sammy?"

He almost laughs, almost chokes, but just says, "Yeah." That whole delirious year, he never once thought of him as "Sammy"; given the way things ended, he supposes that's a sign of how little he knew him after all.

Dean's still waiting for some elaboration, so he tries to pull himself together. He thinks maybe he can do this if he chops it up into little pieces. "I went to Stanford."

"I'm in bed with a geek!" Dean groans, falling back against the pillows dramatically.

That throws him off a little and he fumbles his response. "Well, yeah. I majored in mechanical engineering."

"Really?" Dean sits back up, looking closely at him. "That's pretty cool."

"Yeah, uh, we met in a class, and -"
solar calculator, save yourself the trouble," Dean says, looking spectacularly incredulous.

He wants to laugh at the picture Dean makes, gorgeous and naked and rumpled and puzzled, but his throat just tightens up again. "No. It was art history."

"And?"

He has no idea how to tell this part. "And what?"

"And Sammy mentioned me by name? Had to be closer than just study-buddies." There's no realization in Dean's tone; he's still working the idea through from the other side.

"We were friends, and we were together for about six months." He gives it the old college try, and if Dean can't catch the layers of meaning, all the better.

He's forgotten how sharp Dean is, at least with him. "Well, hell, isn't Sam just full of surprises," Dean finally says, his eyes wide and downcast. Dean's fingers are picking at the blanket haphazardly thrown over their legs. He doesn't know what to say, how to ask if this changes things for Dean, if running off is a Winchester tradition, if Dean still wants to stay. He's tempted to start the coffee machine up again, just to give himself something to do, but he doesn't want to be the first to move, to ease away from the warmth of Dean's flank kissing his. They sit in silence for uncounted minutes.

"You didn't know?" Dean asks quietly. He shakes his head even though Dean's still looking at the blanket instead of him. "Does it matter to you?" Dean's voice has almost disappeared, and the words seem more like a thought overheard than a question posed. He can't shake his head this time and Dean turns to face him.

The back of Dean's hand knocks against his. "Pretty much never had anything in my life that Sammy didn't call first," Dean says, trying to smile, but his clear eyes have dimmed.

"Turn around," he says in a rough whisper, waiting until Dean's facing the wall before wrapping his arms around him and drawing him gently back. He kisses the nape of Dean's neck and rests his head on Dean's shoulder, holding him close, and when Dean lies back down, Ben goes with him.

*

There's no jockeying for position in the shower or the kitchen.

Dean's gone quiet, to the point where he doesn't even protest when Ben unthinkingly distributes banana slices into both bowls of corn flakes. "You need milk," is all Dean says, and they sit at the small kitchen table uncomfortably.

He takes the bowls to the sink, freezing when he hears keys jingling in Dean's hand. He turns to find Dean looking at him uncertainly. "Are we still going to that thing?" Dean asks, and he's so relieved that Dean isn't just making a break for the door that he can't quite speak.

"Yeah," he finally says, and Dean shrugs on his leather jacket and waits for him by the door.

They get out to the street, blinking dazedly in the bright, cold sunshine and through the clouds of breath he can see Dean sweep his hand along the car like he would pet a cat to make it purr. It would be so easy for Dean to just get in his girl and drive off, and he knows it means something that Dean's letting him come along for the ride. He wants to kiss Dean, touch him, but he's not sure enough yet. But when he smiles at Dean, he gets a smile back in return.

*
The farmers' market is busy but not crowded, since it's cold enough to discourage browsing. It's nearly closing time; Dean had just put the car in gear and driven without asking for a destination, and Ben was content to sit beside him in the warm black space where Dean grew up.

Dean pulls up in front of the main entrance. "I didn't see a parking space, so I'm just gonna stay in the car." He can see that Dean's right, that there's nowhere big enough for this car, but he doesn't really want to get separated either. There's no way to say that, though, so he just nods and gets out of the car.

He's sifting through damp boxes of raspberries when he feels his phone buzz in his pocket. "Yeah?"

Dean's voice comes through low and lazy. "Try not to get just health food, okay? Pick up something a non-freak would eat."

"A non-freak such as . . .?"

"Me, the goddamn pinnacle of evolution." He can practically hear Dean's smirk through the phone, and he laughs, feeling the knot in his stomach loosen. Just for that, Dean's getting his sweet tooth indulged. He drops the raspberries into his basket and heads for the homemade chocolates.

*

He likes the smell of gun oil. It leaves a tang in the air, and Dean's hands move with a beautiful rhythm as he goes through the motions with each weapon.

He turns back to his textbooks reluctantly; he needs to know this stuff for the MLE. And worrying over a relationship three years gone isn't a solution of any kind. He takes off his glasses, rubs at his eyes, and starts to go through his notes from the first year, staying sharp with the coffee Dean keeps making.

Dean's packing up the guns just as his eyes start closing. They're quiet as they get into bed, and his "good night" gets lost on the smooth skin of Dean's throat.

*

He goes through his regular warm-up when he gets to the field, trying not to grin like an idiot just because Dean's in the stands. Rahul and Eleanor are quizzing each other on insertion points, and they pass him the ball, including him in the study session. "Last one of these until spring, I think," Rahul says, shivering in the sharp breeze. He turns his head to look at Dean, who gives him a casual wave while talking to a couple of girls sitting next to him on the bleachers.

He's just glad his knee has healed completely, that he can play soccer again; the game is his best outlet, and without it he knows he lets things fester in his head. He scores off a pretty pass from Nick and sets Eleanor up for an easy goal kick. He waits at halftime, but Dean's got a whole crowd of girls around him now, and it doesn't look like he'll be making his way to the field anytime soon.

The second half of the game is tight, possession being overturned every minute, no shots on goal attempted. When Jeff blows the whistle, everyone looks up in surprise that the time elapsed so quickly. He gets back to the sideline to find Dean standing there, girls hovering near him in clumps of two and three. "Ready?" he asks, and Dean just walks up and kisses him like the last few days never happened, like they're not in public, like he doesn't care what any of those girls has to offer. He opens his mouth and kisses Dean back.
scene five

Things have been going non-stop since six this morning, and his pager can only emit faint, tired-sounding beeps at this point. He's lying on the lumpy, understuffed couch in the empty break room when his phone rings. It's tempting to ignore the vibration at his hip, but before he's really made the decision, he's already flipped it open and said hello.

"Ben?"

"Angie?" That sweet drawl couldn't belong to anyone else. He laughs and relaxes into the sofa, wishing for a blanket. "What's up?"

"I was hoping it'd be harder for you to say no to me over the phone than in an email. Come down for Thanksgiving, please," she wheedles. "The kids miss you. Sam does too."

His brain stutter-steps for a moment at the name; his Sam - no, Dean's Sam - has been on his mind too much in the last few weeks. He pulls himself together to answer her. "Oh, not fair," he says; "the babies' brains haven't developed enough to remember me. And that goes double for your husband."

She laughs, and he feels warm all over, like he's basking in the sunshine; he loves her laugh, her voice, the way that they fit together so perfectly from the moment they met. "I miss you," she says, not a confession or a plea, just a statement of fact.

"I miss you too, Ange." He rolls over onto his back, remembering the twins, warm and fragrant and heavy in his arms, and the way her eyes shone when she looked at them. "But I can't come down. Everyone else is off, I'm pretty much the only intern here at the clinic, and the ER's understaffed right now too."

She's humming something, low and sweet, and he guesses she's trying to get one of the boys to sleep. "And anyway, I'm trying to save up my vacation days." He thinks about Dean beneath him, mouth red and raw, hair spiking wildly in every direction, reaching up to thread his fingers through the ends of Ben's hair, the coolness of his ring sparking against his neck.

"For -" she cuts herself off. "Wait, is there something you want to tell me? Any special company you're keeping?" His laugh is all the admission of guilt she needs. "Let me put Charlie down and then I want to hear everything."

***

Mostly harmless was what he'd thought the first time he'd seen Sam, joking a bit with himself to keep from falling over his own feet at the sight of him: alien, uncertain, beautiful. Sam had had an aura around him, had projected an air of weary invulnerability that was belied only by his dimples and blinding grin. He can remember how far gone he'd already been by the time Sam had finally looked over at him, how easy it was to read all of Sam's silences as proof that his feelings were reciprocated, how exhilarating and agonizing that whole year had been. Up until the day Sam left, and he'd felt like he was being ripped apart, those big hands he'd loved tearing him limb from limb with real hatred, and he still didn't know what he'd done to hurt Sam so terribly.

There's a part of him - maybe the part with his brain in it, he thinks bitterly - that's sure what he's doing now is beyond stupid. Sam's brother is not the way to get over Sam, put all of that behind him.
But maybe it will be okay. Dean's already told him more than Sam ever did, made sense of most of Sam's quirks. And besides, haven't his initial reactions been proven wrong when it comes to the Winchesters? He just has to trust that Dean is as different from Sam as he seems.

***

He fumbles his pager when it beeps shrilly as soon as he's dumped fresh batteries into it. He checks his watch, figuring he has time for one more clinic patient before he has to get to the ER. He clips the pager back to his waistband and jogs tiredly down the hall.

The little girl sitting on the exam table has long, tangled brown hair and an endearing underbite. And an arm that had to have been broken deliberately, if the finger-shaped bruises on her bare shoulder are anything to go by.

The dull resignation in her eyes infuriates him, but he can't even start to help her until he talks to her mother, who's fidgeting with her pocketbook, the ring on her finger flashing with every nervous movement. "Ma'am," he says.

"Mrs. Greene," she interrupts.

"Mrs. Greene," he continues, "this is just a free clinic, not a full-service hospital. You need to take your daughter to an ER, where she can get the care she needs."

"No, I can't," she protests. "I'm not even supposed to be here. I still have to do the grocery shopping and make dinner. Can't you just help her? Aren't you a doctor?"

Not enough of one to help Maya, who looks confused when he smiles at her and asks if he can try to fix her arm. He pages Noreen, who takes one look at the situation and figures out what he needs. By the time Dr. Stanton walks in, he's assessed the injury as a spiral fracture to the humeral shaft and listened to Mrs. Greene pleading for the non-operative course, despite his warning that the radial nerve could be compromised. No question she's scared, but it hurts to see how much of that fear is for herself rather than for her daughter, who's sitting silently in her torn dress.

Maya turns to him when faced with the X-ray machine, her eyes widening when she hears its loud clanking. "Almost done, sweetpea," he says, and she calms again, trusting him when she's got no reason in the world to. He wants to eviscerate her father, craves the satisfaction of knowing he's struck a blow on her behalf; the cold comfort of calling the cops doesn't seem like it could possibly be enough. Noreen snaps photographs and nods at him, and Maya shivers and presses her face into his thigh.

***

He can't sleep anymore. All he sees is Maya, breaking under cruel hands. The body of the teenage boy who'd taken a gun to his head and been pronounced DOA at the ER. Far too easy to be hurt, too easy to let pain be the only frame of reference. He rolls over to Dean's side of the bed and pulls out his cell phone.

"Needed to hear your voice," he says when Dean answers the phone, sleepy-sounding and quiet.

"Saying anything in particular?" Dean asks, a little hoarsely; he's either hurt or getting sick.

"No." He hears Dean shift, rub his hand against his stubble. "Where are you?"

"Outside Philly. With my dad."
"Did I wake him?"

"Not really. He's getting his cheap thrills listening to the police scanner." Dean rumbles a laugh. "Was pretty funny when we were going through Amish country."

He snorts a little at the thought of drag-racing buggies and surprises himself with a yawn. "You coming home after straightening them out?"

"Hope so," Dean says. "Dad and I have some stuff to figure out."

"Soon?"

"Soon."

*

Noreen smiles at him when he walks into the clinic. "Morning, Ben," she says, handing him a big cup of black coffee and a folded newspaper. He opens the paper to find an article on the arrest of a Denver Greene and feels grim satisfaction in the pit of his stomach.

Patsy gets off the phone and turns to him, grinning conspiratorially. "Ben? That boyfriend of yours called this morning and asked me to give you a message." Her eyes are sparkling, and he knows she's fallen for Dean. "Oh, shoot! He was laughing, and I couldn't hear everything he said, but it had something to do with . . . churning butter?" She looks delighted at the innuendo, and Noreen starts to giggle. "You hang on to that one, sugar."

He feels himself grinning like an idiot. "That's the plan."

***

There are times when he wants to keep Dean entirely for himself, when the wicked gleam of his eyes over a mischievous grin can only be translated as take me home now. Dean is bright and happy at the pool table, trading easy one-liners with the guy who challenged him to a game, and the guy concedes defeat and hands over the cash for the next round. Ben makes his way to the bar and catches the bartender's eye. She leans across the bar, expertly avoiding the puddles of condensation and bowls of pretzels and nuts, and tilts her head. He orders the beers, holding up the twenty, and she nods and fills the glasses. He waves off the change and she smiles, beckons him back again. "Your brother's totally hot," she says, completely matter-of-fact, her eyes on Dean.

One of the glasses starts to slip from his fingers but he gets it on the counter in time. "He's not . . . we're not brothers," he says, confused. The beer sloshes around in the glasses, three new spots of slick on the polished bar.

"Come on, you look exactly alike," she protests, wiping at the mess with careless circular motions.

"What?"

His surprise triggers hers, and she holds her hands up. "My mistake," she says, then smiles. "Would it help if I said you were totally hot too?" She's already shaking her head like she knows the answer to that one. "Next life, maybe," she sighs.

He can feel her eyes on him when he walks back to Dean and the other guy - Jake maybe - still one-upping each other with dirty jokes and pool cues. Dean's arm lands warm across his shoulders and they drain their drinks together.
"You gonna tell me what's up?" Dean asks after they finally get outside, while they're waiting for the T.

"Yeah," he says, and Dean nods; once they're on the subway, Ben keeps hold of Dean by his jacket to leave Dean's hands free to tell the best joke in Jake's repertoire.

*

"C'mere," he says, and Dean grins, unlocks the door, and heads for the bed, looking adorably bewildered when he's steered in the opposite direction. It's a tight fit for both of them to be huddled in front of the bathroom sink, but the only mirror in the apartment is there, and Ben needs to see for himself. "That bartender said we looked exactly alike."

"What? Dude," Dean rolls his eyes hugely and spins on his heel.

Ben sticks out a foot to stop him. "Just do this for me, okay?" He pulls Dean back and they're standing shoulder-to-shoulder, peering into the medicine-cabinet mirror. His eyes dart between his hairline and Dean's, his eyes and Dean's, his nose and Dean's, his mouth and Dean's, his jaw and Dean's. Their coloring is different, and their chins, but everything else looks pretty much the same. His spine stiffens when he realizes she was right, and Dean's does too.

"That's just freaky," Dean breathes, and somehow his shock makes this hilarious instead of upsetting.

"Except I'm not covered in freckles. Weren't you supposed to outgrow those about twenty years ago, Pookie?"

Dean looks even more startled, but then he gets into the spirit of the game. "Haven't most guys your age figured out what a comb is for, Monkeyface?"

He is never confiding anything in Dean again. He casts about for a decisive blow. "My eyebrows match," he says smugly.

"Not that anyone could tell behind those nerdlinger glasses of yours. This face doesn't need fancy accessories."

Oh, it's on. "Plus glasses probably wouldn't sit right on that bumpy nose of yours," he says musingly, grinning at Dean's reflection.

He's not expecting Dean to crowd him against the wall and kiss the breath out of him. "Only bumpy because that quack wouldn't let you set it," Dean says when he comes up for air, and he sees their reflections smile at each other. Game over.
scene six

"So," Dean says as he opens, as he gives around Ben's fingers, his voice thready and his breath hitching despite his casual words, "if you see a big black truck following you around, or if a big white guy with dark hair, dark eyes, and a beard starts stalking you, don't worry about it. I told my dad about you."

His fingers lose their way but Dean's stay settled on his shoulders. For Dean to tell anyone, let alone his dad - that's huge, and he goes kind of crazy in response. He flushes hot, then cold, and ends up staring dumbly down at Dean, who's frowning frustratedly as he grinds down on Ben's hand, trying to get the rhythm going again. "What - what did you say to him?"

Dean knows what he's asking and grins up at him. "I didn't get all poetic or anything - he'd've tried to exorcize me. Just told him who you were." Dean draws his head down and kisses him, long and thorough, and he remembers to get his fingers moving again, to press and stroke the way Dean likes. Dean arches up and keeps himself open when Ben finally thrusts in.

"If you really want to know," Dean murmurs, after he's come all over his own stomach, between wet, hard kisses, "you make me feel . . ." and Ben gets lost looking at him, at the way Dean shines, steady and vivid and responsive, and Dean somehow manages to look mischievous even when he shouldn't be able to think, let alone speak, and whispers, " . . . well-fucked."

Ben comes with a shout or a laugh and when he can finally see Dean again, he realizes that what Dean really looks like is well-loved. He kisses Dean once more and hides his smile against Dean's warm neck.

***

"Still on 95?" he asks, tucking the phone between his shoulder and his ear so he can start chopping onions.

"For the rest of my life," Dean groans, not sounding upset at all. "Guess I got to be careful not to stay in any more family-run places. Motel 6, here I come. Whoo."

"Oh, stop it. You know you're glad you can stay sort of close to home."

"Anything is 'close' when my baby gets going," he hears Dean say, can imagine the fond pats Dean's giving the dashboard and steering wheel. "Hey, you don't belong to one of those dumbshit Polar Bear clubs or anything, right?"

"Why should I go outside to freeze my ass off when I could do it in the comfort of my own apartment?" he cracks. "Why, what's up?"

"Nah, nothing." There's a pause. "Exit's coming up. Gotta go."

"Stay safe."

"Yeah."

"Hey, Dean," he says; "love you."
"That's what they all say."

"Who's 'they'?" he plays along, his eyes watering.

"All the boys I let into my pants."

"Jackass." He dumps the onions into the pot and starts pressing the garlic.

"That's better."

***

Dean's words and a phone call from his parents crowing about Jaya's Lincoln Center debut make him, stupidly, homesick, and he mopes around for a few days before deciding that what he needs is to breathe in the tang of ocean air, inhale the scent that defined his childhood summers.

He takes the T from the clinic and gets out to the beach. Sunset is long gone, but a few stubborn pink streaks still linger in the nearly black sky, and he shivers in the cold, feeling calm instead of lonely. He tips his head back and breathes it all in and starts to walk.

He remembers the suicides he'd run in the sand while Jaya lazed back with a book, the two of them reuniting in the saltwater, hair plastered flat against skin that glowed browner than usual. It's not homesickness, not really; he just hasn't been face-to-face with his sister in too many years.

He rounds the curve of the beach and sees a blazing bonfire, two homeless people sleeping near its warmth. He's about to turn around and leave them to their sanctuary when he realizes one of them is much too close to the fire; he runs over and sees the flames licking at her crumpled body, and he knows she's dead. He turns to the other person, lying utterly still, and he feels sick and dizzy when he pushes aside the odd wrappings covering his face and sees that it's Dean.

* 

Dean won't wake up, though his heartbeat is steady and strong, and Ben cannot bring himself to let go. He should be pulling the dead girl away from the fire. He should be calling for help. But he just keeps looking at Dean's still, pale face, the only thing the firelight lets him see in this vast darkness. A light rain starts to fall, muting the humming he's been hearing since he neared the fire, and Dean's eyes finally open.

"Ben," he says, his voice ripped to shreds. "Help me burn her."

* 

It's not a girl at all. It's female, a tight necklace of blood where Dean slashed her throat open nearly distracting him from the gills he finds under carelessly scattered lank, rough hair. Her skin is like fine-grain sandpaper, and not even the orange of the fire can mask its greenness, now that he's really looking. She's got claws and sharply inhuman teeth, row upon row, tiny and deadly and bright white. He and Dean drag her into the flames, and Dean searches her tangle of hair for something bright and shining that he pulls free with a snap. She burns quickly, settling into dust, and they watch it happen as the rain patters against the crowns of their heads, Dean still kneeling and Ben standing next to him.

It's when Dean tries to stand that he finally sees what's throwing off Dean's equilibrium.

***
Dean is shivering, and Ben's traitorous fingers keep fumbling the keys, stopping them from reaching the safe haven of their apartment. The door finally swings open and he hooks his arm around Dean's bare waist to guide him inside, but Dean keeps locking his knees in silent protest. It suddenly occurs to him what the problem is, and he lets go of Dean long enough to dart inside and sweep the salt off the doorframe.

Dean still looks wary but take a step forward. His wings shift uneasily as something pushes back against him, denying him entrance. "Need a sigil," Dean whispers, sounding wearier and wearier each nanosecond. "Ink on my skin." Ben digs in the backpack hanging on the hook by the door and comes up with a marker and hands it to Dean. "Has to be you," Dean says, closing his eyes.

There's no time to argue. He wants Dean inside as soon as possible, away from others' eyes, safe and warm in bed. He uncaps the marker and Dean turns to present his back. "Between the wings," Dean directs, and he positions the tip above Dean's dappled skin. "Close your eyes and concentrate," Dean asks, and pauses before starting off with, "one long downstroke, now."

*  

He puts salt back up on the doorframe while Dean collapses in the bed, falling uneasily on his side and crushing one of the wings underneath him. Dean groans and sits up straight, and lets Ben check his vitals. Dean's body temperature is low, and the breath he's panting out against Ben's hands is cool and wet as the air swirling around a mountaintop. He kisses the top of Dean's head as he checks Dean's pulse and Dean tilts his face up to look at him. He gets dizzy from looking into Dean's eyes, the green of the irises undulating like waves in ocean water. He closes his eyes and kisses Dean, hard, and feels Dean's arms like bands of iron around him. He holds on to Dean.

He can feel Dean murmuring something into his mouth, and he makes it out after a few repetitions. "Sorry," Dean is saying, trying to pull free.

"No," he says. "No."

"I'll figure out what she did. I'll figure out how to change back," Dean says, his voice still sounding used up, this time with an edge of desperation.

He wants to tell Dean it doesn't matter, but he knows that it does, that Dean needs to believe he can reverse whatever that thing did to him. He's never seen Dean at a loss before. Something icy slides down the back of his neck, and he twists to see a trickle of blood dripping from Dean's clenched hand. He pulls back and opens Dean's fist, finding the bright coin the thing had woven into its hair slicing open Dean's palm. Before he can dress the wound, it closes up on its own, leaving a blisteringly hot, raised white scar behind; the humming sound around them gets louder while Dean regenerates.

Dean looks as shocked as he feels, and they look at each other with determination, recognizing the necessity of documenting everything about Dean to narrow down the search for an answer. Dean plucks at one wing and Ben the other. "Nothing," Dean finally reports, after they've lifted and run fingers through the dense softness of pale-gold feathers, exactly the color of Dean's freckles. "Not a lot of sensation in them. Don't think they'd hold me up, either."

"Lie back," he says, wanting to investigate the way they've insinuated themselves into Dean's musculature. But when Dean is settled trustingly on his stomach and Ben runs his hand across the ink to the spot where the left wing meets Dean's broad and supple back, it refuses to stay still, shifting like water in a balloon. "They're not . . . attached," he says, prodding gently, fingers growing firmer as they skate across Dean's familiar skin. "Can you control them at all?"
Dean shakes his head, then rolls over just enough to look at him over his shoulder and gets one hand around his wrist, pulling slowly. "Ben, please," Dean says, raising himself up on his knees and Ben lies in the cool spot Dean's vacated, and lets Dean strip them both. Dean spreads his legs and sinks down on him, the wings spreading to their fullest length, and starts to move; his hands move wonderingly over Ben as if Ben's the one who has transformed, who's been stripped of his everyday self and replaced with alien splendor, something blindingly beautiful. No. That's wrong. That hasn't happened to Dean either. This is still Dean on top of him, just a Dean hurt by something evil, and his hands hold Dean's hips a little tighter.

***

"I need to call my dad," Dean says when dawn breaks.

"Your stuff is still in the car," he reminds Dean, wondering briefly if there are feathers all over the backseat; "use my phone." He tosses it over, and Dean stretches long and lean to catch it. Dean dials and raises the phone to his ear and lets out a pained yelp, dropping the phone back on the bed.

"Feedback loop," he grits out, and Ben snatches up the phone and hits redial, crossing the room and cursing the cramped dimensions of the apartment.

"This is John Winchester." There's no sleep in Dean's dad's voice, just a hint of impatience.

"This is Ben Mahar."

Now there's something sharp in that deep voice. "Did Dean not check in with you?"

"No, sir, he's here. But whatever that thing was that he was hunting, it did something to him."

"I need to speak with my son."

"He can't get on the phone. He's not unconscious, his vitals are fine, just . . . he can't use the phone. But I'll tell you everything he's telling me."

***

He hangs up and turns on his laptop, looking for his digital camera. He photographs both sides of the coin in a series of shots, trying for as much detail as possible, but not much is visible; the water must have polished it nearly smooth. Dean balks when he turns the camera on him, but doesn't protest. His eyes radiate misery that comes through in agonizing clarity, each feather starkly outlined.

He sends the pictures to Dean's dad and turns back to Dean, who's sitting quietly on the bed in his faded black boxer-briefs, one leg tucked underneath him. "Dean," he says again, "love you," and walks over, stopping within arm's reach and looking down at Dean's fragile clavicles, at the mossy softness of his bronze hair.

"Do you?" Dean pleads, voice caught and quiet. The wings twitch.

"Yes," he answers, sitting beside him and letting his hand slip past the golden feathers and into the sweet, welcoming hollow of Dean's back.

"I didn't want you to have to see me like this," Dean confesses, keeping his eyes closed like he knows how disorienting they've become.

For once his hands are ahead of the game, smarter than his mouth, and his fingers are gentle as they trace over the scar on Dean's tricep, the place he once stitched up. "It's no different, Dean," he
"Feels different," Dean murmurs. "That was one thing. This is - everything. Can't move properly, can't really see, nothing."

"Can't see?"

"Like everything's underwater, hazy. Just shapes and colors and motion, you know? Is this what it's like before you put on your glasses, all dreamy?"

"Yeah." Dean's hand covers his own where he's still rubbing tiny circles into Dean's arm.

"Wait," Dean says, sounding a little stronger, sitting up straighter, "where's that coin?"

He fetches it and hands it over, watching Dean's fingertips work gently over the coin's smooth surface like it's Braille. "I know this symbol," Dean whispers excitedly. "I know this." He flips the coin over and feels the obverse side, his eyes shut, concentrating; his hair is ruffled by the breeze the wings kick up as they flutter like they want to take flight. "Yes. I just need to call . . ." He opens his eyes and smiles. "Can you call? Ask Bobby for the ritual that would reverse an entrapment between the elements."

He smiles back and kisses Dean, hard and quick.

***

The ritual leaves scars on Dean's skin, shiny slashes that look like burns, but Dean doesn't cry out. Ben nearly does, just from watching, but he needs to stay sharp; this is all unfamiliar territory to him. The beach is quiet, deserted really, and the fire burning inside rings of salt and herbs is the only source of light and heat around. Dean's voice is steady, regaining its shivery depths as he continues, and Ben is surprised that it sounds less like chanting and more like just plain speaking, though Dean did say that it is the intent that matters most, more than cadence or pronunciation.

When it's done, the fire has burnt itself out, and the wings have evaporated, they're left only with the coin. They head back to the car, worn out. In the dim illumination of the interior light, Ben can see new burns on Dean's back, but his eyes are soft and whole again, and he's smiling. Ben tosses him the keys and Dean laughs in delight.

* *

Dean is a whirlwind of energy once they're back in the apartment, calling his dad and Bobby, insisting he's fine and going over the fine points of the ritual; he's got the laptop open and he's typing as he talks. Ben doesn't interrupt, but he hitches Dean's shirt high enough to apply ointment to the burns, then turns away to start heating up the food in the fridge. Dean is bound to crash at any moment, having gone for so long without sustenance. He's feeling pretty shaky himself, and all he wants is Dean's warm body next to his as he falls asleep.

* *

The ER isn't too bad the next day, busy but not overwhelming. He gets home to find Dean pulling a couple pans of spinach pie out of the oven and looking awfully pleased with himself. It turns out Dean's been busy with more than that, and he shares what he's learned as they devour most of the pie. "So. That was a siren."

Ben's wondering now if the Greek food is some kind of joke, a way to set the scene; Dean has a loopy sense of humor.
"Only I thought it couldn't be a siren, since they lure their victims into the water, not the other way around."

"What did you think it was?"

"No idea," Dean grins frankly. "Too many possibilities to narrow down, things that like to kill near water but not in the water." He scoops out more food for both of them and continues. "But this one had left a trail of bodies along beaches from Maine to Virginia, always men, usually young."

There can be no doubt that she saw Dean as simply the next in a long line, and he can't deal yet with how close she evidently came. "And that coin?"

"That's where I'm stuck. For her, it worked as a way to move between the elements of water and air, and she knew enough to turn it into a curse when she saw me. But I don't know who gave it to her; someone had to exchange it for his life. Too many people running around with that kind of know-how."

It's hard to believe that's true, when all of this sounds bewilderingly new to him, but Dean would know. He pushes his empty plate away. "You figure out anything else?"

"Nothing major," Dean shrugs.

"You didn't figure out how much I'd missed you like this?" Ben asks, and lets Dean tackle him into the bed, welcoming him back with open arms and an eager mouth.
"You have a flair for the dramatic," he says when he looks up from his paperwork to see Dean walking into the clinic, looking tired but without a scratch on him.

Dean laughs and crunches on the lollipop Patsy must have slipped him, too impatient to lick it down to a paper-thin sliver and then nothingness. Jagged little bits of key lime candy move from Dean's tongue to his.

"Good timing, right?" Dean says, finally pulling his mouth free. "Poltergeist took twenty minutes, tops."

He smiles his relief. "We still have to be up early to catch the train." He's thinking more along the lines of just staying up all night, though, now that he's been reminded of the physical reality of Dean all over again.

Dean makes a face that he should have grown out of years ago. It makes Ben absurdly happy. "We're driving."

"Fifty-fifty on the music," he bargains, and Dean seals the deal with another swipe of his candy-tinged mouth.

***

Dean stays a step behind and to the side of him while he pulls out his ID and claims the room his parents reserved for them. He glances over to find Dean looking positively demure, and he knows that he's definitely up to something.

Dean waves off the bellhops and leads the way to an elevator bank. The minute the doors glide shut, Dean drops the bags and is on him. "What are you doing?"

"Makin' out," Dean says, dropping teasing little kisses on his cheeks and mouth, strong hands resting casually on his hips.

He turns his head and manages to get his mouth on the underside of Dean's jaw, that sensitive hinge where stubble glitters like gold, and Dean's heavy eyelids drop to half-mast. "We're kind of in public," he murmurs into Dean's warm, clean skin.

"Smile for the camera, baby." Dean tips his head back and Ben doesn't bother looking for it, too busy marking up the inviting strength of Dean's throat.

*

"Ohhh," Dean exhales when he catches sight of the king-sized bed piled high with pillows and covers, dropping his bags and stripping as he heads over, leaving a trail of clothes and boots and weapons behind.

He watches Dean bare all that scarred golden skin and then fall face-first into the plush bed and tug the sheet and covers back up over himself. "What are you doing?" he asks, amused by the way Dean's snuggling sleepily into the bed, only the top of his head visible.
"Sleeeepin'," Dean murmurs. "This bed is nice."

Dean had looked tired, had even let Ben do some of the driving on the way down, and this place has to be several distinct steps up from Dean's usual accommodations. He should let him enjoy a little luxury for once.

Ben replaces his contacts with glasses and then steps out of his own clothes to slide into the bed and fit himself against Dean, warm and just drifting off. Now he gets why Dean had called it making out; they'll get to foreplay when they wake up.

*

The sheets are soft and warm against his cheek, but the roughness of Dean's hands moving down his arms makes him shiver; the heat of Dean's tongue against his spine, the amulet trailing behind, makes him moan. He thrashes underneath Dean, flattening the pillows, trying to buck up and get some friction, but Dean's well-rested now and willing to spend the time to just keep playing.

"Dean," he asks, starring for Dean's soft mouth, and Dean eases him onto his back, fingers staying slick inside him, and allows himself to be tugged down for a kiss.

He holds Dean close, feeling dazed with lust, his reactions slow but bright, intense. Dean is a hazy shape above him, refusing to come clear before his dazzled eyes. "Goddamn," Dean breathes, "you - " before dropping his mouth to Ben's throat, sweaty hair teasing across Ben's cheek.

They're moving together, the pace escalating, and they can't bring themselves to stop, just keep working each other back up while the sun moves across the sky and sinks.

***

The room service burgers are okay, missing the sharp bite of onion both he and Dean like, but the skin-on fries are outstanding, crisp and salty and piled high on the plates. "Don't know why they haven't called," he says around a mouthful of potato. "They've been wanting to meet you."

Dean keeps eating. "What'd you tell them?"

"Nothing. Your name. That you work all over." He takes a sip of his extra-thick chocolate shake. "I told them the rest would have to wait until they met you." Dean looks at him like he'll take his cues from Ben, go along with any crazy story he chooses to tell his parents. "The thing is, I've never brought anyone home to meet them or my sister."

Dean drops his eyes. "Sammy would have been the perfect boy to introduce to your parents."

It's hard to tell who the challenge, the incipient anger, in Dean's voice is for. "They'd've liked him a whole lot," he agrees, trying to keep the recoil out of his own voice. "But Sam took off before they came back from Asia."

Dean looks up, his lips tightening. "He ran?"

His stomach clenches up all over again and he can't quite move. He is past this and Dean doesn't deserve the fallout from it.

"Sorry," Dean says.

He jumps in before Dean can say any more. "Anyway, I haven't dated a lot. One guy freshman year of college. Then Sam, and no one real after that."
Dean picks at the remaining fries and goes with the new conversation. "You're still beating me. Most I've managed before this was one whole relationship."

Ben nudges his glasses back up his nose. "What happened?"

"Fell in love, told her the truth, she ran screaming." Dean shrugs, like it's no big deal. He waits and Dean lifts his eyes. There's no regret in them. "The point is, I managed to find time to introduce her to my dad. What's your real reason?"

He smiles. "Guess I was just waiting for you to come along." Dean rolls his eyes and slurps up the rest of his shake and pulls Ben onto his lap.

*

It's not an unreasonable distance from the hotel to Lincoln Center, and the sharp April weather has softened for the first day of May, so they leave the car with the valet who swore he'd look after her like she was his own newborn daughter and walk. Dean looks relaxed, but his eyes are still taking in everything, and Ben realizes anew how much Dean takes on himself, how vigilant he is, has to be, outside their apartment. This is as easy-going as Dean's going to get because he knows there are too many things out there that live to cause pain.

"Thank you," he says quietly, and Dean somehow hears and smiles.

"Looking forward to it," Dean answers, looking a little shy, a little nervous, and Ben thinks he couldn't love him more.

***

"There," he says, pointing, his chin on Dean's shoulder as they stare down at the program. "Alto soloist for Mozart's Regina Coeli, Jaya Mahar."

"'Queen of Heaven,'" Dean translates. "That was my mother's name," he murmurs.

"Mary," he says, his voice soft, and Dean nods, fingers twitching ever so slightly.

They stand to let a blond couple squeeze by, and once they're sitting again, Dean opens his program once more, flipping the heavy cream-colored pages. "Is she not on until we get through all this other stuff?" he asks, and Ben laughs at the horror in Dean's voice.

"Just sit back and enjoy it; the hours will fly right by," he teases. He gets his lips on Dean's jaw and then pulls back, doubting his own ears. "Are you humming Metallica?"

Dean just grins at him. "Makes me happy," he says, looking frankly irresistible, but then the lights dim and the conductor comes out to sustained applause.

*

Dean's bearing up surprisingly well, and Ben just sits and lets the music - familiar even after the years he and Jaya have spent apart - wash over him. Dean's eyelashes are leaving thick shadows on the broad plane of his cheek; his eyes are open but unseeing. One piece even gets his fingers to move in time, betrayed by the light glinting off his ring.

When intermission finally comes, though, he can see that Dean's had more than enough. A quick kiss settles them both, and he sees his parents making their way into their row. "Hey!" he says, the tension over their whereabouts vanishing. "Where have you guys been?"
"Flight was late and couldn't catch a cab for love or money," Mom says. "We didn't miss her, did we?"

Dad's saying, "You must be Dean," and shaking Dean's hand, and Dean looks over at him.

"No, you didn't miss her," he says, feeling his grin split his face. "And yeah, this is Dean."

*

J had grabbed a shirt from his bag to use as a jacket, and it's one of Dean's, the flannel soft and faded. She snuggles into it and yawns. "So, Dean. How'd you end up with Monkeyface?"

"I can't believe I missed you," he grumbles. Dean just laughs and tells the truth. "Picked him up while he stitched me up."

J raises her eyebrows like she's impressed. The waitress comes by with their food and starts setting it down. Dad eyes the peanut butter pie topped with chocolate ice cream she sets in front of Dean. "Guess you've got a sweet tooth, huh?"

"Yes, sir. Got it from my mom," Dean says, his voice light. Ben squeezes Dean's thigh and is rewarded by feeling Dean relax a little beside him. He takes a bite of the dessert, scrunching his eyes shut against the cold.

"Okay," Dean says, "now I get why she calls you Monkeyface."

"Shut up."

J laughs her infectious laugh and soon they're all giggling, though Mom at least is trying to control herself. He scowls at each of them and steals a huge bite of pie.

***

"I can't believe you let me eat pie and ice cream at two in the morning," he moans, extravagantly tired and ridiculously full, and lets Dean hold him up.

"I do it all the time," Dean lies through his teeth. "Be a man."

"Hey, is this our elevator?" he asks, cracking one eye open to take in vaguely familiar paneling and gold buttons.

"Yup."

He steps forward to where Dean is leaning nonchalantly against the back wall and raises his hand to run it through the duck-bottom bristly softness of Dean's hair, tilt Dean's head just right for kissing. Dean opens his mouth slowly, just lets him do what he wants, and makes low, approving noises in the back of his throat.

The elevator dings and the door slides open. "Just wanna keep doing this," he murmurs.

"No one said you had to stop," Dean responds, equally soft, and they stumble down the hallway to their room, doing more kissing than walking.

*

Dean lays him out on the bed and pulls off his shoes, then reaches for his clothes. "This is why they
loved you."

Dean gives him a quizzical look. "Cause I can get all your clothes off in 4.2 seconds?"

"Cause you take good care of me." He shouldn't have said it, should have just gone along with Dean's joke, because Dean is looking uncertain and disbelieving now, backing up a bit. But his mouth just keeps going. "Love you."

Dean relaxes like he's at last back on familiar ground. "Yeah, yeah." Dean's phone rings. "Get that, would you? I've got my hands full here."

He gropes for it briefly and picks it up, setting it on speaker accidentally and connecting the call. There's a loud, static-filled silence and Dean says, "Hello?" while he pulls off Ben's jeans.

The static sounds continue and suddenly Ben realizes that it's not static, it's someone breathing heavily, wetly, into the receiver. "Are you okay? Who is this?" Dean asks.

He hears a sob, finally, and Dean snatches up the phone lightning-quick. "Sammy?"
scene eight

Another sob, more hitching breath, and Ben can see that Dean's too scared of missing something to pull the phone away from his ear and take it off speaker. "Sammy," Dean murmurs, his voice dropping down into something low and soothing, a tone designed by instinct to wipe fear and panic right out. "Sa -"

The call cuts out and Dean just sits on the edge of the bed for a moment before growling and searching for the number in his phone. Ben gets up, wide awake now, and starts to pack. J still has Dean's green flannel shirt, but there are plenty more scattered around the room. He rolls each shirt up, stuffs it into the duffel so that the weapons have soft layers between them; he can see Dean dialing the number over and over, growing more and more frantic as each call fails to connect.

He finishes and steps forward. Dean looks up, face drawn. "I gotta -"

"Go," Ben finishes with him, holding up the packed duffel. "I know. But you need to get some sleep."

Dean's shaking his head. "Can't." He looks wired and exhausted, a dangerous combination familiar from the routine of the clinic and the ER, and Ben feels a flutter of fear in his stomach.

"Can't," Dean repeats, but it's not stubbornness; it's just the truth. Ben drops the bag and sits next to Dean just as Dean gets up. "He needs me." Emotions keep chasing each other across Dean's face, too many to count or process, all of them for Sam, Sammy, the one who hurt them both.

Ben stands up too, gets his fingers in Dean's thick hair, strokes his scalp, and is surprised when Dean's arms come up around him, clinging tightly, painfully. It's a struggle to get his voice to work, to figure out what to say. "You really want to go right now, you should at least get in the shower first. Wake yourself up a little." He's messing this up so badly, giving Dean impersonal advice like he's just another patient at the clinic.

Dean sways a little on his feet when he lets go, but disappears into the bathroom without a word.

Ben opens Dean's duffel again and takes a change of clothes into the bathroom, depositing it on the counter. He's got coffee made and steaming in two paper cups when Dean emerges, impatiently toweling his hair dry. He slides the cup without a lid over to Dean and lets him take a long swallow. He watches Dean fortify himself with heat and caffeine - such inadequate weapons - and hands Dean his credit card.

"Take it," he says, when Dean looks like he's going to protest. "You've got no cash right now and the cards you've got are going to land you in jail."

"Like you've got money to burn," Dean argues, lacing up his boots with unsteady hands.

"Take it."

Dean nods sharply, pocketing the card, and then heads out the door, the second cup of coffee in his hand and the duffel's straps hooked over his shoulder. Ben hugs himself with goosebumped arms, watches Dean go, and tells himself everything will be okay.

***
He wakes up cold. The blankets have puffed around him like a cocoon, barely touching his skin, as if aware that Dean should be there, taking up that space. He checks his phone for messages and gets up, moving like there are weights attached to his limbs.

He's bleary-eyed when he stumbles downstairs and tries to read the breakfast menu, and J plucks it right out of his hands when she sits down next to him. "Mom and Dad'll be here in about five minutes, so talk fast," she says, studying his face with soft eyes gone sharp. "Where's Dean?"

"Sam called." That's enough to get her back to straighten, her hands to clench into fists. "I told him to go, J. That's his brother."

He can practically see the litany of epithets she'd like to call Sam on the tip of her tongue. But she surprises him by drawing his head down and laying a kiss on top like he's three years old again. She smells like lemon lotion and sandalwood soap, like comfort and love. "Too bad. Would have been nice to see how hot Freckleface is in the daylight."

He wants so badly to play along, to let her take care of him. "Incredible," he says, trying his best. "I just bet." She slides her arm around him.

When Mom and Dad come down and ask where Dean is, he's able to say in a normal voice, "His brother called - family emergency," and J casually changes the subject.

* *

J watches him pace around his hotel room for a few minutes in dead silence.

"Let's do something," he finally says, just as she's asking if he ever wants to leave the room.

"Yes," she agrees emphatically. "Grab your phone and let's go."

They have to wait for the elevator, and he turns to her. She's changed since he last saw her - new haircut, less tomboyish clothes. "You were fantastic last night," he blurts out. "I should have said it before."

Her face lights up but her voice stays light; she knows how to control that at least, her talent disciplined by years of practice. "You're saying it now." She shakes her head and looks up at him. "I missed you the most, you little punk."

"I know, J," he says, tugging at her hair. God, how he missed her.

"Stop!" She ducks and spins away from him, shaking her hair back dramatically. "Jackass!" she whoops, her fingers darting out to find the ticklish spots in his armpits and on his ribs.

They're howling like kids, breathless with laughter, when the elevator finally arrives. J smooths her hair into place, fixes him with a stern look, and steps demurely inside like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. "C'mon, Monkeyface," she whispers, and he can't help but follow.

***

He can't take it anymore. As soon as he's on the train, he dials Dean's number. "Where are you?"

Dean's voice is scratched to hell and uncertain, like he had to wake himself up to answer. There's no
music in the background. "Leaving Pennsylvania."

That means Dean's setting a pace that will kill him. But he can't order Dean to stop, won't become someone Dean has to fight against.

"My friend Mark lives in Cleveland. Let me call him, get you a place to sleep for a couple hours." He can't stand this walking on eggshells, wishes he could just say what it is he's feeling. *Go. He needs you. But come back, because I love you.*

"Yeah, okay," Dean agrees finally.

That's as good as it's going to get, and Ben knows that even after pushing himself like this, Dean will step up, ready and eager to take on whatever hurt Sam. "Love you," Ben says without thinking, unsure if it's for his benefit or Dean's that he says it. Dean is more than Sam's big brother, more than a hunter, and Ben doesn't know how else to express that.

And he doesn't know if Dean is ready for it this time or if he's simply too intent on Sam to worry about what tumbles out of his mouth. All he knows is that Dean's voice is quiet when he says, "Love you."

*

His apartment looks unfamiliar when he walks in, like all the colors have changed or he's looking at a mirror image instead of the real thing. The casual mess he remembers creating feels completely foreign.

He wanders about for a little while, picking things up and putting them back down, not really cleaning. His stomach growls and he dumps a packet of noodles into a pot on the stove, stirring it while a sitcom plays in the background. Sorting through a fistful of bills, he chokes the food down.

It occurs to him that he's doing what he prays Dean isn't - just the bare minimum to keep going - but this state of limbo, waiting for the phone to ring, is tying him up into knots.

***

Dean calls as he's walking into Bobby's spare room; Ben can hear Bobby's gruff voice saying something about food and rest and Dean says, "It's Ben," and Bobby says hello loud enough for him to hear.

He hears the warning in Bobby's voice, and he's glad beyond measure that Dean's with someone who'll take care of him without worrying about pride or boundaries, utterly relieved that Dean stopped at all.

"Too tired to sleep," Dean sighs into the phone once Bobby's voice fades away.

"You need it, though. At least lie down."

"Lemme just take off my boots, or Bobby'll kill me for messing up Molly's quilt." That's it, no jokes about playing doctor; Ben had no idea he'd miss them this much. Dean sounds more rational, though, like he recognizes that his body needs sustenance and rest if he doesn't want to collapse the moment he sees Sam, or maybe even before.

Ben waits, hearing Dean's quiet breaths, his deep groan when he finally stretches out. There's a pause, and then Dean says, "Sam's still not picking up. I don't know . . . I don't know what could have happened." He hears Dean roll over, the bedding rustle as he shifts onto his side. "I haven't
heard from him since he got on the bus to California. Not one word. Figured he was making a go of it."

Here at least he can help. "He was. He was doing great. I promise."

"Yeah?" There's a painful degree of hope in Dean's voice.

"Yeah." He makes his own voice as warm as he can. "Go to sleep. Tomorrow you'll see Sam." Dean hums sleepily in agreement. "Night, Dean."

*

He's dreaming of Dean, soft and avid eyes shining down at him as he moves his mouth, Dean's thighs heavy in his hands and downy against his tongue. Dean's hands are clutching at him, head tipping back as his eyes slowly close; Dean is saying everything he's ever said all over again, the words spilling out of him, transparent and substantial and real, and Ben smiles against his skin, holds him closer, and feels himself give way.

***

At the clinic the next morning, he keeps his cell phone on him, checks it as he jogs from one patient to the next. He listens to stories of injury and illness, diagnoses and treats, but always with half his mind on Dean. It's only when he's writing up the paperwork that he realizes how much he must have missed with his diminished attention, and is disgusted with himself.

There is nothing he can do right now, and if he's honest, nothing he would do to keep Dean from Sam; Dean wouldn't be Dean if he could ignore a call for help.

It's time to stop behaving like the world has ended. Dean shouldn't have to come home to a maudlin mess. He pulls the folder of residency applications out of his locker and starts filling out the ones for East Coast hospitals, those in the area under Dean's watch, places where he could make a difference.

*

He's in the ER, stitching up a jagged tear in an older man's side and wondering if the guy's a hunter, someone Dean and his dad know, when his phone buzzes. He finishes up, explains when the guy should come back for a checkup, and scrubs his hands clean. There's a text from Dean unspooling across the screen. Got him. Safe. Not good. Home late.

If Dean's texting rather than calling, there's a reason for it, and he's on the ER clock anyway. He desperately wants to hear Dean's voice, but he contents himself with a text message in return: Anytime.
the mark scene

If he looks at the rough draft of his report on the Russell 1000 Index one more time, his head is going to explode. Damn, does he need a break. He knows what he'd like to do, but chances are that Lu's not going to be happy if he calls her at work to suggest a little afternoon delight. School should be out in a couple of hours, though, and maybe he can get over there, lock the door behind the last little rugrat, and spread her out on her desk, let her run chalk-stained fingers over his back.

Or he could order some lunch, eat it in the little courtyard behind the building, and go through his notes again. He can never remember the name of that place that does the really good mango chicken, so he's rummaging through the pile of take-out menus stuffed in his middle right desk drawer when his phone rings.

The display just reads OUTSIDE CALL. Could be Lu, looking for a little lunch-hour distraction herself. "Mark Mileski."

"Hey, it's Ben."

"Ben, man! What's up? I've been meaning to catch up with you." He's been too busy these last few months to call, and assumed Ben was too, between school and the clinic and the ER.

"Mark, I need a favor."

Ben sounds a little off, uneasy somehow. "Sure. Hey, you finally coming out here for a vacation? Lu's been waiting for a chance to fatten you up."

"I wish," Ben says, a strained laugh punctuating his words.

"What's wrong?" Mark asks, serious now. "Is it Jaya? Angie? Your parents?"

"No, nothing's... it's not like that." It's not like Ben to be fumbling for words, not with him at any rate. "I just... I was hoping you could put Dean up for the night."

Why Ben's acting like this is going to be a huge burden, Mark can't figure out, and the awkward silences are making him tense and clumsy. "Yeah, of course, man. Tonight?"

"Yeah."

"And Dean's your new guy?"

"Not so new. It's been too long since we talked."

"Okay. Spill. What's wrong with this one?" If Dean is the reason Ben sounds so miserable, he and Mark are going to have some serious words. Ben's got great taste in friends, and absolutely no sense at all when it comes to boyfriends. Mark's damned if he's going to watch the fallout from something like the Jonas-fizzling-out again, let alone the Sam-explosion. No way. Ben deserves a hell of a lot better.

"Nothing!" At least the surprise and indignation in Ben's voice sound real. And then Ben seems to catch on. "No, it's not like last time. I promise. Dean's good for me, you'll like him."
"But?"

Ben takes a deep breath, and Mark frowns. "But you might think you have a reason to not like him."

Man, this is like pulling teeth. "Because?"

"He's Sam's brother."

"No. You are shitting me and taping me for some stupid reality show, because the Ben I know would never . . ."

"We didn't know," Ben says, sounding more relaxed by the second, now that the big secret's out. "Found out by accident. And you really will like him."

"Don't bet the farm, buddy," Mark says, clenching his teeth when Ben only laughs.

"I'll bet you one meeelllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllll dollars."

"Shut up."

"No, you shut up and tell Lu I said hi."

"When's this guy coming?"

"Dean is apparently breaking all land-speed records, so he could get there in a couple hours. Oh, and he's in a rush, so he might not stay the night. I just wanted to make sure he had a place to catch a couple hours' sleep."

"Is this one going to eat me out of house and home?"

"Just don't feed him after midnight, and you'll be fine," Ben says breezily.

"Nice dodge, you ass."

Ben gets serious again. "I owe you, Mark. Thanks."

"I miss you, man. And you're welcome."

*

Well, one good thing to say about Dean is that he gets Mark out of the office. "Working from home the rest of the day," he tells Joanne on his way out, waving the folder with the stupid report in it. He's on the couch in his sweatpants twenty minutes later, laptop propped against his knees, finally able to work in peace and not worry about falling asleep at his desk.

The phone rings, and he pushes aside the blanket Lu crocheted over the winter to find the handset buried in the couch. "Hello?"

"Hey, honey. Listen, Veronica's got an extra ticket for the photography exhibit tonight, so we're going to get dinner, go to the show, you know."

"Damn, really?" He could really use Lu's critical eye here, someone to agree that Dean isn't good enough for Ben.

"Yeah, why, what's up?"
"Just wanted to see you."

"Uh-huh. I think what you meant to say is, 'I love you and miss you, but I know you haven't gotten to see your friend in weeks, so I will eat leftover pizza while you catch up with her.'"

"There's leftover pizza?"

"I hid it from you behind the Tupperware full of stew," Lu says with no compunction at all. "It was too good to waste on you."

"I think what you meant to say is, 'I saved some pizza just for you, because I know how much you enjoy it and I love you too.'"

"Right. That was it."

"Have fun tonight, baby."

"You too," Lu says and blows a kiss into the phone.

He hangs up and goes to find the pizza.

An hour of solid work later, Mark hears a roar in the driveway. He steps out onto the porch to see a guy in a leather jacket emerge from one of the sweetest cars he's ever seen. She's a beauty, looks as well-loved as Betsy, sitting next to her, and for a second he's tempted to skip the tests he's got lined up for Dean.

Well, maybe he'll just take it slow. He gets out to the car and reaches out to shake his hand. "Mark Mileski."

Dean pulls a duffel off the front seat and turns to return the greeting. "Dean Winchester." His grip is firm.

Damn, up close this guy looks so much like Ben that it's a little scary. "You look . . ."

Dean cuts him a sharp glance. "We've been told."

"You don't see it?"

"Had better things to worry about," Dean shrugs, and Ben was totally right, he does already like Dean. The way Dean trails his hand along the black gloss of the car as he goes just strengthens Mark's gut feeling that Ben might finally have found himself a good one.

"Sleep or eat?" he asks Dean, and Dean relaxes a little, the lines on his face easing a bit.

"Sleep."

"Got it. This way." Mark leads the way to the guest bedroom, waits for Dean to drop his duffel, and then heads for the bathroom. "This is the bathroom. Towel's here, if you want to shower or anything. The kitchen's back there, and there's pizza in the fridge, or help yourself to whatever else we've got."

"Thanks," Dean says, looking like his eyes are rolling back in his skull from exhaustion. "I'll get up in a couple hours."

"I'll be around," Mark says, shutting the bedroom door behind him.
He polishes up the draft, emails it to Nicole and Andre, and decides to reward himself with a beer. The weather's nice enough to sit outside, so he wipes down the plastic chairs on the front porch and settles in to watch the sunset.

Dean shows up when he's nearly finished the bottle, hair damp and smelling like soap, wearing torn jeans and another dark t-shirt. Dean's carrying a bowl of corn flakes, and Mark can't help but grin, recognizing Ben's breakfast of choice. Yeah, Dean's okay.

Dean eats like he hasn't had a meal in weeks, milk dripping down his chin as he crunches cereal. He talks with his mouth full, too. "She's real pretty," he says, pointing with his chin at Betsy.

"That she is. Yours, too."

Dean just nods and continues to scarf down cereal like it's going out of style. "I gotta hit the road. Thanks for everything, man."

"Yeah," he says, standing up and taking Dean's empty bowl. "Bring Ben with you next time, stay a while."

* 

He hears Dean's car thunder off and goes back outside with the phone. Sipping another beer, he dials the number. "He just left."

"Did he look okay?" Ben asks.

"He slept a little, ate some corn flakes. Looked a hell of a lot better after that."

Ben's silent on the other end. "Hey, Ben? You there?"

"You liked him."

"Maybe."

"Told you."

"I'm thinkin' I like him more than I like you right now."

"Wish I could come out there too," Ben says quietly.

"Me too, man. Soon, though, right?"

"Yeah. Soon."
scene nine

He's sweating like a pig, forty minutes of waiting underground for the T and then a twenty-five minute ride jammed up against every resident of Boston, all equally in a rush to get home, get out of there, get gone. It's unseasonably hot; late May should get no hotter than upper 50's, but it's at least ten degrees warmer, and muggy too. At least he's not paying for water - a long, cool shower will relax him, maybe even enough to try to read a little in bed, get back into a habit the stress of school has ground out of him. The books J mailed him are still sitting in a box on the kitchen table, and hopefully one of them will keep his mind from running in circles, the fixed point at the center always Dean.

*

One breath for every two of his heartbeats, and Ben would know Dean's soft, grinding snore anywhere. There's just enough light spilling in from the window that he doesn't need to flip a switch to make his way over to the bed. Dean's lying curled on his side, knees drawn up to his chest, chin tucked down, left hand locked around his right bicep. He looks completely worn out, vulnerable now that his beauty is a matter only of his bones and carved features instead of sass and flash, and Ben feels his heart split open all over again at the sight.

Dean is back, Dean is here, and Ben ends up rushing his shower just so he can fit himself next to Dean's warm, heavy body, lying on his back and closing his eyes in thankfulness.

*

He wakes to find Dean on top of him, body tucked in too tight a bundle to be called a sprawl. This close, Ben can see the exhaustion painted on Dean's face, the dull purple shine on his heavy eyelids obliterating the freckles. Mark had said that Dean disappeared from his house after only a few hours of hard sleep and a bowl of corn flakes, and Ben knows that as little rest as Dean snatched on the way to Sam, it's still exponentially greater than what he would have allowed himself once Sam was back under his wing, his responsibility again. If Dean wants to sleep for a week straight, Ben is going to let him do it.

If only he didn't have to piss. He presses an apologetic kiss to the tip of Dean's nose and rolls them over, getting up from the tangle of golden limbs and moss-green sheets with a lazy urgency.

When he comes back, Dean's awake and not looking any better for it. "Hey," Ben says, feeling his dumbest, happiest smile stretching his face. "Didn't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep if you want."

Dean's propped up on his elbow, free hand rubbing tiredly at his face. He shakes his head, looking all of five years old, tumbled hair and sleepy eyes. His amulet is hanging between his shoulder blades, the thin black cord nestled against his throat. "S'alright," he rasps. "M up. C'mere?"

Ben pulls back the sheet, settles into the same warm spot he'd temporarily abandoned. "Missed you."

Dean looks at him. "Shouldn't."

It's not like he has a choice at this point; Dean is Dean, either present and loved or absent and missed. He needs to figure out how to get that through Dean's thick skull at some point, but right now he
needs to listen, not talk. "Wanna -"

"Okay," Dean says, rolling onto his stomach before Ben can finish saying "- tell me?"

No, he wants to shout. I don't want you like this. But there's no denying the temptation offered by scarred, freckled skin, the promise of Dean, familiar and incendiary, beneath him. It's been too long since he had that, too many nights of wondering if he'd ever have that again.

The silence stretches out between them and Dean twists his head to look up at him quizzically. Even that small movement seems to cost him, and Ben can see that the muscles in Dean's back are strung too tight across iron-hard bones.

"I've got you," Ben says, moving to straddle Dean's slim hips, calves bracketing Dean's downy thighs. He works his fingers deep into Dean's warm back and Dean goes still under him.

"God," Dean finally chokes out, then hides his face in his hands as if the pillow isn't enough of a dark corner. He's unbending, though, with each moment of the massage, and Ben waits for him to come back all the way.

*

Under his hands, Dean begins to talk, words spilling out as if compelled. All in a horribly hollow voice, and for that alone, Ben wants to tell him to spare himself, but the words persist. "Sam didn't sleep." Ben translates that to mean that Dean didn't either, too worried over his baby brother to let go, even for something so necessary. "He kept tossing, kept saying he smelled smoke all over himself, over me, even though I showed up three days after."

Smoke. God, what had happened?

Dean knows where his thoughts are going. "His fiancée died in a fire."

Just like their mother. It's too much to take, but he can't let it be Dean's burden alone. "The wound too?"

"Everything the same. She bled down onto him too." Dean shifts a little but Ben stays steady, pressing into the places where Dean once had wings, his fingers kneading the tension down into soreness. "Thought maybe he didn't want to be in a bed, staring up at a ceiling, so we stayed in the car the second night. But he's too tall, kept kicking, rocking the whole thing. Wouldn't let me just drive away either. Said we had to stay, figure out what'd done this, make it pay." There's a note of love in Dean's voice that rings out clear as a bell even when it's smothered in the agonized hoarseness of his narration. "After a week, he just looked at me like . . . he just said 'Dad' and I gunned it all the way to him."

It might be stupid or it might be a mercy, and he can't tell which way Dean will read an interruption, but he cannot stay silent. Anything to shake the deadness from Dean's voice, as if it's not him that's speaking, but something mortally wounded speaking through him. "Where's your dad now?"

Rolling his shoulders a little, Dean says, "Set up in a place on some land a buddy of his has in southern Illinois." Dean tilts his head from side to side and murmurs, "'M good now."

He's not, not in any way that counts, but Ben swings himself off him and Dean sits up to face him. Kisses him next, a gentle hand on Ben's cheek, and the touch is enough to let Ben know that Dean's not trying to change the subject, just wanted to kiss him, and hope swells again within him, that Dean isn't here to say goodbye.
"Love you," Ben says when there's space between their mouths, and Dean doesn't deny it, joke or sidestep his way out of it.

Dean just nods and lies down, presses his face against Ben's throat, and keeps going. One kiss wasn't enough of a respite; Dean's voice is still scraped painstakingly free of emotion and the words still spill out like automatic writing, but faster now, like Dean's vomiting them up.

"The whole time we're driving, Sam won't say one word, won't talk about his girl or school or, hell, even the weather, if he wants cheese on his burger, nothing. Gets out of the car and sees Dad and it's like he can't talk fast enough, can't even remember how pissed he was when he left, just wants to compare notes. They kept at it for days at a stretch; he'd be shakin', fatigue, hunger, Dad too, the two of them, one thing after another. Sam said he'd dreamt about Jess's death and Dad was writing it all down in his journal, making him go over it again and again, and they wouldn't stop to eat, to sleep, nothing. I kept trying to get them to slow down - they were all gung-ho to run off after this thing and get their revenge, even if it killed them."

Ben can only imagine how frantic Dean must have been, how hurt he would have been to see his care ignored, brushed aside. Dean's monotone pushes relentlessly forward. "And then Sam stopped talking whenever I came into the room. You know that look he gets? - no, you probably don't know, bet he never gets that look because of anybody but me - hell, he was always up for a fight with Dad, but never with me, like what I thought wasn't even worth arguing about. He'd get that you're so dumb, Dean look, that you're just getting in the way, Dean look. So I left. Heard Dad say they were out of some stuff, so I went to Ohio, haggled with Rick, got what they needed."

Dean sits up to point to the greasy-looking green duffel shoved under the kitchen table, too full to be zipped shut. "You wouldn't believe the shit that guy carries."

"Dean -" Ben says into the abrupt silence.

Dean twists away like he didn't hear, stretching out to try to snag his shirt and jeans. "Didn't use your card; Rick only takes cash. I should get this stuff to them. They're gonna need it."

"It's your fight too."

And that brings Dean up short, gets him to look Ben dead on, and say slowly, "Yeah. It is."

*

He tries to make Dean get back in bed, but he insists on helping to make breakfast and uses up pretty much everything in the fridge. Somehow Dean makes it all taste good, and Ben discovers that plotting is much more difficult on a full stomach. He can't muster up any roundabout maneuvers, any jokes about Dean needing his beauty sleep; he just says truthfully that Dean looks like he could use another few days of rest and he'd be much happier if Dean slept. Dean takes a moment to consider that before crawling back into bed.

Three hours into Dean's marathon nap, Ben's phone vibrates. "JW" is the caller; he braces himself and picks up. "Hello?"

"This is John Winchester." The deep voice is calm, the words a little clipped.

"How are you, sir?" He wonders if the air of calm politeness he's assumed is giving anything away. They haven't been phone buddies or anything, but they'd spoken enough to dispense with small talk.

"I - I'm fine, son. Is he there?"

"He's here." Ben knows he wouldn't have appreciated anyone intruding on a fight he was having
with his parents, but Dean will never ask for help in opposing his father. No point making it too easy for Dean's dad.

"I . . . Can you tell him, I think I got a lead on this thing. I need him in New Jersey."

"When?"

"It'll take me two days to get out there, so . . ."

"Yes, sir. I'll tell him you need him." Not that Dean will believe that, but it is a direct quote.

"Thanks." There's a brief pause and then Dean's dad says it again. "Thanks, Ben."

*

He ends up studying while Dean sleeps, while the day passes by in a blur of textbooks and notes. Dean wakes up at around ten that night, so he passes along the message. Dean just nods and pulls him into bed; Ben has no problem with that plan, even when they end up falling asleep after only a few languorous kisses.

In the morning, it's a different story. Dean looks and sounds better than he has since he heard Sam's tears three weeks ago. Ben's just drifting awake when Dean palms him through his boxer-briefs. "Mmm," Dean says around an unfairly delicious smirk. "What's up, doc?"

Ben pulls him down against him, the friction sweet but unsatisfying until the needy noises Dean's making register. He kisses Dean thoroughly, plays with his pouty lower lip, and smiles against his mouth when Dean gives up the pretense of playing it cool and crushes him close.
scene ten

Ben gets out of the shower to find Dean on the phone, scrawling notes in a battered little steno pad.

"Yeah," Dean says. "That's what I'm thinking. Call me if you find anything?"

Ben squeezes Dean's bare shoulder on his way to the closet, undrapes the yellow towel from around his hips, and pulls out a faded shirt and shorts. "Thanks, Bobby," he hears Dean say and then click the phone shut.

"Don't bother with the clothes," Dean says, coming up behind him and draping a forearm across his clavicles. "Got plans for you."

"World-domination plans or come-back-to-bed plans?"

"A little from column A, a little from column B," Dean says, grinning as he uncaps a thick black marker with his teeth. They end up on the bed, Dean sitting behind him, one sure hand pushing his head gently forward and down. Dean's thumb is warm and strong in the hollow at the nape of his neck. "Your turn for some ink."

"What -"

"Protection. Way I figure it, the thing that killed my mom had to be the same something that killed Jessica. Too much matched up for it to be just some kinda coincidence - had to be something malevolent. Something with intent."

The sensation of the wet brush of the marker tip against his skin is startlingly unpleasant, and he fumbles his words. "Malevolent like that creature on the shore?"

"Malevolent like a demon," Dean says softly.

"Those are real too?"

"Yes."

"And it can just show up?"

"Bobby's checking into that for me. Don't know if it needs to possess someone or if it can get around on its own." Dean's fingers settle firmly, reassuringly on his shoulder. "This is the best I can do for now; it's pretty all-purpose. Lean forward."

Ben hangs his head and lets Dean finish his careful work; his skin already feels a little tighter, shrunk by ink. He's shivering by the time Dean caps the marker, turns swiftly when he hears the click. "Now," he demands.

"We can't smudge -" Dean protests before Ben's mouth cuts him off. Pushing Dean down onto his back, he gets Dean's tattered jeans and faded underwear halfway down his thighs. He sinks down onto Dean slowly, so slowly that his thighs burn, and Dean's hands come up to his biceps to steady him.

That touch sparks along his skin, and Ben rocks languorously, deliberately. Dean's hand starts to steal to its accustomed place in his hair, so he shrugs it away, pins Dean's hands above his head. "No
smudging, remember?" he asks, keeping the irregular rhythm going, watching as Dean turns his head to the side, his throat going taut, tendons standing out white among the flushed skin, and bites at his own bicep. "God, Dean," Ben breathes, and Dean rolls his hips in response.

There's no way things can get any better than this.

*

"Get someone to redraw it for you every day, okay?" Dean asks, shoving his clothes into the duffel. "Marjorie, maybe; some girl, anyway. No hot guys for you." Dean waves an admonishing finger in his face.

Ben swats it away. "You are such a jackass sometimes."

"Must be slipping."

"Mmm, must be." He draws Dean close with an arm hooked around his neck and kisses him again, knowing he's only delaying the inevitable.

"And not that girl from the ER who's in love with you."

"Alison's not -"

"You knew who I meant. And she totally is."

"Love you," he says, and Dean smiles to hear it.

"No better words to go out on," Dean says like he finally believes it and swings the duffel over his shoulder; he walks out with his head held high.

***

The ER's packed from a six-car MVA on 23 and they're critically understaffed. He's going from room to room tending to the victims, everyone uniformly covered in blood and grit, making it hard to tell which injuries are the worst. He looks down at the chart Lilly just handed him, but his eyes are a little blurry; he wishes he'd worn his glasses instead of these contacts that he probably should have thrown out a week ago.

"Ben?"

He looks up, scrubbing his hand across his face, and sees a familiar, unbelievable sight. Jonas. Half of Jonas's face is covered in blood that's been clumsily wiped away, leaving streaks that look like tear tracks.

"Hey, Joe," he says, assessing the damage as he gets closer. He sits, beckons him to lean forward, and cleans a long laceration at Joe's too-hot temple.

Jonas's hand drops to Ben's knee to steady himself as he closes his eyes and winces in pain. "Tell me I'll still be pretty, you butcher."

"Always, drama queen," Ben says, smiling and knitting the lac shut with a couple of butterfly bandages. "What happened?"

"Some asshole going a hundred miles an hour tried to change lanes, clipped me, and got me acquainted with my steering wheel."
"Track my finger," Ben asks, and Jonas looks at him exasperatedly but has no problems passing the test. "You got lucky. You get to go home."

"Thanks, man," Joe says, and then Ben's beeper goes off again.

*

"This is quite a racket you've got going here." Ben looks up from his cup of coffee to see Joe holding a cafeteria tray and smiling down at him. "Shitty coffee and food that would probably send you to the ER to get your stomach pumped . . . conveniently located in the ER."

"Yes, we're fiendishly clever," Ben says. "What are you doing here, Joe?"

Jonas's smile slips and his eyes flash weirdly yellow, catching the overhead lights. "I . . . thought you'd like to catch up," he says, sounding hurt. "It's been a while, Ben."

"Sorry. I just wasn't expecting company. How have you been? And what are you doing in Boston?"

Joe's smile is the same, wide and pleased, though he looks a little jittery; adrenaline and caffeine can do that to a person. "Drove up from the city for my grandma's eightieth birthday."

"Cool."

"Not really. I spent all day yesterday blowing up balloons for the party."

He laughs. "That is a lot of balloons." He points to the bruises littering Joe's arms and asks, "Everything else okay?"

"Yeah, can't complain. This could have been a lot worse."

"I'm glad you're okay." Joe looks really good, actually; the New York clothes he's wearing probably cost half of Ben's monthly rent, and he holds himself differently now, like there's something driving him, an energy Ben would never associate with the laziest guy he ever knew.

"I am. Better than okay; things are going great. I'm finishing up a big project, quite a few years in the making . . . You don't want to hear about my work." Ben knows he should protest, but he can't without lying through his teeth. "Anyway. You seeing anybody?"

"Yeah," he says, smiling like a Pavlovian response at the thought of Dean.

"You want to elaborate on that?"

"Nosy," Ben chides fondly.

"Not so much nosy as getting bored sitting here watching that dopey grin on your face get bigger and bigger. What's this guy got that I didn't?" Joe's voice is teasing, but there's another strange flash in his eyes.

Ben thought it would be harder to sum up, but it comes tumbling out before he can overthink it. "He loves me."

Joe's face goes blank at that. "Oh. How'd you meet him?" He's fiddling with his paper cup, but hasn't yet lifted it to his mouth; the sandwich on his tray is sitting untouched in its shrink-wrap.

Ben borrows one of Dean's phrases. "Picked him up while I stitched him up. He came into the clinic a couple of times with injuries."
"Huh. That doesn't sound like you."

"What?" He finishes the dregs of his coffee and thinks longingly of his bed, of getting into Dean's old shirt once he's home for the night.

"Picking up violent guys, brawn-over-brain guys."

"That's not what I said. Dean's got a dangerous job." He keeps his voice even; Joe always did have a big mouth, and that sometimes made it hard to remember that there was a good heart inside him.

Joe holds his hands up in surrender. "Just sounds like you could do better. You're a doctor, Ben; you don't need some guy with blood on his hands."

Ben stands and chucks his empty coffee cup into the trash. "That's my decision, Joe. I've got to go."

If he gets over to the clinic right now, he can nap for an hour before his shift starts. If Jonas says anything else, he doesn't hear it.

***

"They're stuck in traffic," Dean says, sounding not at all upset. "Dad's getting soft - no traffic jams or road rage in the heartland. Welcome to the Garden State."

Ben laughs. "You sound good."

"Yeah, saw a doctor up in Boston," Dean teases, then sober up quickly. "And I got here a couple hours ago, did some research."

"Hit me."

"Looks like this demon has a couple tells. Fucks with the weather, with the animals in the area when it's coming in for the kill. Did it in Kansas and again in California before it made its big move. And from what Dad and Sam were saying, it sounds like it did that exactly the same both times. Pins her on the ceiling alive, belly slashed open from side to side, waits for him to see her, then burns her."

It's worse than any nightmare, just hearing about it. Seeing it, knowing it for the reality that stole away the life you once knew must be shattering. He knows he must sound like a child, but he can't help asking. "Why?"

"I don't know," Dean admits quietly. "You keeping your mark clear?"

"Yeah. And salt on the doorframe."

"I wish I knew if that was gonna be enough."

There's no answer to that, so Ben contents himself with saying, "Stay safe, love you," and hearing it echoed back to him.

*

The phone rings again just a few seconds later, when he's gotten only one of his contacts out of his itchy eyes. "Yeah?" he asks.

But it's not Dean's voice on the other end. It takes him a second to realize it's Joe's. "Ben? It's me. Listen, I just wanted to apologize for what I said earlier."

"No, it's fine," he says, not wanting to rehash the conversation.
"I just - I was just worried about you, you know?" Jonas's voice is quiet, a little uncertain.

"No need, Joe. Thanks."

"Cause sometimes guys like that, guys with 'dangerous jobs' can start to crave that danger, get addicted to it, and they pull people around them into it too."

"Stop. Now." He takes a deep breath, tries to calm down. There's no point in defending Dean to Jonas. "What do you want?"

"You're going to get hurt." There's no doubt at all in Joe's smooth voice. "You're exactly the same, Ben, still thinking everyone plays fair, but they don't. Trust me."

"I'm not going to get into this with you," he says quietly.

There's a pause and then Joe says, "I guess you've got it all worked out, huh? You're the one that stitches him up, gets to call all the shots? Must make you feel pretty good."

"What happened to you?" Ben asks, feeling sick. "You've changed -" 

"- since you used to kiss me goodnight? Grow up, Ben." That silky voice cuts off, and all he can hear is an empty dial tone.

*Get a grip,* he tells himself sternly, laying down the phone and slipping the remaining contact from his eye and tossing it in the trash. He fumbles on his glasses and runs his hands through his hair, looking at his face in the mirror. He looks petrified, and he pushes that thought away; if Dean can be strong enough to chase and find the demon that destroyed his life, surely Ben can withstand a few nasty words from someone who never owned more than a little bit of his heart.

It's still hot in the apartment, so he gets the ceiling fan going and falls into bed in his underwear and Dean's old red shirt. He thinks of the long, quiet days he and Dean spent together in the apartment, him studying and Dean cleaning his weapons or making dinner, or the two of them talking, swapping stories of childhoods vastly different, wondrously exotic to each other.

He'd had a hard time reconciling the Sam he knew - big, beautiful, willful - with the Sammy who lived in Dean's memories - half-brat and half-angel, precocious and obstinate, absolutely loved. But remembering how Sam had sunk into himself when he'd finally admitted to Dean's existence, how completely defenseless Sam had looked without his brother, makes Ben wonder if Dean had been more of a mother to Sam than either of them realized or would acknowledge. He frowns up at the ceiling, watching the big wooden blades of the fan circle endlessly by, willing himself to fall asleep and closing his eyes.

It's so hot. He kicks the sheet away restlessly, but it's pinned by a weight at the foot of the bed. He opens his eyes. Dean is sitting there, frowning down at his little steno pad and chewing on a pencil. Ben can feel the tension easing out of his shoulders; he sits up and reaches for Dean. "Hey," he says, and Dean smiles, quick and bright, and leans in a little closer. They're nearly touching when Dean is jerked backwards, his skull and spine slamming into the wall, dazing him. "Dean!" Ben screams and scrambles off the bed to get to him, but is repelled by some invisible force, unable to do anything but watch as Dean is dragged slowly and roughly up the wall, his body unable to adjust to the positions it's forced into, until at last he's on the ceiling, his eyes wide and dark with fear, staring beseechingly down at Ben. His mouth gapes open helplessly, silently, as a slash opens him from hip to hip, bones unmoving while the flesh gives way, blood dripping down onto Ben, hotter than anything, until a fire ignites from within Dean and consumes them both, screaming, only one with a voice.
His own screams wake him up.

He bolts upright and snatches his phone. It's not Dean, whose voice will be sleepy and unguarded, whose words will be calm and rational, whom he wants to talk to. He needs someone who will understand how much is at stake when the demon's pattern culminates, who will take him back to the beginning. He searches for "JW" in his phone and hits send.

"This is John."

"Dean's in danger. It's Dean the demon's after."

"What -"

"You want to kill someone, eviscerate them, you do it with a longitudinal incision. Nothing to keep the organs in place that way. Especially if they're on the ceiling. Gravity, you know?" God, he sounds absolutely hysterical - voice pitched octaves higher than normal and speaking at a tempo only a crack addict could match.

"Son -"

"But a transverse cut, that's not so bad. We do C-sections that way. The demon kills them with the fire. But the slashes are about fertility - attacking your wife for having Sam, his fiancée for being the future mother of his children."

"What does that have to do with Dean?" At last, Dean's dad sounds like fear has got his guts in knots.

"Dean raised his brother, acted like a mom to him." This sounds incredibly stupid, but it's the truth.

"It doesn't work like -"

The rest of the truth comes tumbling out while he shivers from the cold. "It was Dean on the ceiling. I saw it happen."

That shuts both of them up. "A dream," Dean's dad finally says, heavily.

Ben stays silent; he's waiting to hear a plan of action, and until he does, he's not going to make any excuses for being out of his mind and nearly out of his skin with terror.

"Sam told me he dreamed about Jessica's death for a week before it happened. And I think . . . I think Mary dreamed her own. She couldn't sleep, couldn't stay asleep, the week she died. Wouldn't tell me what had her up even when the baby wasn't fussing."

"It's Dean," Ben says again. "Please."

"I want to hear the whole dream, every detail, right now," John says, and Ben closes his eyes and tries to remember.

***

He keeps having to explain his red eyes to everyone at the ER, and he passes them off as fatigue to his colleagues and allergies to his patients. He lifts his glasses and rubs his eyes with the heel of one hand, trying to fill out the morning's paperwork.

He's almost done, can just about taste the coffee he's promised himself after this task is complete - decaf, most likely, if he wants to sleep at all this week and stop looking like a wreck - when he's
interrupted.

"Ben!"

Ben looks up to see Jonas, standing so close he can smell the sweat shimmering on his skin, despite the chill in the air. He opens his mouth to brush Jonas off, but a closer look tells him Joe is terrified of something. "What, Joe?" It's not as warm a question as it could be, but he's not feeling very kind at the moment.

Joe's words are punctuated with shaky breaths. "I . . . I think . . . something happened. I think I'm going crazy."

"Why? What happened?"

Joe's grip on his forearm is fierce. "Last thing I remember is coming into the ER after the accident and you fixing me up," he says. "But that was two days ago, man! And I think I talked to you after that, but I don't think it was me, and . . ."

Joe sounds as panicked as Ben had felt last night. "Shh, wait, Joe. Hang on." He puts a paper cup of water in front of Joe, gets him a chair. "We'll figure it out." Half the water ends up darkening the front of Joe's shirt when he lifts it to his lips. "Have you slept at all in the last few days?" Joe's shaking his head, and Ben can see the grayish bandages on his temple. "Has your injury been bothering you?"

Joe is crumpling the cup in one severe fist, his body tweaked tight. "This isn't from a bump on my head. Something happened to me. Like I was sleepwalking or something. But -"

"But you never sleepwalked before," Ben concedes grimly. Joe had always slept like the dead; nothing could wake him up but the million-decibel alarm he kept next to the bed.

Joe grabs his hand suddenly. "I remember saying some shit about the guy you're with now. But it wasn't me, I swear."

"I believe you."

"Help me."

"I don't know how." All he can do is call in a favor from Uma, the best psych on the staff, and escort Joe down to her office, an arm around his shaking shoulders the whole way.

* 

Alison bumps into him accidentally-on-purpose on his way back up. "Oh, hi!" she says, blowing her bangs out of her face, big blue eyes fixed on him.

"Hey."

"Ooh, new tat?" she asks, tugging his shoulder down with a firm hand, trying to get a better peek at the back of his neck.

"Not really a tattoo," he says, waiting for her to say whatever it is she wanted him to hear, twisting away when her fingers dance a little too close to Dean's ink.

She drops her hand and replaces her flirtatious smile with a nicer one. "I need a consult," she says, leading the way to the ER. "Kid came in with a busted-up arm. Dropped off by a coach, who said
the parents were out of town and a nightmare to reach."

Ben nods; this is all pretty straightforward. "Sounds like you don't need a consult so much as a babysitter," he says.

"Got it in one," she grins. "But the kid won't really talk to me. Figured he might open up to you, man-to-man, you know?" She cocks her head to the side. "There's a free cup of coffee in it for you if you say yes," she wheedles.

"Decaf, please," he asks, and she nods agreeably.

*

The kid, Jeremy Martin, turns out to be a scared eight-year-old with tear-tracks on his face and a torus fracture in both radius and ulna. "I want my mom," Jeremy says firmly, implicitly denying any tears.

"We're trying to get hold of her and your dad," Ben assures him, taking in the dusty pin-striped uniform. "You're a baseball player, huh?"

Jeremy's small chest swells with pride. "Shortstop." His wrist is hugely swollen, and his arm is warm and soft in Ben's hands.

"I was never any good at baseball," he confides.

"What'd you play?" Jeremy asks, then gasps as his wriggling jars his arm. His little cap sits askew on his head.

"Soccer. Number five, just like you."

"I thought only girls played soccer. Like that one in the Gatorade commercial."

"Nah, where I grew up, everybody played. It was fun."

"We're league champs, three years running," Jeremy says, serious as can be. "And then I broke my stupid arm."

"It's not broken, Jeremy. The bones have been bent and we need to take some X-rays to figure out how long it'll be before you can play again, but you're gonna be fine."

"Really?" Jeremy's smile lights up his whole face, little crooked teeth shining like his big brown eyes.

"Really. I'll look for you in a Gatorade commercial."

*

Alison finds him when he's finishing up Jeremy's paperwork and perches herself on the edge of his desk. "I was thinking, maybe instead of coffee, I could buy you dinner instead? To say thank you? You really saved my ass."

She's ramped up the flirtatiousness, and he thinks she might lunge at him at any moment. She shakes her hair back, whipping it across her face, and his tired eyes are playing tricks on him, making it look like the yellow flash is coming from within her eyes instead from streaks of blonde.

"No problem," he says, watching her slide across the desk. Looks like Dean was right about her
crush. He has no idea how to put her off without coming across as a jerk; she's ignored every one of his signals so far.

"Done," he says, closing the folder and handing it to her. "And, about dinner, I appreciate the offer, but I've got a boyfriend."

She doesn't look surprised, but angry, so angry her eyes seem to flash that weird color again and her voice goes positively venomous. "Boyfriend? Is that what you call it? Because I -"

His phone interrupts her, buzzing loudly on his hip. "Excuse me," he says, and stalks off. "Hello?"

Dean's voice comes through, rough and urgent. "You okay?"

"Yeah, are you?"

"Yeah, but all that stuff we were talking about - freaky weather, dead animals, all that shit - it's all happening in Boston right now. The demon's there and we gotta stop it."

"No! You can't come here. Please."

"What are you talking about? You're sitting in the middle of a war zone!"

"It's you - you're not safe," he counters. "I dreamt the demon got to you, put you up on our ceiling, gutted you, and burned you, and all I could do was watch."

"It's got no reason to hurt me."

"It's got no reason to hurt me. It goes after people Sam loves, right?" Even if Sam had loved him at one point, that was a lot of years - and a lot of silence - ago.

Dean's quiet for a moment. "Point is, if we know where this thing is, we've got a chance to end this, once and for all."

"Can you?"

"I think so."

*

"Bobby, it's Ben." His little silver phone is cutting into his fingers but he can't relax his grip. "Dean and his family are coming here - they say the demon's here in Boston right now. But I dreamt - I saw Dean die just like his mom."

"Easy, son," Bobby says gruffly, but there's panic in his tone. "You tell him what you saw?"

"I tried. I told John, too." That obviously didn't work; maybe Bobby can get through to them.

"Damnation! John listened to the whole thing and then decided he'd make his move anyway, am I right? Stubborn, pig-headed fool!"

"Please, I don't . . . I don't know what to do."

"No one does, son, that's the whole goddamn problem." Bobby takes a deep breath and starts over. "I've been workin' on this as best I can since Dean called, gave me that heads-up about it being a demon, about the pattern it's following."
"And?"

"All I can find is that this demon - it's got lots of names, don't know which one is the real one - is fairly high up. Likes to play, likes the personal touch."

His skin is crawling, but there's no help for it now. "Tell me, please."

"It likes to mess with people's minds, the victim and people close to them."

It's easier, somehow, to think the victim than Dean. "How?"

"Makes things happen. Possesses people, that kind of thing."

"So it can't get around on its own?" he asks, remembering something Dean had said when he'd first drawn the protective sigil. "It needs to possess somebody?"

"Well," Bobby says slowly, "most cases that's true. This one seems to be able to do both. Like I told Dean, trouble is, if John or Sam has figured out how to kill it, they'll be killing whoever it's possessing at the same time. So it needs to be in its own shape, you understand?"

"How do we do that?"

"All I can find is that you'll know it by its 'eyes of gold.'"

***

Where are you? Dean texts.

Clinic he writes back. He can't go back to the apartment and lure Dean into the place of his death, and the ER is too crowded. Here, at the clinic, there are only a few people around and for the most part they'll comply if he asks to be left alone; this isn't his shift anyway.

Outside shows up on his screen about five minutes later, so he goes to the parking lot just as Dean's opening the trunk. "Hey," he says, wrapping Dean tight in his arms and burying his face in Dean's neck.

"Hey," Dean murmurs. Dean's skin is warm and smells like soap, thin over the pulse jumping in his throat. "I'm fine, see?"

"Yeah. Let's just get you to stay that way, huh?" His voice is lost against Dean's neck but Dean must hear him anyway because he tightens his arms as if to say you too.

"Help me get this stuff inside?" Dean asks, finally taking a step back.

"The demon's been here." Dean goes still, head and shoulders still ducked under the protective cover of the trunk. Ben starts babbling. "I talked to Bobby and he said this demon had 'eyes of gold' and it's possessed Jonas and Alison, even though it didn't need to, and who knows what it's going to try next."

"Yeah, it likes to play games," Dean says grimly. "But I've got this." Dean's eyes are dark and calculating as he brandishes a long, slim blade. It doesn't gleam; it absorbs the light somehow. It looks old and deadly and completely right in Dean's hand. "I found it at Rick's. And I found an invocation that should let us separate the demon from whatever skin it's in." Dean closes the trunk with a resounding slam.

Ben leads the way to exam room three. As they wait, Dean allays a little of the tension by teaching
him the invocation. Dean smiles and unknots his shoulders as the unfamiliar syllables in dead languages begin to flow more easily from Ben's mouth.

"Gotta say, this would be so much harder if you were stupid," Dean says, and grins at the swift punch to his shoulder. "Not that I'd be with anyone stupid," he adds agreeably.

"Where are they?" Ben asks, feeling adrenaline flood his overtired system.

"They were about five minutes behind me, but I know the area better than they do." Dean checks his watch, looking anxious again. "Run through the words one more time?"

Ben trails off when Sam comes into the room with a duffel bag full of weapons. Sam doesn't even notice him at first, crouching to draw a complicated symbol on the floor with what looks like a black Craypa. Sam's hair is longer now, little curls everywhere, and his body has filled out. Aside from the pallor of his face, Sam looks good, healthy, like he was on top of the world until not too long ago.

Ben takes a step forward and Sam looks up from his sketching, blank face turning furious when he registers Ben's presence. Well. If he'd ever wondered how Sam would take the news about him and Dean, now he knows. Dean sees it too and steps close.

"Where's Dad?" Dean asks.

Sam glares at him, then says, "He needed something from his truck. Said he'd be in in a minute."

"Been longer than that," Dean mutters, heading for the door. Before he gets there it swings open. John Winchester is a big, solidly built man with dark eyes that seem to see everything, frown lines on his forehead and laugh lines around his mouth; it's not hard at all to see why Dean pretty much worships him. John locks the door behind him, takes one long step into the room, scuffs at Sam's design with one booted foot, and looks up with a grin. "Howdy, boys," he says as his eyes flash yellow.

All Ben sees before it all goes to hell is Dean, dark eyes in a crumpled face, lips already tightening with determination. And then Dean's brutally flung against one wall, Sam against another, and the demon is looking right at him.

"God, Dean," Ben gasps, and then he's slammed back against the wall, too. It feels like he's being squeezed by giant fists, the top of his head ready to pop off, and he can't get even a single muscle to move.

"Oh, God can't help you now," the demon purrs. "And neither can Dean." A flick of its finger - Ben can see the wedding band on John's hand - and there's a long gash in Dean's cheek, bleeding freely. Just like in his nightmare, it's Dean's blood flowing, and Dean's eyes meet his. Dean can't move at all, but his slow, deliberate blink jolts Ben into an awareness of what he has to do.

Ben starts the invocation and the demon backhands him, slamming his cheek into the cold wall and knocking his glasses half off his face. Then it smiles. "I've never had one try to fight back before." It glances over at Dean, who's choking on words that won't emerge from his sealed-shut mouth. "You sure picked a feisty one, Dean!"

It turns back to Ben and puts its hands on him, straightening his glasses and patting his cheek. "Aw, look at you. So sure I was going after your pretty boy, so sure you knew better than he did. Well, I guess that's fair, because I just don't think he could have played this any dumber, do you?" It speaks in a horribly relaxed drawl, a whiskey-rasp of a voice that somehow sounds nothing like John Winchester's normal clipped words or troubled baritone, that can't be shut out.
"Really, Dean," it says, forcing Ben up the wall inch by excruciating inch and pressing him nearly through it, "you should have listened to Mr. Juicy Med-School Brain here. Sorry - Dr. Juicy Med-School Brain. He saw that it was all about Sammy. Actually, so did Sammy. Isn't that right, champ?"

It love-taps Sam on the jaw, grinning hugely.

"But you, Dean, you were in such a hurry to forget that Sammy dropped you like a hot potato all those years ago that you went when he called you and cried like a little girl." It turns to Sam. "Jessica didn't cry, you know," it tells him.

Ben's halfway to the ceiling now, can feel everything in him straining to give under the pressure being exerted against him. His eyes must be bloodshot, and his skin stained with the blood pushed right up against the surface. The demon halts his slide, keeping him pinned against the wall while it turns to taunt Dean in his father's voice. "You would have liked her, Dean," the demon says. "If you hadn't decided to play for the other team and retire your jersey."

It clicks its teeth in mock-disappointment. "Of course Sammy made sure you'd never meet her. You know, no one would have blamed you if you'd ignored him after he abandoned you, left him in that little world he made just for himself and not for the two of you. But instead, you brought him back into the fold, told him you'd make me pay. Very bad move. Because Sammy believed you, needed you. So I had to take you out of the picture." It looks at Ben and then swings back to Dean. "You put your boy on the chopping-block, Dean."

Ben looks down at Dean, vision coming clear for one long, painful moment. Dean is shaking with rage, tears standing bright in his eyes as he keeps his gaze fixed on the demon. Ben can hear the demon's words come through loud and clear still, undiminished by the heavy heat of his head, the ringing in his ears. "Oh! Don't you want to know how I found him? That pretty little mark you put on the back of his neck. That kind of stuff has power, boy; you can't waste it on protecting someone who doesn't really understand, love of your life or not."

Ben dimly registers the demon's movements as it grabs Dean's face, mashing his cheeks together and pulling his head away from the wall. It lowers its head to stage-whisper into Dean's ear. "Don't you dare turn away now; you don't want to miss the climax of the show."

It turns back to Ben. His hands and feet are buzzing, prickling like they've been asleep forever, and the demon's voice seems to echo in his head. "Damn dropped ceilings. Guess the wall's gonna have to do for you."

The demon's like a snake, transfixing his blurred vision, but out of the corner of his eye Ben can see a movement behind it. Dean's head has been released from the demon's paralyzing spell, and he shoots Ben one fervent look and begins to move his lips, chanting something under his breath. Ben needs to buy him time and keep the demon's attention away from him, so he starts the invocation again, the words hard to remember, hard to shape.

"Oh, no you don't," the demon says nastily. Ben keeps going, though he's getting dizzy and his limbs are tingling; he feels hollow but somehow dense too, paralyzed with his back against cold plaster. Still he can't escape the demon's words. "You know, kid, this isn't personal. Well, I mean it is, but not personal about you. Fact, I kinda like you. That was smart, what you said to John, gave me some ideas, you know, about vertical incisions and evisceration. That's a fun word to say. E-visc-er-a-tion. Looks like all that school -"

It stops talking. It stops talking because it splits, horribly, John's body going stretched and rubbery as a thick, greasy black smog erupts from his throat. Ben only has time to blink before he's falling, crashing into the linoleum floor, slammed onto his hands and knees, wrenching his wrists and aggravating his bad knee, the sharpness of the pain the only thing keeping him from sliding into
unconsciousness. Oxygen floods his system, and everything around him gets a little too loud, a little too bright, doing him no favors as he gets shakily to his feet. He sees Sam stagger forward in time to keep John's head from hitting the floor, but Dean just stands there, back still against the wall, watching as the smog swirls and takes form like liquid accommodating to the shape of its container.

The eyes of the demon once it's in its own form are not just yellow but golden, shining like sunlight against the smoky, stained pallor of its skin. Before it can take its first breath, Dean's stabbed it in the throat, put out its luminous eyes, and gouged a bloody X through its heart. It shatters silently, exploding into dirt that bursts into flames that die before they hit the ground.

Dean tucks the knife into a pocket and pulls Ben to him; Ben stumbles but Dean doesn't let him fall. "You can stitch me up at home, right?" Dean asks lightly. Ben nods, not trusting his voice yet, keeps one hand in Dean's for strength, and holds out the other to help John to his unsteady feet.
scene eleven

It takes a few minutes for Ben to feel the pain of pulling John to his feet, but once his abused wrists start to protest, he cannot shut them up. John isn't letting go, though, so Ben just makes his best attempt at triage, even if his eyes keep getting caught on the dark blood oozing from Dean's slashed cheek. John is shaky, weak, and panting like he just ran a couple of marathons; there's no doubt that possession is not just a matter of the brain being violated, but a physical injury as well.

The clinic is perpetually low on supplies, and it doesn't make sense to wait here until someone comes to investigate the noise and demand explanations for the scorch marks and the spatters of blood and the wax patterns on the floor.

"We have to go," he says. "Come on."

He feels like a kindergartener on a field trip, a chain of linked hands keeping them together, one with Dean, and his other closed carefully with John's, pulling him to a safer space.

Ben can hear the duffel bag packed with weapons slapping against Sam's leg with every step, can feel Sam's eyes boring into the back of his head. He's grateful for the twin pillars flanking him, because he has no idea how to appease Sam, what Sam needs to hear that will make him believe that he loves Dean, that he has no intention of letting Dean go simply to diminish into the old, claustrophobic roles of peacemaker and caregiver that his family has made so necessary.

Their progress is slow, halting, given John's condition, and Sam gets a hand on his father's back, but it's his brother's name that he speaks. "God, Dean," Sam mutters, then trails off, then does it again.

"I know, Sammy. Let's get Dad home, okay?"

John's hand stays fast in Ben's when they finally reach the parking lot, and Dean doesn't seem to want to let go either, so they all slide in from the passenger side of Dean's car. Sam closes the door gently after his father's legs make it inside, eyeing Ben the whole time, and then he stalks off to the glossy black truck parked a knight's-hop away, two down and one across.

The inside of the car smells like Dean, and Ben starts to shake, like he can accept the reality of Dean's safety only because of that familiar scent, rather than Dean's warm, strong hand in his. Dean pulls him a little closer before starting the ignition. Ben buries his face in Dean's shoulder, kisses it quickly, and finally lets himself believe that they'll make it home in one piece.

* 

He and Dean must be thinking along the same lines, because they move smoothly toward the bed, and deposit John in it. Dean unlaces his father's boots and pulls his belt free while Ben goes in search of the blankets he'd folded away when the weather turned. He turns back, blankets piled high in his arms, and sees Dean gazing down at his father, looking lost and uncertain. He tosses the blankets on one of the kitchen chairs and moves to stand behind Dean and wrap him in his arms. "He just needs some rest," he murmurs into Dean's smoky-smelling hair, gladly taking the additional weight when Dean leans back.

Sam's voice from the doorway makes them both jump, and even the frown lines on John's unconscious face deepen. "Dad belongs in a hospital."
Dean doesn't stir, but his eyes go sharp. "Not like the hospital's known what to do with the other victims." Trust Dean to remember Joe and Alison, even at a time like this. "If Ben says Dad just needs to stay warm and get some rest, then that's what we're going to do." Dean smiles his best conciliatory smile. "Can't beat free healthcare, Sammy."

"This isn't good enough," Sam says, enunciating in a way that makes Dean stand up straighter; that tone must be a sign that Sam's working his way up to an explosive fury. Ben tries to let go, but Dean keeps him from getting too far with an arm around his waist. He turns his head, and Dean's slashed cheek is just a few inches from him, a dark red furrow cutting an ugly path through bronze stubble, and Ben remembers that his work isn't nearly over.

"I'm going to cover up your dad, and then I'm going to need to take a look at the two of you," he says firmly, counting on the motions of shaking out the blankets to hide the minute but persistent trembling of his hands. Dean and Sam are both standing so solidly, facing each other head on, and he's shaking like he's palsied, wanting nothing more than for him and Dean to be curled up together on their bed, falling asleep tangled in each other.

It's not happening tonight.

He floats the blankets down onto John, confirming that his color is good, that he's neither shivering nor sweating, and that his respiration is easy. So far so good. He pulls Dean's med kit out from the duffel under the bed and turns to face him.

Dean's obligingly seated himself in one of the kitchen chairs, face tilted helpfully up to the light. The gash in his cheek is ugly, but not so deep it needs anything other than a thorough cleaning. Dean does his best to distract him as he works, fingers threaded through the belt loops of his jeans, thumbs nudging up Ben's shirt to rub dizzying circles just above his hips, but it's not like Ben doesn't know Dean's looking right back at him, making sure he's okay too.

Dean squeezes him in thanks when he's finished, and Ben takes a deep breath.

"Sam?" he asks, gesturing to the chair Dean's vacated. It's the first time he's said Sam's name to his face in years, the first time he's listened to the sound of his voice shaping the syllable; he wonders what they both hear when he says it. At least his voice doesn't shake.

"Nothing happened to me," Sam says flatly.

"C'mon, Sammy, let 'im check you out," Dean coaxes, and Sam whirls on him, catching him mid-yawn.

"You think this is fucking funny, Dean? Having him 'check me out'?"

"Sam -" Dean says, his face darkening to match his brother's.

"There's salt on the doorsill, there are sigils all over his neck, because, what, Dean? You just opened your mouth and told him everything?"

"We wouldn't have walked out of there tonight if I hadn't told Ben the truth," Dean bites back. "I told him first thing, and I've never been sorry for it."

Ben is standing stock-still in his own kitchen, wondering if he should break this up, but he can't figure out what he'd say even if he could drag their attention off each other.

"And it's not like I tried to hide any of this from you, either," Dean continues, voice rising, finger stabbing in Sam's direction. "You were right there when I told Dad that we needed to get to Ben's, so
"Yeah," Sam laughs, spiking close to hysteria, and painful to listen to, "because there's only one Ben in the whole world, Dean. Because of course when you and Dad were talking about somebody named Ben who could help out, I wouldn't assume it was some other hunter, of course I'd think, huh, that must be the guy Dean suddenly went gay for, and liberal old Dad has no problem with his favorite son taking it up the ass. Yeah, of course."

It sounds like homophobia, but it isn't; Ben's heard enough of the real thing to know that this is just Sam's easy way out, sparking internecine warfare. It's not entirely a pleasant surprise to discover he still knows Sam well enough to pinpoint the fear that's driving him. Though maybe it's not that he knows Sam so well, even after all this time, but that he lives with the same fear, that Dean will keep loving him but find someone else to love even more. And he can't say it, not in front of Dean, and not in front of Sam.

But Dean's not the type to make anyone beg for his love. His finger drops, and his shoulders slump with what looks more like defeat than a shucking off of a too-heavy weight. His voice is quiet after a long silence, marked only by John's increasingly uneven breathing. "I missed you, Sammy."

"Hard to tell," Sam says, eyes glittering as fiercely as the misshapen diamond ring dangling from the chain around his neck.

"Not to anyone who's been here," Dean says, and turns his gaze to his father, shifting restlessly in his sleep.

Ben can just make out the curve of Dean's turned-away cheek, that line he'd know anywhere, but all Sam can see is the tense breadth of Dean's back. Dean's shoulders aren't unknotting, even through the low, steady murmur of his voice as he tries to soothe his father back into slumber, and Ben is just about to go over and help out with John when he hears Sam's choked little voice.

"I'm supposed to believe this was all some big coincidence?" He spits it out like it's a dirty word, a clean sheet whisked off a rotten bed. "That you didn't go out the minute you were alone to try to find Dean?"

"The way you did?" Ben asks without flinching, without blinking; once he'd had a moment to breathe in what that bartender had said about the resemblance, once he'd let himself think back to his last day with Sam, he'd figured out the realization Sam must have come to. "Or at least trying for the next best thing?"

Sam goes red so quickly it looks like he's been slapped, and his jaw is tight with anger. "You were never -"

"Good enough, I know," Ben says, trying to keep one eye on John, who's struggling against Dean's hands.

"Hey!" Dean calls, and they both start forward to help.

It's Sam, with his long legs who gets there first, Sam whose touch wakes his father, Sam who supports a disoriented John as he stands and guides him to the door. "No room here, we'll find a motel," Sam says, managing to get them both out of the apartment without making further eye contact.

Dean's sitting on the bed with his eyes shut, but when Ben steps close, Dean presses his head softly against him, like a small child seeking comfort. "They'll be back tomorrow," Ben promises, and
Dean just nods against Ben's belly.

*

To Ben's surprise, they both sleep soundly through the night, waking only to fully golden mid-morning light. "Mmmmmf," Dean says, mouth pressed sleepily to Ben's shoulder.

"Mmmmmf to you too," Ben says, shifting down to kiss Dean. His hands drift down the rumpled cotton of Dean's shirt, dipping just underneath the waistband of Dean's boxer-briefs. There are tiny dimples in Dean's warm skin there, little resting places for his fingertips.

Dean responds like he's never been touched before, fervent and eager and adoring. "Can we?" he breathes, looking so hopeful, that Ben tosses out the idea of going slow.

"Love you, Dean," he says, sliding down the bed, lifting Dean's red t-shirt just enough to clear his navel, and then biting down gently on the hot, freckled skin just below. Dean's fingers twist sharply in his hair, and he smiles against Dean's belly. "Anything you want," he translates, and Dean rolls them over too quickly for another word.

*

"Your dad really did need some sleep," Ben points out while he does the dishes and Dean finishes his usual sniff test of the laundry. "We have no idea when they'll get here, but they'll come."

He's startled by Dean's strong arm slipping around his hips, drawing him back so that Dean can nip sharply at his jaw. "At least you didn't say 'it's done.'"

"It's not, is it?" Ben turns to face Dean, drying his hands on a towel and then tossing it on top of the pile going into the washer. "From what you said, from what Bobby said, there are more demons, more everything, and . . ."

"Yeah," Dean says, clear eyes unwavering.

"Yeah," Ben says, and the buzzer finally rings.

Sam's wearing a face like a thundercloud, but his lips are pressed firmly shut. John's just as quiet, until Dean's hand lands on his forearm.

"Dad? You okay?"

Dean's wrapped in his father's arms, and Ben can just barely hear John saying so proud against the top of Dean's head. "You too, son," is the next audible thing out of John's mouth, and Ben turns around from putting the chain back on the door to see John holding his right hand out to him.

It's been less than a day since that same hand was desperately clutching his, and it's not just for Dean's sake that Ben is fiercely glad that John is standing on his own two feet again. "Thank you," John says, and they shake.

"Sam?" Dean asks, looking at his brother with that same hope Ben had seen in bed. Sam crashes forward, pitching himself into Dean's arms like the baby brother he was years ago. Ben turns away when Sam starts to sob, and John looks awkward at the sight of Dean rocking Sam steadily as he cries.

Too bad there are no walls inside the apartment, but still. "Coffee?" he asks, and Dean's dad nods gratefully.

Fortunately, the coffeemaker is ancient, and notwithstanding his and Dean's tinkering, about as loud
as a vacuum cleaner, so he and John are mostly shielded from whatever Dean and Sam are saying to each other, perched on the edge of the unmade bed.

John resolutely turns his back on them, and Ben can almost hear his mom saying *the two of you need to work this out yourselves*, so he asks as he gets out the mugs, "What are you going to do now?"

"Sam deserves to finish his degree. God knows he earned it ten times over." John sighs. "And Mary would have wanted him - have you seen my Mary?"

Ben shakes his head. "Just the picture Dean carries around, the one of the four of you."

John flips open his wallet and hands over a snapshot of a woman who could be Dean's little sister, brighter blonde than she was in Dean's faded photo. "She'd've liked you," John says. "And she'd've trusted you to keep looking after Dean the way you've been doing."

"Got it," Ben says, handing the picture back, resisting the impulse to salute her or him, but Dean's dad must see the glint in his eyes because he grins that same roguish grin that Dean wears on occasion. "So you're taking Sam back to California to take his finals?"

"Yeah. And then, who knows, but it doesn't have to be hunting anymore."

"Will it be for you?" Ben asks, then starts to pour the coffee into the mugs on the counter. "Milk? Sugar?"

John shakes his head. "Well, maybe a little sugar." He takes a long sip - Dean must have inherited his asbestos esophagus and cast-iron stomach from his father - and meets Ben's gaze almost sheepishly. "The job is over. All I want to do now is be the father the boys deserve."

It's not up to him to decide what's best for Dean's family, but he can't keep himself from nodding at John and lifting his own mug in a toast. "Here's to that."

John drains his cup, then asks, "Got any more? Or should I save some of this for the boys?"

Ben looks over at them to see if they're winding down. Sam is clutching at Dean's shirt, his face still shining with tear-tracks. "But demons *lie*, Dean!" Dean doesn't look away, just leans forward to speak softly to his brother. "You don't, though," Sam admits, and Dean's smile lights up the room.

"You can have mine," Ben says, turning back to Dean's dad. There's no point taking in caffeine, not when all he has to do before falling back asleep is hold Dean tight, tell him he's loved, and kiss him goodnight.
"Seriously?" Dean asks, his eyes wide. "Because of me?"

"Mostly," Ben replies honestly. "Partly for J, partly for my parents. But mostly you - us." He grins. "So, we'll have to go house-hunting; I need a place where I get to be in charge of the thermostat."

Dean's quiet, but Ben can see, reading the intimate language of dropped eyelashes, taut shoulders, and set mouth, that his mind is racing. Dean's brightly mocking face when he looks back up is, Ben knows very well, nothing but a sham. "I always did want a sugar daddy, but -"

"Quiet, you," Ben says while he pulls Dean close by a belt-loop, refusing to lend any validity to Dean's misgivings by taking this seriously. "You're not freeloading. We both have jobs, but only one of us gets paid. So that one should be paying for a house." He raises a finger to smooth away the worried wrinkle developing between Dean's mismatched eyebrows. "I'm not moving without you," he says, kissing the hinge of Dean's jaw, working his way to the corner of Dean's mouth. "Who else am I going to blackmail into doing all of the heavy lifting?" Dean smiles at that, and their mouths are now perfectly lined up; who is Ben to ignore a sign like that?

*

"When are you gonna get going?" Dean asks while they run their MIT route, sneakers pounding steadily on the blacktop.

"I was thinking of switching ER shifts with someone so I could have a few days off. Maybe Rahul - I think he was looking to swap anyway."

"Do you know what you want?" Dean's still a little shy, but he thinks he's covering well by looking at the students swarming the lawns, geeks who took a different turn in life than he did.

Ben's not going to let him get away with that. "Well, we should talk about what we want in our house."

Dean slants a sideways glance at him. "You better take the EMF meter when you go. Last thing I want is to carry you over the threshold and have you get attacked by a poltergeist or something."

Ben's jaw drops in outrage, Dean's wicked grin flashes across his face fast as lightning, and then they're off, chasing each other at full speed, Dean choking with laughter and Ben breathlessly swearing vengeance.

*

Ben keeps getting distracted from his list. He needs to write down everything they both want in a house before Dean takes off for his next hunt, but it's virtually impossible to concentrate.

Before Dean poked his broken nose into his life and made himself at home, Ben never had this problem, but now, somehow, the stupidest little things distract him. Like the way Dean's shower-damp hair curls at the tips, or how drops of water from the freshly washed snap peas cling to Dean's lips as he crunches gracelessly, or even Dean's feet, up on the bed and nudging Ben's right hip companionably. Dean's feet are long and freckled, and the pinky toes are set at a slightly different angle, turned out just a little, like they're about to take off for adventures of their own.
Ben shakes his head at what he's sunk to. Happy, relaxed, affectionate Dean is clearly too heady an influence to be around very long, but Ben can't help wishing he'll stick around forever.

***

"So, why don't you tell me what you're looking for?" the real estate agent chirps in Ben's ear. He forces himself to sit up and hunt for the list he'd made and Dean had doodled all over.

All of the numbers are now wearing funny faces. "First, we need something that's close to public transportation. I'm not sure yet which hospital I'll be working at."

"Can do!" she bubbles. "Philly has excellent buses!"

Her over-caffeinated enthusiasm reminds him how long he's been on call, and he wishes he could just go home and get some sleep. "Great," he mumbles, swallowing a yawn. He looks back down at the list and snorts. The numeral 2 is now wearing a Groucho Marx glasses-eyebrows-and-nose combo. "We'd like at least two bedrooms. Two baths would be great, but not required."

"I can look those up for you," she assures him unnecessarily. "When do you think you'll be able to come on down?"

_Lady, this isn't The Price Is Right_, he can just imagine Dean saying. "I could get there Thursday morning, if that works for you?"

"Of course, Mr. Mahar! I'm looking forward to meeting you! At our office, at ten?"

He agrees and gets off the phone. Time to catch up on his sleep; he's got fifteen minutes on the lumpy couch in the break room before afternoon rounds officially begin.

*

Coral Rodgers looks a little disconcerted when she sees one earbud of the Walkman's headphones staying in his ear, but she smiles gamely and doesn't let it throw her off her sales patter.

"Let me just make sure I have all of the keys and lockbox codes, Mr. Mahar. Or is it Ben? Can I call you Ben?"

"Of course."

"Let's go find you a home!" she says, virtually sparkling with enthusiasm, and he smiles and hopes this wasn't all a grave miscalculation.

The first two places are nothing special; one sets the EMF meter humming a little louder than it should, and the other is just cookie-cutter and nothing to get excited about.

"Lucky number three," Coral says as they round the corner, but Ben had heard her say "lucky number one" and "lucky number two" earlier, so he's wary of her chipper façade.

The third house on the street is a rowhouse, settled snugly between its slightly larger neighbors. There's ivy growing over the brick, a good sign according to the checklist Dean had run through with him. Inside, it's all wood and light, polished floors and gleaming windows and odd corners tucked away. Walking through, he can see where all of their stuff would go, how they could live in this space.

"You've got a lovely walk-in closet here, with matching his-and-hers wardrobes," Coral says, "and
an extra cedar closet over here."

The EMF meter stays silent while Coral keeps up with her pitch, talking about original flooring and new windows with double-paned glass, about the stability of the neighborhood. Ben takes another look at the sheet in his hand. They can afford this. All he needs is for Dean to say yes. He excuses himself and goes out to the tiny patio in the back and dials Dean's cell. "Agent Mercury," he hears Dean say; the hunt must have gone well if he's picking up.

"Hey, Freddie," Ben says, smiling like an idiot into his phone. "I think I found it. Can you meet me in Philadelphia in the next few days?"

"Yes, sir," Dean says. "I should be available for debriefing tomorrow at oh-eight-hundred."

"You wish." It's more fun than it should be, taunting Dean this way, challenging him to keep that professional exterior.

"It will be an honor and a privilege," Dean says, like he's being awarded a medal, in a dangerous voice like honey. God only knows what the person he's with must think.

"I'm at the downtown Comfort Inn, not the one near the airport," he tells Dean just as Coral wanders back to the patio, looking curious about his phone call. He hangs up and turns to her with a smile.

"I'd like to come back tomorrow, see the place one more time, if that's okay with you?"

*

He kills time by wandering around the neighborhood. Philadelphia is walkable, and clearly a place where people love to eat. He passes an old-fashioned candy shop that sells homemade caramels and fudge and thinks about Dean's nose pressed against the glass.

A few blocks over, Reading Terminal Market is bursting with food from all over the world. The delicacy of choice, judging by the natives around him, is soft pretzels from the counter run by three young Amish women; his eyes nearly roll back in his head when he bites into the buttery dough. Forget the little house on the quiet street - this is the only place Dean will want to call home.

*

Dean's been fortified with a couple cups of coffee, but he's still clearly cranky about a nine a.m. appointment after driving all night. Ben slips his hand into the back pocket of Dean's fitted, faded jeans, and Dean smiles around the rim of his paper cup. "Yeah, yeah," Dean says, and leans forward to kiss him but detours to hide a yawn in Ben's neck. "This better be the awesomest house ever."

"Well, it's me and the EMF meter against you, so, technically, you don't even get a vote."

"Hey!" Dean looks affronted until he comes up with a counter-argument. "My baby - my real baby - and I count as two votes. There better be room for her."

"Good morning!" Coral calls, looking surprised by Dean's presence. "It'll be the two of you looking at the property this morning?"

"Yup," Dean says.

"Wonderful, wonderful," she trills, and Dean eyes her warily. Ben steps back, lets Dean follow Coral in. This should be fun.

Coral starts with the basement this time, evidently pegging Dean as the handyman of the relationship;
she points out the workbench, the water heater, and the circuit breaker. Dean nods authoritatively and _hmmms_ impressively, shrugging at Ben as soon as her back is turned. She keeps chattering, giving details about the years the roof was redone, when all of the windows were replaced, and Dean grins and bears it; when Coral pokes her head into a closet, Ben grabs Dean for a quick kiss.

"And here," Coral says, smiling like she's got something mind-blowing to impart, "we have the bathroom. The floor is a few years old, but still in great shape. The sink and the toilet - both made by American Dream - were installed new one month ago." Ben is trying to figure out what earth-shattering secret was apparently coded in those simple sentences when Dean nudges him. Coral's looking at the two of them expectantly.

"Wow," he tries, and Dean smiles as charmingly as he can.

Fortunately, Coral still believes in sincerity. "I know, right? I once saw a demonstration where this exact model flushed eighteen golf balls in a single flush!"

"I've never shit golf balls before, but I'll practice every night," Dean murmurs so low that Ben can just barely hear him over the flow of the water gushing out from the faucet.

"Great water pressure, see?" Coral says, looking over her shoulder at them.

"Absolutely," Ben says, getting himself under control.

Coral shakes their hands when they step back out into the sunlight. "It was a pleasure," she says, smiling hopefully at them.

"For us, too," Dean says. He waits until she's halfway down the block before turning to Ben and whining, "Why don't you ever take me anywhere nice? You know, like a toilet demo?"

Ben laughs until his stomach hurts, and Dean slings his arm around his shoulders. "I like it," Dean says, looking sideways at him. "We can stick the weapons -"

"- in the walk-in closet," Ben finishes with him.

Dean looks impressed. "Yeah, and the basement - well, not the laundry area - we could build it up, fortify it."

"New fixtures, new roof, good floors; all we need is an inspection and a loan."

"So let's go for it," Dean says, and Ben kisses him long and hard right there on the front stoop.

***

"You're making that up just so you won't have to help me pack," Ben accuses, not even sure how serious he's being.

Dean's smile only gets wider. "Scout's honor."

"Do I look like I was born yesterday?"

"No, crankypants, you don't. I can't help it if this old lady swears she's got ghosts jitterbugging in her attic all night long."

"Didn't you all work something out? Some kind of spheres of influence thing? Can't the Carolinas-to-Florida guy - Abel - handle this?"
"But it's in Virginia, and that's my area," Dean says slowly, like he's not sure how this has gotten so close to an actual argument.

"But he'd cover for you if you asked," Ben points out, wondering why he's not just keeping his mouth shut. It's not like there's a lot to pack up in any case; the kitchen stuff is all that he has to worry about breaking.

"Don't want to ask," Dean says, swallowing hard, and that's when Ben gets it, that Dean's afraid of the day when he will have to ask, that Dean carries with him the knowledge that he's been both skilled and lucky, and that any one of his hunts could end in tragedy.

He can't believe what an idiot he is. "You don't have to," he says, stricken. "I'm sorry." He reaches out a hand, tentatively, toward Dean.

Dean uses it to haul him close. "Me too. But I'll make it up to you."

* *

When Ben gets home from his last day at the clinic, still holding the gift certificates Patsy and Noreen gave him, he opens the apartment door to find a beautiful girl on his bed.

"J!' he blurs, completely taken aback. "When did you get home?"

"Freckleface called, said you guys were moving, and that if I didn't show up soon, he'd forget what I looked like and never let me into your new place. So?"

First things first. He crosses the room and sweeps her up in a bear hug. God, he missed her.

***

"J's almost as anal as Sam," Dean observes when he staggers into their house with another box of books, this one marked 4th Semester, Med, M-X. "And you've got way too many books." He wipes an arm across his face. "I'm sweating like a pig."

Ben stops unpacking, pulls a bottle of water from the backpack tossed on the mantelpiece, and hands it over.

Dean downs half of it in a single gulp, then leers at him. "I think I've seen pornos that start this way."

"With pig-sweat? Nice."

"Jackass."

"The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can go out and buy a bed," Ben points out, but he can't resist a small delay - just kissing Dean sweetly and smacking him on the ass to send him on his way.

***

"Bobby gave me this guy's number," Dean says as he leads them on a winding path, over and across several one-way streets near their house. There are some rowhouses here, but just as many free-standing houses, and it's at the biggest and shabbiest one that Dean knocks.

A short man with a broad, wrinkled face answers the door, looking mildly peeved to see them. "Now what can I say to make you two go away?" he muses. His shirtsleeves are rolled up, and Ben can see scars from old burns scattered across his hands and forearms. "Well? Only way I'm letting you in is if you're hiding Girl Scout cookies or bourbon behind your backs."
Dean grins. "You must be Elijah Drew. Bobby Singer told me about you."

Elijah's dark eyes widen. "You're Dean Winchester?"

"Yeah," Dean says, extending his hand for a shake. "Why?"

"Boy, the way Bobby carries on about you, I thought you'd be twice your age and twice your size. Come on in."

A long, vehement streak of curse words spews forth from somewhere inside. Elijah and Dean both look obscurely pleased. "That must be Hank," Dean says, and Elijah rolls his eyes melodramatically; Ben wonders if all hunters are drama queens because they're just bursting with knowledge they can never share, or if he's only happened to meet the histrionic ones - and the Winchesters could all give anyone a run for their money. "We won't bother you now, but we wanted to know if you could build us some iron bars for our windows. Ben and I just got a house."

"Little trinity?" Elijah asks thoughtfully, lips still twitching due to the continuing, crescendoing cussing.

"Yes," Ben says, when Dean looks puzzled by the term. "It's a trinity house."

"Yeah, I could do it. Could put iron down everywhere, not just the windows. Can't be too careful."

Elijah eyes Dean once more. "You're the Winchester who's good with cars, right?"

"My dad -"

"You're the one Bobby could stand to have working next to him, right?" Elijah interrupts.

Dean snorts, but his face is as lit up as a kid's. "Yeah."

"You get our motorcycles purring again, we'll call it even."

"Only if you let me take care of the muscle spasms in your left hand," Ben says.

Elijah's eyes narrow, but he unclenches the fist he's made and quits trying to hide his hand. "You're good, kid."

"Yeah," Dean says, "he's the best."

***

Ben stumbles into the kitchen early in the morning and is taken aback by the sight that greets him. He's unable to comprehend how Dean is actually doing something, given the energy they've expended over the past ten days trying to make the house feel like theirs before his residency at Friends' Alliance begins and before Dean has to take off for another hunt.

He can see Dean chewing something with his chin resting on his arm, so that the top of his head moves instead of his jaw; his amulet is resting face-down in front of him, and there's paint dotting his hair.

Ben's too tired to raise his arm, so he points with his chin. "What've you got there, Grover?" he asks, yawning halfway through.

Dean blinks sleepily up at him. "Grover? Oh, yeah." He scratches his belly and then seems to remember the question. "I was just finishin' up these things." The last peapod is standing upright between Dean's finger and thumb. "Here," Dean says, getting up and extending it toward him; "it's
"Bed?" Ben mumbles between bites.

"Mmmm," Dean agrees, but they just stand there, swaying tiredly on aching feet, holding each other up.

***

"There has got to be a limit to your geekiness, man," Dean says, looking wide-eyed at him.

"Oh, but there isn't," Ben says, grinning madly; all this and he still gets to go home - to their home - with the person he loves most in the world.

Dean just looks at him for a long moment, ignoring all the giggling children darting between and around them, and then says, "You want to go again, don't you?" He shakes his head in amusement. "C'mon then, let's go."

"No, that's okay; I think Security was ready to throw us out when we went into the heart the first time," Ben says, feeling flushed not only from the tight spaces he'd negotiated much more successfully as a pint-sized wonder than a full-fledged doctor, but also from the memory of Dean's sweet, insistent warmth just behind him, heating the arteries and veins and capillaries. He should not be having sex fantasies involving the heart model at the Franklin Institute. But Dean's right in front of him, unfairly and unfadingly gorgeous, and Ben gives in to the naughty tingle running up and down his spine. "Let's go to the, um, papermaking exhibit," he says, trying to remember the signs they'd seen.

"Really?" Dean wrinkles his nose. "We were just blood cells, and now you want to recycle paper? Booooring."

"Boring enough to be deserted?" Ben murmurs suggestively, leaning close.

Dean's face lights up. "After you, doc."

***

Friends' Alliance Hospital is a lot like the house - lots of unexpected turns and weird little hidey-holes everywhere - and the other residents seem familiar, like new faces on the personalities he met in med school. By the end of the first day, Ben already knows who's going to be eating lunch together, and who's going to couple off.

It's a nice group, all highly motivated, some a little louder than others. Monterey, for instance - he'd bet she could make herself heard and seen wherever she went. She stands and stretches, drawing the gazes of about half the courtyard crowd. "Anyone want to quiz me on the proper procedure for an appendectomy?"

He smiles and shakes his head no, because the sweep of her eyes seems to linger on him. All he wants is to take a walk while the weather's still good, find a bench, and eat the lunch Dean packed last night.

*

He can't imagine working this hard for something you don't really want; Juliana had confided that she was only in the program because of the belief her family and hometown had in her, to be their first college graduate and first homegrown doctor. He's tired every time he walks home, night or day,
but he's exhilarated, too, at the idea that he's making progress toward his goal.

Dean teases him for the bags under his eyes, but makes sure he does everything he can so that Ben gets at least five hours of sleep a night. One night, Dean's arm wrapped securely around him, Dean's amulet a cool and heavy weight against the back of his neck, he twists and peeks at Dean, snoring softly behind him, and wonders what it might take to set up some kind of clinic for hunters, to do what he can for those who ask for nothing.

***

"Sam wants us to come out there for Thanksgiving or Christmas," Dean says as they sit out on the patio.

Ben's contentedly sniffing the air, scented by the spiced meat on the grill. Dean is awesome at birthday presents - a relaxed evening at home is all that he wanted.

"I wish," Ben groans; "I would pay to see your dad terrorizing civilians." Dean grins appreciatively and flips the meat. "But I'm on call." Dean's grin is fading. "You should go, though, get to see them."

Dean's looking doubtful, so Ben presses. "It's fine, I'll just be here all by myself, eating a turkey TV dinner, and crying into my pillow."

"They give you pillows at the hospital?" Dean asks, smirking and cocking an eyebrow; he's clearly very pleased with himself.

Ben laughs. "Only if we've been extra-good. No, seriously, go; you should have some fun."

"Hey!" Dean says after a couple of minutes of attending to the meat on the grill. "On my way back from Chicago, I can pick up Mark and his wife, bring them back?"

"That would be awesome," Ben says, and Dean, the big dork, pats himself on the back.

*

The house feels empty without Dean, and Ben just barely keeps himself from wondering if his lonely words are reverberating by applying a little common sense; the house is too small for echoes. He checks the Chicago weather every day that Dean's gone, listens to Dean's voicemails whenever he's on break.

Working over the holidays has caused more than a few grumbles, but it's turned out to be a bonding experience for the residents. Ben invites all of them over late one night, when everyone's still a little wiped from the shifts they've been pulling, and it's nice to see people in their little house. He can't wait until they actually get to use the second bedroom as a guest room, maybe start to repay all of the favors that years of being a broke student forced him to take.

Dean pulls in a day earlier than expected, his hair dusted with the first snow. "Man, I missed you," Dean says, standing in the doorway and letting all the cold air in, and Ben drops the blanket and welcomes him home.

*

"Sounds like Sammy's been making up for lost time in the dating arena," Dean says as he putters around the kitchen, making a staggering number of his special grilled cheeses. "Dad said he's wanted to shoot about half of them on sight."
Ben shakes his head, still bemused by the idea of John and Sam cohabiting without Dean to mediate, but maybe they've all grown up a little now. "All girls?" he asks before he thinks about it, then stiffens with surprise in his seat.

"Yeah," Dean says, glancing his way after flipping the second sandwich in the pan.

There's nothing, no jealousy, no vindication, nothing flooding his system; he just takes it as fact and moves on. He smiles at Dean, gesturing for him to continue. Dean slides the first two sandwiches in front of Ben and picks up where he left off.

"So one of them called Dad 'John' without being invited to. The next one went on for a few hours about how immoral war was - all war, even after she found out Dad was a vet. And the third was a vegetarian."

Ben can't help it; he laughs. It's too easy to imagine John Winchester's face as the horrors keep progressing. "But he likes this one, right?"

"Yeah, Noelle," Dean says. "She was there over Thanksgiving. At least she tried to help in the kitchen."

"And Sammy's happy?"

"As happy as he lets himself be," Dean says soberly, turning his back to start slicing another tomato. "He talks himself out of a lot."

"Good thing we know better, huh?"

Dean's eyes crinkle. "Better believe it."

***

Dean grumbles about having to dress up to impress people he doesn't even know, but once they're at the hospital, Dean's collecting groupies left and right as usual; beyond his looks, he's got charisma, a touch of vulnerability and a dash of cockiness, and it's a combination that is all too effective.

Ben's chatting with Dr. Rudan, the hospital's director, when she turns, distracted once again by the laughter that emanates from the little cluster of people Dean's in. "Who is that young man?" she asks.

"He's my - he's with me," Ben says. They watch him for a moment, animated as a cartoon, as he tells an evidently hilarious story.

"Your young man seems like a born entertainer," she says wryly. "I wonder if he'd be willing to take part in our New Year's festivities?"

"Oh, I couldn't volunteer him for anything -" He trails off, because he'd actually like to live to see the new year, and signing Dean up for some fancy dress event seems like a sure-fire way to guarantee that he won't.

"But it's for our pediatrics ward," Dr. Rudan says, laying a gentle hand on his arm.

All Ben can see is how good Dean was with Charlie and Luke, how every time Angie calls, the last few minutes of the call are devoted to her handing the phone over to the twins, and letting them breathe heavily at Dean, occasionally saying, "Hi, hi, hi" or "Deeeeeeaaaan."

He remembers how Dean's face lights up every time he gets those calls, how he spins stories into the silence, until the boys are giggling and incoherently repeating their favorite parts to each other.
"Dean will like that. We'd both love to help out," Ben says, and Dr. Rudan flits off, satisfied. It isn’t until his champagne flute is empty that Ben realizes just what he’s done.

*

"Yeah, he just walked in," Dean's saying into the phone when Ben comes in with a chocolate cream pie from the little place a few blocks down. Ben looks up, trying to guess who Dean could be talking to. Dean's next words make it clear. "He wants to do all these kinky role-playing things now. Did I tell you he wants me to wear a dress?"

Ben gasps and leaps across the room, snatching the phone from Dean's hand. "J?" he asks while Dean snickers evilly in the background. "It's not like that." She's not saying anything, and it takes a minute for him to realize that's because she's laughing so hard she's reached pitches only dogs can hear. "You suck. Dean sucks. It's for charity, for the kids in the pediatrics ward."

"He thinks I'm too vanilla!" Dean bellows shamelessly, setting Jaya off again.

Ben sets the handset against his chest and points threateningly at Dean. "One more word out of you and I'll hold you down and shave your legs myself."

Dean says nothing, but starts humming "I Feel Pretty." Loudly. Though how he even knows -

"You taught him that song, didn't you?" Ben breathes into the phone. "I'll get you. Backstage at your debut at the Philly Opera House. Oh, I'll get you."

"Promises, promises, monkeyface," J sing-songs, then hangs up.

He watches Dean twirling around the room. "If you're going to waltz, do it right," he says irritably, catching Dean in his arms and taking him for a spin.

*

Dean is a bona fide hit, easily the kids' favorite part of the whole New Year's pageant; they like the silliness of a big, muscular man dressed as a woman, but even more, they respond to him, clambering all over him to claim his attention.

Ben knows how they feel; he's only seen snatches of the pageant, since he's got rounds to complete, but Dean just shines every time he catches a glimpse of him, enthralled with this other way of helping people.

"Thank you, Dr. Mahar," he hears, and swivels around. Dr. Rudan is watching approvingly. "Dean seems to be enjoying himself; please thank him for me as well."

Dean looks up a couple of minutes later and drops Ben a slow, seductive wink.

*

You almost done? Stupid heels are killing me Dean texts just as Ben's finishing up his rounds. He doesn't bother to respond, figuring it's quicker just to swing by and pick him up.

He gets to the vestibule, weaving through the crowd and searching for Dean. He almost misses him, given Monterey's wearing heels tonight, and that means all six-plus feet of her is between him and Dean. "I know Ben's gay," he hears her saying to Dean, "but you're not, right?" She's tracing Dean's forearm with a long black-and-pink fingernail. "What are you, Dean?" she asks, shifting even closer.
"I'm Ben's," Dean says simply, then pulls out his phone again. "Now where is that idiot?"

"Idiot here," Ben says, feeling almost giddy.

Dean looks at him appraisingly. "I thought you were working - I'm not going to have to carry you home, am I?"

"Nope," he says, leaning forward to claim a quick kiss. "Just can't wait to get you there."

*

"I have never wanted to get under a skirt more in my life," Ben breathes, looking at Dean, at what should be an absolutely ridiculous contrast between his thick, worked-hard muscle and his frilly Alice-in-Wonderland dress.

"You never...?" Dean asks, looking dazed. "Not even once?"

"Not until now," Ben affirms. "Can I?"

"You know you don't have to ask," Dean says, eyes still wide and locked on Ben's.

Their kiss starts hot and gets incendiary. Ben's fingers are tangling in Dean's hair, from the crown of his head to the soft locks at his nape, and Dean bears him down onto the bed. Ben drops one hand, slides it up Dean's bent leg, all the way up to his waist, until he can peel away Dean's boxer-briefs.

Dean is sucking tiny kisses into the skin along Ben's collarbone while he works Ben open with clever fingers that are warm and strong. Ben sighs and gives himself up to the sensations Dean draws out of him, moaning at every change of pace or position. Dean looks down at him, amulet swinging free of the dress's collar, one lock of hair falling across his brow, and kisses him, mouth and throat and the tip of his nose.

***

"I bet someone thinks he's awfully sneaky -" Dean's saying as he unlocks the door, but from the way his eyes bug out when he registers John and Sam in their living room, Ben figures he kept this surprise pretty well.

"Happy birthday, son," John says, getting up to clap Dean on the back and pull him into a hug.

"Dad! Sammy! What're you - I mean, how long can you stay?"

"Couple days," Sam says, smiling brightly at his brother. "Missing a couple of classes isn't going to cause irreparable damage."

"Good to see you too, Lionel Hutz," Dean snorts, as though his face is not broadcasting joy in every direction.

"I got you something," Sam says, shoving a large, wrapped package into Dean's midsection; Dean responds by tousling his hair hard enough that, technically, it counts as a noogie.

Dean pulls the wrapping off in a matter of moments, and he's left with a stack of vinyl records. "I figured, since I didn't have to live with you anymore, you should be free to blast whatever crap you want." He looks over at Ben with mock-pity. "Sorry, man."

Ben waves it off, already happily anticipating the wars - and the make-up sessions - that will be waged over the turntable.
"My gift might be more for Ben," John says, tugging at his beard to hide a smile behind his hand.

"Dad!" Dean opens his eyes wide, feigning scandalized shock. "Is it lingerie?"

John goes beet-red, whether from embarrassment or laughter, it's hard to say. "Just open it, wiseguy."

This package is the size of a sheet of copier paper, and slim. Dean tears away the newspaper wrapping while John says, "I stopped at the storage facility in Pittsburgh to pick it up." The newspapers flutter to the ground, revealing a framed photograph of a baby. "That's you on your first birthday," John says, gesturing at the picture. Baby Dean already has that roguish glint in his eye and two fingers in his mouth, and he's dressed in a white onesie with red piping and snaps. "Your mother dressed you in her favorite outfit; across your butt it said Disco Diapers." Dean gasps in horror, and John raises his hands and says, "I had nothing to do with it; I wasn't consulted."

John's voice gets a little softer. "She was so happy with this photo. You'd been sitting up on your own for about three months, and she decided we should get about a million pictures of your first birthday. All she had to do was sing a little and you'd start laughing. And your very favorite trick was to stick both your index fingers in your mouth and smile around them, all gums." He frowns, remembering. "You didn't get teeth until pretty late; Mary was worried about that." He looks up again, and grins. "But you always had those bowed legs." In the picture, Dean's little legs are mostly rolls of fat, but there is a definite bow to them. Ben laughs, and John joins in.

"Nice," Dean says, "real nice." But he can't help smiling a little. "Sam, kick him while he's sleeping. For me."

"We're sharing a bed?" John asks, sobering up pretty quickly.

"You're sharing a pullout couch," Dean says. "Just like the good old days." He's wearing an evil grin, and John just pats his face gently, conceding defeat.

***

"Love you."

"Love you too, monkeyface." Dean kisses him, and laughs into Ben's mouth.

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