### Summary

Dean Winchester has just lost his dad, he hasn't seen his brother in years, he's spent his whole life following John & his mission for revenge. Now Dean decides to take one last look around Lawrence before his bus comes to take him away to the Army camp. He decides to stop in at the old diner in town where there's a waiter with a smile for him.

Switches between Dean & Cas POV and then switches to 3rd person when it becomes needed.

Mentions of sex and masterbation but no smut. Rated for these mentions, homophobic language and swearing. Character death but not major character.

I have also posted this work on fanfiction dot net so don't worry if you see it there under the username TC591, it's mine! It was inspired by the song "Travelling Soldier" which was made famous by the Dixie Chicks but my man Ty England sang it first.
Chapter 1

I was only twenty-two, everyone told me I was nuts, of course I was, twenty year old kids haven't lived yet, why would they run away and join the Army? They didn't understand, of course they didn't. I was all alone in the world and I needed a reason to keep on going, I needed a leader, in all truth. I had followed my dad like a good little soldier from the age of four, when my mom died and he went off the rails. I did everything he wanted me to every day of my life, I didn't have relationships because we never stayed in one place long enough and I hardly went to school. Everything I learned, I learned from him. So when he died I did what I thought he would want; I enlisted in the Army. He was a marine but it didn't feel like the right move for me so I did the next best thing.

I decided that if I was going then I would take one last look around, the old sentimental crap that you get when you know you're leaving some place. Lawrence wasn't so bad but I had never seen much of it. I never even realized that I had an attachment to it until that morning when I was putting on my uniform, I was folding up my usual clothes since I wasn't going to need them for a while. Old boots, denim pants, old t-shirt and a khaki green shirt. I laughed at how what I usually wore wasn't that much different really, having been raised by a marine I guess I never thought about it but folding up those pieces and laying them on my bed for when I came back I realized that they couldn't be more different and more alike. I put them on a bed in my old room - I had gone home for a few weeks before shipping out. I didn't really have a home, I guess, except my car so I needed somewhere solid to come back to. There was one thing I completely forgot, my necklace. Well, maybe I forgot it on purpose, who knows, but I walked out that door, cap stuffed in my pocket and bag over my shoulder with that necklace tucked under my shirt. Knowing I was going to have to take it off made me need it more than usual, I was so aware of it as I locked up.

I had a slow walk around town, looking at all the places I had spent the little time I had around here before we had hit the road. I was only four so it was silly things like daycare and the park but the one place I wanted to be the last was the old diner.

It was just a crappy little diner that didn't mean anything to anybody. Except me. Ellen was still working behind the counter and had done since I was a kid, I saw her the other day when I came back, she owns it now. I had introduced myself when she'd asked about where I was staying, said the house used to belong to a friend of hers, a John Winchester. I told her I was his son, one of his sons, Dean I said when she asked if I was Sam. Her face lit up all kinds of gentle and relieved. We talked, she introduced me to her daughter, Jo, she looked like a sweet kid. Then, of course, she shot me right down to size for calling her a kid and I laughed. I think Ellen understood, I was home but not for long. She made me promise to come back before I went, give her one last chance at changing my mind. So I promised and, after packing that morning and ducking in to see Bobby, there I was.

Bobby had taken the car, he was an old friend of my dad's that I still saw every few months when Dad needed a part for, what was now my baby, he lived on the outskirts of Lawrence at his garage so I never had reason to go back into town but I dropped the car off at his and told him to keep her for me. He told me he would keep her running and put a sheet over her, his way of telling me that nobody else was ever going to drive her. I told him thanks, had a few beers and headed on out, to the diner.

When I walked into the diner heads turned and Ellen appeared out of the kitchen. I got the odd respected nod for the greens and sad smile for the orphan thing. Everyone around here seemed to know my dad or my mom in some way, even some of the roadies who passed through every few
"I have been waiting for you all day!" She smiled, a tear in her eye. "Every time that door opened I come running out." I leaned on the counter, bag still over my shoulder and she smiled before she hit me across the head. "Tryna to kill me, boy?"

I closed my eyes to it and then smiled. I deserved that one I guess. She started talking to me about how I shouldn't be going and how I should just sit down a while, I'd see eventually. I nodded and listened then I inhaled, ready to argue but I didn't have to.

"You're going no matter what I say, huh?" She smiled and I shrugged. My mind was made up, no matter the amount of people who argued, I was going. I knew in my heart it was what I wanted, what I needed. "Well, go on and sit down, I will get you some pie at least. And if I even see you reaching for that wallet I will do that again."

I smiled and turned towards a booth near the end. I sat so I could look out at the people and cars going by to the bus stop across the road, where I would get picked up. Where it would begin.

"Pecan pie and coffee, black." I looked up to the waiter and smiled before mumbling a thanks. I swear I was caught off guard, I expected Jo or Ellen but the rough voice got my attention quicker than any recruitment officer. I just stared, to this day I guess I'm embarrassed by that but halfway through my thanks I stopped and stared. The dark hair and pink lips, cupid's bow I think I've heard it described as and you'd think he was wearing some kind of chapstick it was unreal. "What?" He smiled, widening the bow as if he'd just shot his arrow, looking to the side.

"Nothin'." I felt the blush spread over my cheeks and I looked to the pie. "Just uh, expected one of the girls."

"I'm sorry to disappoint." He shifted on his feet.

"Not at all." I said it before I had a chance to check myself. He paused and I tried to find something to say. "I guess I was ready for some more hard sell from Ellen or for Jo to bat her eyelashes at me."

He looked to Ellen, I looked too, she nodded and he turned back. "May I sit?"

I looked up. "Course." I gestured to the seat across from me. He took a step and slid into the booth. "Aren't you working?"

"Yes, but we aren't too busy." He smiled and settled back.

"I get it." I picked up a fork and started to attack the pie. "You're the underdog. Ellen sent you over here?"

"Of course." He smiled and I exhaled a laugh. He shifted and I looked up as I chewed. "She asked me to talk to you about enlisting, but I'm not going to." I raised my eyebrows. "You're Dean, right?" I nodded. "Cas." He held out his hand and I shook it, it was only then that I realized my palms were a little sweaty, or that his were cold; I couldn't decide which. "I don't know you from Adam but I know what Ellen and Jo have told me," He smirked. "And a little that they haven't." I twitched my head to the side, not having a clue what he meant. "If you want to join the Army then you join the Army, no one here has the right to tell you otherwise."

I nodded. "Thanks." I used the napkin to wipe my fork and turned it towards him. "You like pie?"

He leaned forward and took the fork from me. "Yes."
He ate a bit and I drank some of my coffee. All of a sudden I felt like an idiot, I was leaving and yet here I was getting all hot and bothered by a stranger. "I uh, I'm going to a training camp for a few weeks and then it looks like I might get shipped out."

"You're going to the East?" He held out his hand and I passed him the cup, I felt his fingers touch mine, hard and deliberate and I knew he was doing it on purpose, had to be.

"Yeah, just waiting on my bus." I felt ridiculous, he swallowed the coffee, licked his lips and I watched every delightful second. The whole point of going to the Army was to escape the world that had screwed me over, but he wasn't trying to talk me out of it and he wasn't telling me what to do. He was just sitting, eating my pie and drinking my joe. And I let him. He smiled and then shuffled out of the booth. "I will get you more coffee."

"Get yourself some too." I muttered, reached for the nearly empty cup and downed it. He then lowered his head before walking away.

He walked back over with one refilled cup and put it down, I looked up and then got the message before I looked back to it. "I finish in an hour, what time does your bus depart?"

I looked up again. "It pulls in at five, leaves at six." It was already just nearly three.

He hit the pads of his fingers on the table before looking to the clock. "Would you have time for a walk?" I smiled and slowly nodded. "And more pie." He wasn't asking about that, he just walked away. It was Ellen that brought over my pie and I was a little disappointed, she sat and spoke to me for a while.

"I was telling your Dad," she looked to the side, "hi honey," then back to me, "I said to him," I looked up when Jo walked over and sat down beside her mom who had spoken to her there, "I told him driving around the country would bite him in the ass, but did he listen?" She looked to the counter when someone cleared their throat. "You off, Cas?"

I turned my head to see Cas putting his trench coat on and rounding the counter. I was surprised, I would never have pegged him for a trench coat, ever. "Yes, I have plans." He smiled at her.

"Thanks, Ellen." I zipped up my bag and went to shuffle out the booth. "I'll call when I can."

"Where are you going?" She looked to me and Jo looked between me and Cas, her smile falling.

I threw the bag over my shoulder. "Well, later I'm boarding a bus to the Army camp, but first? First, I got plans." I smiled and Cas turned to walk away so I followed him. I turned when we got to the door and raised my hand in goodbye.

We stepped out into the cold air and looked around for a second. "I know somewhere beautiful." He sighed and turned before slowly walking away. I followed him as we walked along the sidewalk towards the pier, it was beautiful out there, from what I remembered anyway. "Tell me something, why is everyone so adamant on changing your mind?"

"I don't know. My dad was a marine and when my mom died he just flipped, he started this one man crusade to find her killer. He took on gangs and criminals trying to find answers that everyone told him never existed for him to find. Maybe they think I'm doing the same." I took a step before I spoke again. "Our house went up in flames one night, electrical fault, I still remember it actually."

"How old were you?" He tucked his hands in his coat pockets and we walked side by side along the pier.
"I was four, my brother was barely six months. Dad handed him to me and told me to get out, the three of us did but he couldn't save my mom and that's what I think drove him crazy." I could see it all that day. "I don't think the fire ever left his vision right to his death." I shook my head as I dropped my bag on the bench. We kept on walking to the end of the pier and leaned down to sit. Cas flicked his coat out before lowering himself all of the way. We dangled our legs off the end and looked at the water. The place was empty and silent. "It is beautiful here."

"Told you. Where's your brother now?"

"Stanford. He wanted to be a lawyer, and he will be. A damn good one too. But following orders and having targets to chase is all I know. It's all I want to know." I sighed. "Everyone thinks they know me, even Ellen and Jo. Especially Sam. They think they have me down, they don't know the half of it."

"Yes. I can see that." I looked to him as he let the sun lie on his face with his eyes closed.

"You can't see jack with your eyes shut." He laughed and I smiled. It was a calming sound. "How is it that even you think you know me and yet, I don't mind that."

"Because I don't know everything about you and I'm not trying to change any of it."

"This is crazy." I admitted and rubbed my face. He opened his eyes and I turned my head to him. "I believe you, I believe that you know stuff about me that I never told you and that's just crazy."

"No, what's crazy is that you want me to know more."

I tried to talk but I didn't have an answer so I asked a question instead. "What is it that you think you know about me?"

He looked over my whole face. "You think you're a follower when you're more of a leader. You like metal and rock, drive an automatic but you'd rather have a manual and you feel rejected by your brother. Unloved, even." I looked down. "And you've wanted to do this since you first saw me."

"Do what?" I looked back up. He leaned forward and brought his lips slowly to mine, almost touching but not. And I wasn't retreating. Then he whispered. "This." He kissed me and I kissed him back. Sitting on the end of the pier in Lawrence, my Army bag ready to go on the bench two men sat kissing gently for the best part of an hour and a half. Nothing more, just kissing while my left hand rested under his jawline and his right held onto my wrist.

When it got late we stood up and had a slow walk back, I think the both of us reached for each other's hand but it still made us both smile. "Cas, would you mind if I wrote to you?" I blushed. "Silly question, now I feel like a girl." I exhaled a laugh. "It's just I don't have anyone to send letters to and," I sighed, "I guess I need that."

He paused. "Good thing they repealed DADT." I laughed and nodded. "You got paper?" He stopped and I let my bag drop from my shoulder, found a scrap of paper with some old bill on the back and handed him it. He searched in his denim pants and smiled when he found a pen. "Good thing I'm a waiter."

"And a thief." I added and he smiled before twirling his index finger, I turned and he leaned on my back. I felt the pen tickle in between my shoulder blades as he wrote it down. Then it stopped and he clicked the pen before holding out the paper as I turned. I took it and read it to make sure I understood the writing while he put his pen back in his pocket. I pulled my cap out of my top
pocket and stuffed the paper inside before just holding the cap. "Cas..." I hesitated. "This is so silly, I just met you."

"Yes, but you can ask me anything. You know, I just met you too." He gestured to my pocket and his address.

I nodded, he had trusted me and I could use someone to trust. When his hand dropped and his fingers brushed mine I felt a flutter right to where it rested against my chest and I knew. It felt like it glowed and I swallowed. "My brother gave me this," I pulled it over my head, tightening my grip on the cap so I didn't drop it. "I'm not allowed to take it with me, I have to wear my dog tags. I had to wear it as long as I could." I looked at it in my hands.

I held it out and he slowly took it. "Would you like me to send it to your brother?"

I shook my head. "Would you look after it for me?" He looked up from it to my face. "Until I come back?"

He slowly nodded and we began to walk to the bus. We had five minutes left and the bus was packed so I pulled my cap on. "Do you want me to go?" He looked at all of the people, Ellen and Jo were there too. "You might not want all of them to know that you're..."

He seemed nervous and I didn't care. I stood into his personal space and slowly kissed him. He kissed me back and I felt his left hand come up to hold onto my neck, the charm from the necklace tickling my skin as it dangled from his hand. "Wait for me?" I mumbled against his lips. I knew it was a lot to ask but, Hell, we had already asked so much of each other already, what was one more?

He nodded, his eyes closed for a moment and then they opened again. "As long as it takes."

I pulled back and walked over to Ellen and Jo, who looked as shocked as anything but more focused on saying goodbye.

"You call me as if my number is on speed dial in that head of yours, alright?" Ellen handed me more bits of paper and I agreed, hugging her.

"I feel like I'm only just getting to know you and you're leaving." Jo smiled, I knew what she meant.

"This is something I have to do. I'll still be Dean when I get back." I promised and she understood. It wasn't her, it was who I was and it wouldn't have been fair to pretend otherwise. She hugged me and I mumbled that if she got in any trouble to tell them her brother Dean was in the Army and knew how to hide a body.

Ellen laughed.

"You're not in the Army yet." Jo said as tears ran down her face and we pulled back from each other.

"I've been training for a long time." I added and glanced to Ellen.

"Alright, all on the bus. Move it!" The sergeant came out of nowhere and all the chumps jumped into line. "Winchester!" He shouted.

"Sir, yes Sir!" I shouted back and smiled to the girls. "I'll call you."
"WINCHESTER!" He yelled and I straightened up. "Don't make me have to say it again. Eighteen hundred hours on the dot."

I turned and jogged onto the bus sitting on the other side. Cas was still standing there but he had the necklace around his neck. I sat at the window, stowing my bag beside my feet and looked out at him.

My dad's death gave me a reason to go to war, and as the bus pulled away and someone plodded down next to me I knew Cas was a reason to come home.
It happened fairly quickly, quicker than I expected. I was on the bus, we were being shouted instructions at and I was in a daze. Everything was damn crazy; I was heading to the Army camp and I think I had a boyfriend.

"Private Winchester!" I snapped my head up to look at him. "Were you listening to a goddamn word I just said?"

"Yeah." He widened his eyes as if to go mental and I realized. I straightened up and looked forward. "Sir, yes Sir!"

"That's better, Winchester! Since you were listening you can repeat what I just said, can't you?"

"Sir, yes Sir! All recruits to de-bus as soon as the driver hits the brake pedal and line up or so help us God you will file us back in here and send us back to whatever town in the shit end of nowhere we came from."

There was quiet over the bus and the Sergeant looked like he wanted to pat me on the back then knee me in the crotch. "Winchester, taking in what I said and listening are two very different things. Where was your head at?"

I stuttered, not because I didn't know the answer but because all it did was fill my head with it. The boy with the cupid's bow and pen in his back pocket. I smiled to myself.

"Thinking about your boyfriend?" The soldier next to me spat.

"WHAT IS YOUR NAME SOLDIER!?!?" The Sergeant stood right up to the boy next to me.

He straightened up and inhaled. "Gordon Walker, Sir."

"Private Walker, perhaps you can speak up next time!" He looked to me and then back to Gordon. "What did you say when I spoke to Private Winchester?"

"Nothing, Sir." He tightened his jaw.

The Sergeant leaned down and whispered. "Don't make me ask twice."

"I suggested that Private Winchester was too busy thinking about his boyfriend while you were speaking, Sir."

The Sergeant straightened up. "Did you?" He looked to me and I waited for it to start. "Well, Private Winchester is going to have to learn that when I speak I should be the only thing with a dick he is thinking about."

"Sir, yes Sir!" I shouted in reply to the look I got.

"As for you Private Walker, I suggest you concentrate on your own dick and keep it in line."

"Sir." Walker muttered.

"What was that, Private Walker?"

"Sir, yes Sir!" He yelled.
"Better." The Sergeant turned and walked back to the head of the bus.

Walker looked at me. "Fag." The Sergeant turned around and his head shot forward.

So, like I said, it started pretty quickly. But I wasn't worried, Walker was nothing but a coward - either he had been brought up in the ass-end of neck country or he had some deep buried homosexuality in there himself. Either way, I was in my own world again. Years of being on the road with my dad and in and out of the odd school when he was on a job I couldn't join him on had taught me many things: one was how to listen when you were completely uninterested. I heard everything the Sergeant said, I heard everything everyone said. Including the two guys at the back who were shit scared of everything, including me and Walker. And the bus crashing. And the driver. I would have laughed, if I was allowed. Which I wasn't.

When we got off the bus, well... When we ran like Hell off of the bus and lined up Walker filed next to me. I was beginning to think this guy wanted to be bunk mates, if you get my meaning.

"Winchester, march your ass up here!"

"Sir, yes Sir!" I shouted and took the steps forward before stomping my foot, turning and stomping again. Then I marched as fast as I could before I stopped beside him and stomped. Feet together, hands at my side, eyes in the distance.

He turned to me, lowering his voice. "What is your training?"

"None, Sir." I answered, not looking at him. He waited. "My father was a marine, Sir."

"And he let you enlist in the Army?"

"He's dead, Sir."

"Semper Fi, son." I nodded ever so slightly and he allowed it. Oorah! "I want you to be my second; we're down on men or we will be, you have the training and these idiots have nothing. What do you say?"

"Sir, yes Sir!"

He nodded. "Listen up you chumps!" He started walking along the line and I turned to face his back, at attention, as his second in command. "Private Winchester has military training of sorts so he will be my first mate." I internally smirked at the inside joke. "When I am not here then he is the proverbial boot up your asses, if he says do something then God help you if you don't. Do you hear me?!"

SIR YES SIR.

I wasn't to answer that one and I didn't. "Fall back!" He shouted and I fell back into line with the rest but in my new post. "And that is just a taste of why Winchester is my second in command, for any of you that," he stopped at Walker, right in his face, "may have wondered." He stepped back. "We are going to quick march to the bunks, you are going to find your bed and you are going to dump your things. You are then going to line back up outside where I stop you and I am going to time you. You have twenty seconds to get in, find the right bed, dump your shit and get back outside. If you do not then we are going to trot our asses back here and do it again. And we will do it again," he stopped back where we had spoken, "and again until it happens exactly like I want it. The longer it takes the less time you all have to eat. Do I make myself clear?"

I joined in that time. SIR YES SIR.
"Welcome to Hell, boys." He turned and walked a few steps in front so I followed a couple of steps behind, to his right and stopped, a step away from him. But some others took this as a sign to move and he turned. I turned with him and he ran to them. "GET YOUR SORRY ASSES BACK IN LINE, YOU MOVE WHEN I TELL YOU TO! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?!"

I was quiet. **SIR YES SIR.**

"Private Winchester was following training as a second in command, I move, he moves and you all wait for my order!"

I was quiet again. **SIR YES SIR.**

"Winchester, lead these idiots!" Which shit me up because I had no idea where the barracks were.

I moved, turned to the right. Stopped. "Company... Quick march!" I shouted and started off, hoping I wasn't about to screw up and embarrass us both.

"MOVE IT! MOVE IT! MOVE IT!" The Sergeant shouted to the stragglers and then, to my thanks, caught up and led.

We had to redo it three times.

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*Hey Cas, first week here was Hell so sorry I haven't written until now. I've been made the impromptu second in command since I seem to be the only guy here that knows what the Sergeant is talking about when he shouts. I was the only one that knew how to respond when asked a question and everyone copied me - idiots. Already getting grief from the DADT mob but they clearly have issues themselves. It's fun 'cause these idiots have to listen to me when the Sarge isn't here. Biggest problem is Walker, he's in the bed next to me, stupid names - he's the biggest phobe going. The camp's alright and the training is nothing I can't handle, a little burn is good for the soul. Only a few weeks left before we find out if we're being shipped out or not, so I'll let you know. How's things in Lawrence? I hope you're not getting too much grief from Ellen, tell her that I tried to phone last week but I ended up breaking up a fight and the Sarge wasn't there so I took the boys out for a run, in the pouring rain, that was fun too. So they're now in the med bay with man flu, pussys. Is it too weird to say that I miss you? It feels weird, but not too weird, at the same time. Oh well, I'll just swallow my pride and say it anyway. I do. I know that the Army is the best thing for me right now but when I'm over this bit of my life then you've got trouble coming for you. I hope that's what you want. I'm going to shut up now, while I still have some dignity left. - Dean.*

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I suppose it was okay after that, working in the diner, it was a little crazy. Everything was. He got on the bus and I was supposed to go home but I didn't. Ellen dragged me into the diner to talk.

"What the hell happened, Cas?" She sat me down at the bunker and poured me coffee. "I sent you over to talk him out of the Army not talk your way into his pants."

I laughed. "I'm sorry, I went over, I spoke to him about it and we just decided to go for a walk. You seriously didn't know he was gay?"

Jo slammed a drawer closed and we looked to her. "No, we didn't." I smiled apologetically and she lost all rage. "What was it like?" She leaned next to her mom looking at me. "Kissing him."

I smiled. "Nice." I admitted and picked up my coffee.
"So what's the deal now?" Ellen whipped a dish cloth from over her shoulder and wiped the worktop.

"He's going to write." I nodded, swirling the coffee around my mouth, they just looked at me waiting for more. "And he asked me to wait."

"He did what?!" Jo let her arms fall properly to the bar and we looked around the diner as people looked up. She put her hand up. "Sorry folks." She looked back to me. "He asked you to wait?"

"Yeah, and I said I would."

I smiled and they smiled back.

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Hello Dean,

Don't worry about it. I thought that might be the case. How is it that you know more than the rest? Is it because of your dad, because he was a marine? You are getting trouble because they saw us kiss? I am so sorry Dean, I knew I should have walked away. You shouldn't have to suffer because of who you are, who you like. Please watch out for him, Dean, he sounds like trouble. And you don't want to get yourself into trouble because of him, because people like that usually end up looking like the victim. I will tell Ellen about the call. You ran them in the rain enough that they got the cold? Hard ass. I hope you don't treat all of the men in your life like that. That's very weird, Dean, please don't ever say that again, you are awfully clingy for a hard ass. Of course you can say that, I suppose I could say I miss you too but I'm not as needy as you. I guess I do miss sharing pie with someone, how do you eat it all? I tried a piece yesterday and I couldn't finish it. Geez Dean, we just met and already you're planning my life. I don't think we should talk again. Yes, I want that. There isn't a day goes by when I don't think about it. About you. But it's only been a couple of weeks so I'll probably forget you soon.

From Castiel.

PS. You know I'm kidding, right?
Chapter 3

"Oh shit!" We all looked up when the door to the dorm opened to a guy, looking like Lynyrd Skynyrd roadie, in greens, ran in. "Sorry, bitches."

He turned to walk away when I stood. "Looking for something?"

"Nope." He kept walking.

"Hey!" I shouted, he stopped and turned as I approached him. "Outside." I demanded and he nodded before he walked outside. When we got there I changed. "Sorry about that, I got to maintain this tough routine, I'm supposed to be the boss when the Sarge isn't there and-"

"Are you Private Winchester?" He leaned in. It was then that I realized he had a mullet, we had all been pretty much shaved down to Army regulation when we got there. Not a problem for me.

"Yes." I stood back wondering.

"Aw you're the DADT one," he sniffed and looked around him as I sighed, "I get it." I must have looked angry because he put his hands up. "Hey, I don't give a rat's ass who you go home to and neither do the powers that be but some of your in-crowd," he gestured inside, "they're second or third gen rats, some even further," I thought about that, "their heads have been filled with rubbish from the walking history books with medals that still think a woman can't kick their asses up and down this pit. And they can, you know?"

I exhaled a laugh. "Believe me I know. Unfortunately I got to be hard all day or they strike you know?"

He tilted his head and moved back a little. "Shit, I know. I'm cool with it. Any time you need it man, you ride my ass for the good of the pack." I raised my eyebrows trying not to laugh, he had no idea what he had just said and it was amazing to see. He was just chatting and I could have hugged him. Roadie or not. "Anyways, I was looking for a couple of grunts." He pointed over his shoulder. "Got some equipment to shift and I'm more of flexing it up here," he pointed to his temple, "than on the keyboard crashers, you know?" He cracked his fingers. "So if you got anyone you want to make a fool of for about three hours, I'm your man."

"Three hours?" I widened my eyes.

"Well yeah, about an hour to unload it from the van and then two for me to give them stupid shit to do." He shrugged.

"Why would you do that?" I smiled.

"I got a cousin," he sniffed, "killed by some narrow minded necks with gun permits a few years ago just cause he was gay." He shrugged.

I nodded. "What's your name?"

"PFC Miles, but the kids call me Ash. Even the Sarge, he sent me to you. I'm sorta VIP around here, dunno why." As he said that he rubbed his mullet and I got it.

I smiled and gestured inside. "Thanks man." He mumbled something and we walked in.
"Bunk up!" I shouted and all of the recruits ran to their bunks. I loved doing that. Ash lingered at the door, shifting from side to side, not at attention and it clearly freaked a couple of the boys out but I ignored it. "PFC Miles here needs a few of you meatheads to help him, any volunteers?" I saw a couple of hands twitch and I noted them for later, good guys. But I turned. "Walker, Armstrong!" The two boys took a quick stomp forward. "Help him out." They turned, I put up my hands as they got to me and they stopped, looking forward. "Remember he's your superior." I turned between them both. "He's my superior."

"Sir." They both muttered.

"Sorry?" I dropped my hands.

"Yes, Sir!" They echoed and I nodded.

"Go." They followed Ash outside and I turned back to the recruits. "As you were." I winked at Atkins as he told me to drop it and play my hand. I settled on the end of his bed and picked my cards back up as he passed me and picked up his. "Gin." I muttered and he sighed throwing his cards at me.

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Castiel? Really? No I didn't know you were joking, I cried for three days. Yeah, my old man was a bit of a dick. I suppose everything he taught us was from the Navy and I always thought he was being a jerk but maybe it was just habit, maybe he just didn't know any other way. You know like how there is more than one way to tie your shoe laces but once you're taught one way you find it hard to learn another way? Maybe that wasn't put very well but I know what I mean. I learned to make my bed a certain way, I thought everyone made their bed that way until I was in a camp when I was nine for a week, which turned into three weeks, and no one made their beds that way, and no one got up at 5AM either, I didn't know that. Not unless they were woken up by one of their classmates wondering why they weren't up yet. I got beaten up that night, I was too embarrassed to fight back, it occurred to me that perhaps not everyone knew how to fight. Funny how pulling at one thread can unravel everything, huh?

Don't worry about it babe, I have a lot of support here, including this guy - he's a PFC but he's like a rockstar here. He has a mullet and doesn't have to wear his cap, everyone's hair has been Army reg since we got here and caps on but not this guy, he does IT or something. Everyone here is called by their last names or ranks but he's just called Ash, by everyone, even the major. Anyway, he knew someone and, long story short, any time I get trouble or need to show them who's boss, when the Sarge ain't there, I send them to him and he works them if I can't be assed. Most of the time I can, nothing like telling the assholes to drop and give me 20, then 20 more and 20 more. It's fun. Not that I haven't had my fair share of drops, I've been ran further than any of them, I guess the Sarge is making sure they know and I know I'm not special. I got the message after the third hour of holding up this big-ass plank of wood for no reason other than I smirked. Not my fault to be honest, someone was getting scolded for not wearing their dog tags and it made me think of you. You still have my necklace, right? Don't worry though, I'm watching them when I'm not watching myself. I can treat the men in my life like that, if they want me to. But I can be soft too, just don't tell anyone. How can you leave pie? It's delicious! I can't get enough. Don't get fat though, I don't think I could handle that. Well, as long as you forget me soon, and don't get attached. That's not what I'm looking for. I might not be able to write for a week, we're going on a hike. And by 'hike', I mean some survivor shit. We're getting dropped in the middle of nowhere and I don't think there'll be a post office. I'll let you know what cannibalism is like. - PVT Winchester. (I have a fancy name too).
"I am going to smack that boy when I see him!" Ellen paced the floor.

"He said he couldn't help it, he has to do that survivor thing." I muttered as I sorted cash into the till.

"What survivor thing?" Jo slid in beside me.

I looked up. "His company got dropped in the middle of nowhere with just their kit and they have to get back, didn't he tell you?" I turned to Ellen.

"How would he have told me? The last time he tried to phone you said he ended up breaking up a fight." She sighed and slammed a drawer.

"But didn't he write you two, too?" I looked from Ellen to Jo.

"He's only writing to you, dumbass." Jo hit her pad on my forehead and I closed my eyes. "The only news we get is from what you tell us."

"Oh." I tried not to smile.

"Is he smiling?" Ellen looked at Jo who nodded. Ellen moved to the side of me and looked at my face. She sighed in frustration as I looked at her apologetically. "Don't smile." I tried but it still spread. "Don't." She pointed and I pursed my lips together.

Jo leaned up to my ear. "Dean."

I smiled automatically and Ellen sighed while Jo went back down to her own level laughing. "I'm sorry!" I tried to walk away.

Ellen tutted and shook her head. "You really like him, don't you?"

I just smiled and picked up my pad. I rummaged in my back pocket for a pen. I didn't answer and I didn't have to.

>>>>

Hello Dean,

Yes my full name is Castiel, my family is very religious. You can imagine how happy they were when I told them that I was gay, it's why I moved to Lawrence. Since you never asked, Private in name and nature, I see. I suppose so, I still fold my clothes the way my mother showed me but I don't think I have any childhood traumas to share with you. My siblings were many and varied. I suppose Lucifer was the hardest of asses - my parents kicked him out when he was fifteen. I have no idea where he is, last I heard he took up with a girl called Lilith and probably made little Novak babies. Heterosexuality; yuck. I'm kidding obviously, how long have you known you were gay, Dean? And before you ask, it's obvious you've had your share of women. And probably a few other guys' shares too.

You will have to show me some of these fighting moves so I can fend off the hoard of suitors I have waiting. I think you would suit a mullet, what is the saying - all business in the front, party in the back. Suits you very well. Well, as long as you know you're not special - wouldn't want to give you false hope. Here I am just minding my business in a diner in Kansas and still managing to get you into trouble, I guess that makes me special. Let's talk about you calling me 'babe' shall we? You're
smothering me. Do you have a lot of these men in your life or...? I won't tell anyone, I think they already know. I won't get fat, I think there's only room for one of those in this relationship. Literally. Seriously Dean, have you seen yourself? You're disgusting. I definitely won't get attached to you, kid. Too young for me anyway. Did you get out of the jungle alive? I hope not. How was the meat?

- Castiel James Novak. (Since you started it.)
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Dean has to survive out there, in more ways than one and Cas meets Bobby.

It was pouring down, I mean absolutely bucketing it down in this hell-hole we had been dropped in. We had to find our way to the outpost and we had two days to do it in. After the first night the tension was palpable, it pissed me right off, and we hadn't gotten as far as we should have. I was up early and banging on the posts to get everyone else up. Everyone that moved anyway, except the three I was worried about. Not really 'worried' but I knew they were going to cause problems.

"Privates Walker, Armstrong and Masters. Up and at 'em! Come on." I stood looking at the company standing at the ends of their bunks. Except those three.

"Piss off." Walker muttered.

I paused. "What did you say?" I said it deep and low.

"I said piss off, fag. I'm not listening to you." He shifted. "I thought you might enjoy looking at my ass anyway," Masters laughed and Armstrong smiled. The both of them lying with their hands behind their heads. I thought about what Cas said; I had followed all my life but deep down I wanted to be a leader. And right now I was one. In the middle of the damn soaking wet forest.

I saw red.

I walked over to his bunk, well it was more of a hammock and I was fine with that. "Now you listen to me you little shit, when the Sergeant is not here I am your superior and I am nothing but God damn nice to your closeted ass! Which by the way I have no interest in," I tipped the hammock and I could sense the other two's smiles fall as Walker fell into the wet mud, "it's as flat as a pancake! I prefer more meat. GET TO YOUR FEET RIGHT NOW!" I screamed down at him.

He sighed and reluctantly stood up, caked in the dark cement that had covered the ground in the night. I didn't look away from him and I didn't move my face from his, he stared right back at me.

"ALL OF YOU!" The other two bundled out of their bunks to their feet. I stood back a little. "THE TWO OF YOU GET OVER HERE RIGHT GOD DAMN NOW!"

They ran and stood in line beside Walker and he looked to them.

"Eyes front!" The two weasels snapped their heads and I walked to Walker, right in his face. "You listen to me and you listen hard." I lowered my voice. "I don't like you any more than you like me sunshine and believe me when I say you're not my type." He snorted and I glared, he relaxed his face a little. "Now, I don't know if your daddy ran off with the milkman or if your Grandaddy has been filling your head with rubbish but here is some homo-education for you." I hated that word but I had to show him that it didn't matter what he said or did I was unphased. I started pacing down the line of the three of them. "I'm sure I said eyes front." I shot back to Walker and his head snapped. "Just because I have a boyfriend," I went down their faces, close and angry, "which I do." I whipped my head away and paced up and down them again, I saw one officer move out the corner of my eyes however I said nothing because I was concentrating but then I saw another so I stopped with my back to them all. "AND JUST BECAUSE I AM NOT FOCUSED ON YOU
RIGHT NOW DOES NOT MEAN YOU CAN STAND AT EASE, PRIVATESES!" I turned to face them all and they all straightened up. "Better."

I cleared my throat and paced again. "Just because I have a boyfriend does not make me gay you close minded pricks!" I turned quick and paced back. "And just because you call that elbow skin you have flapping about between your legs a dick does not mean I have any interest in it!" I saw Masters smirk and I ignored it because she checked it pretty quickly. The thing about her was that she didn't care that I had a boyfriend, she just liked to cause trouble. I stopped in front of his face. "Do I make myself clear, Private Walker?"

"Yes." He snarled. I waited. "Yes, sir." He said.

"Good." I paced them again, looking at Armstrong too, see he didn't care if I was gay or not either, he just wanted to be in charge and didn't care who it was he was taking orders from - he just wanted to dish them out. "You might not like it but when we got on that bus chances would have it that I knew more about this than you. Now, I won't bore you with the details but if your comforter and whatever issues you're carrying around aren't enough to get you three to sleep at night I would gladly tell you a bedtime story another day. As it is, our Sergeant has put me in charge." I looked to Walker, "Not because I have a boyfriend," I looked to Armstrong, who was at least thirty-five, "not because I'm younger than a lot of you," I looked back to Walker, "not because I'm white," I glanced at Masters, "not because I'm male," I paced again, "not for any reason other than I know a little more about it than the rest of you on account of my father being an ex marine, it's not exactly something to envy." I narrowed my eyes. "Believe me, I am all kinds of messed up, I will gladly give you more ammunition to throw at me other than who I am screwing at the moment." Masters smirked again and I walked to her. "DID I SAY SOMETHING FUNNY, PRIVATE MASTERS?" She shook her head and pursed her lips. "Use your words!"

"No, sir."

"Keep it that way." I walked away again. "And the reason he did put my in charge is because my father used to do just this, drop me in the middle of stupid situations and expect me to survive while he was out hunting bad guys or chasing tail. Maybe not in the same way but you imagine being brought up like this from the age of four and then dropped off at the gates of a New York high school for a month and a half, it's pretty much how you all feel being dropped in here. This is more like home to me than any suburb," I could see a couple of them raise their eyebrows, getting it now. "Understanding now, are we? So I'm in charge because I can get us out of here and I can teach you to do the same. Contrary to belief the powers that be actually want us to survive whatever they throw at us. And the key to that is sticking together. It's also listening to me or whoever knows better than you do," I stopped at Walker, "regardless of where they're sticking their dick because if our Commander in Chief doesn't care any more, what gives you the right? Do you want to get everyone killed because on the front line, if you don't do as your told, from anyone, then you three put this whole company in danger." I pointed. "Get in line!"

They ran off and I turned. "I will not let any one soldier in this company, two, three, any amount of you, put any of us in danger. So understand this, and listen to every syllable because I will not say it twice. Listen and do as your told because this is practice, but on the front line I will put a bullet in your head and carry on." Everyone swallowed. "You are a member of this team and I will listen to every word you say, even if it's no, I will listen when it is for the good of this team. When you stop being an asset and start being a threat this stops being a team and becomes a dictatorship, do you understand me?"

YES SIR.
I stamped my feet. "I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

SIR YES SIR!

"Don't make me have to say it again! Move it!" I yelled.

>>><<

Hey Cas, I'm sorry that I haven't had the chance to send a letter before now. Castiel James Novak, it suits you. I'm just Dean Winchester, Private 2, if you don't mind. I've been promoted after our survival experience. Let's just say shit went down and I sorted it, I united my company and I've been rewarded. Well, that sucks Cas, I'm sorry about that. I never told my dad about boarding both buses, I just went for winter, he would never have accepted that side of me and I wanted him in my life. It seems like you made the choice I was too chicken to, I hope that doesn't upset you but I lost my mom and I was either looking after Sam or following Dad around when he let me. The only time I ever let that side show was when I was fourteen, we were living in a motel place and I met this kid, another long termer, we became pals and then a little more than that. Nothing too bad, we were young, you know how it is but my dad almost caught us once, assumed we were just hanging out and I didn't correct him. We left the next day so I guess it didn't matter, not to me, but Liam must have been hurt. I think about him every now and again.

Wow, everything just got very soft. See what you do to me? Aw that's pretty cool, the fact that you could be an uncle, not the kicking Lucifer out bit, but in all honesty, you call a kid 'Lucifer' he's destined to be a rotten apple in some ways, you know? Ever think about tracing him and the rugrats? So, in answer to your question, I'm not gay. I don't think I am. Maybe women are more of something I've gotten used to, I guess I'll never know, but no I play for both teams. I guess that's why this feels so weird, you're not just the second guy I've ever kissed you are my first relationship - pretty much ever. I had the odd chick I was seeing but I was ten or twelve or fifteen and I only ever stuck around for a couple of months at the most. Usually when I thought I could actually have something real, that's when Dad rolled up in the Impala and took me away. Life on the road, it's not all it's cracked up to be. Guess I traded one car for another. A big green bus.

Well, if you're facing a guy and he's hassling you, grab his shoulders, put your left leg around the back of his left, bend his knee and push him. He'll fall on his ass and then you either go to town beating him up or, if you're feeling generous, press your foot to his nuts and push enough so that it hurts too much to move. Then tell him I'm coming for him when I get back. Me and a mullet? Are you kidding? With that and my gut, I don't want all the guys in here jumping on me, Private Sexy - that's my nickname. PV2, I should say. You think you're special, huh? I guess so. But I'll deny it if you tell anyone. No, not a lot of men in my life at the moment, unless you count the 17 I sleep with every night, and the 2 women. I mean, we're all in different beds but still - practically an orgy, right? I guess it's just you in my life at the moment, babe. I'll try fit in some extra exercise, in between all of the hair-growing, eating and orgies. Too young, just how old are you, Gramps? I guess I should have asked that before I got on the bus, huh? How do you know how old I am? Oh wait, you asked Ellen, didn't you? See that's not fair. Little creepy too. Now who is smothering who? It was good, I ate them all. It's just me now. I'm coming for you next. - PV2 D. Winchester (in charge of the orgies).

Another bit of paper was thrown in with the envelope, it'd been ripped off something else, folded in half and had the words 'read this last' scribbled on the outside of it.

Hey sorry, this was a last minute thing. I've been called up to office to see the boss, the post goes before I'll get seen so I will try sending a quick thing in a couple of days to let you know what is said. I'll try to call Ellen too so she'll probably get the call before you get this. I'm a little worried
now, this is all you're fault, Cas. I was all set for the Army, all set to be a soldier with nothing to lose. And now, now I can't stop thinking about being down at the pier. With you. - Dean.

>>>>

I was working one day in the diner when the door opened and I never paid much attention.

"Hey beautiful!" One man's voice drifted in and Ellen smiled.

"Bobby Singer!" She rounded the counter and embraced him. Then she pulled back but they still held each other.

"How you doin'?" He smiled at her.

"Oh you know, I'm doin'." He tilted his head and then she punched his shoulder.

"Ow!" He let her go to hold it and she stepped back. "I've been busy?"

"Uh-huh!" She put her hands on her hips and I watched. She rounded the counter again and he sat opposite her. She took the coffee pot and began to pour him coffee. "And when were you going to tell me Dean was in town?" He shifted in his seat.

I turned my head a little as I picked up a plate from the serving hole. "Thanks Bart." He sniffed and walked away back into the kitchen.

"Bobby!" Jo shouted and come running from the far end of the diner. I turned to the man at the end and handed him his food before I slowly walked back.

"He was burying his dad, Ellen. Hey kid." He smiled to Jo as she hugged into him and then rested her arm on his shoulder. "What did you want me to do? Throw a party?"

"I was at the funeral and I didn't even know it was him. Was Sam there?" He nodded as he picked up his cup and Ellen sighed. "Bobby!"

He rushed to swallow. "What? Tall guy, long hair?" Jo and Ellen thought back. "They stood at opposite ends of the coffin." I was listening and I knew I was but I couldn't help it. "Dean thinks Sam abandoned th- Can I help you?" Bobby looked to me and I jumped. I stuttered and his eyes fell to my necklace. "Where'd you get that?" He pointed then looked to Ellen. "Oh." He relaxed his face and looked back to me putting his hand out. "Bobby Singer."

I looked to Ellen who nodded. "He don't bite. This is Cas, Bobby."

I shook his hand, it was firm and rough. "I'm sorry, I haven't heard about you yet." He looked to Ellen. "Guess I wasn't the only one keeping my mouth shut." She shrugged.

"Wait, do you-"

"Please kid, do I look like I was born yesterday, I taught that kid everything that his daddy was too busy or drunk to. I know a Jack of all trades when I see one." I narrowed my eyes. "I knew he wasn't strictly straight, kid." He looked to Ellen. "Do you serve food in here or is just physical abuse?"

She smiled and put her hand out as if to slap him but he didn't budge. She grabbed his face and shook it. "If only I got paid for that." She winked. "Usual?"

"Thanks."
She turned and banged on the hatch ledge. "Full Maxi for Bobby, Bart. You know the drill."

"Aye-aye!" Came from the back.

Bobby looked to Jo. "You heard from him?"

"He's been trying to call but he's been busy, we only know what he's been writing Cas."

She nodded to me and Bobby looked. "Anything you can tell me?"

I leaned on the counter. "He's been made the second in command on due to his experience with what his dad taught him, in fact he went on a survivor trip with his company and got promoted."

"He got promoted?" Ellen leaned to me. "Why didn't you say?"

I looked down and paused. "He said he was going to try and call, I thought he might want to tell you. Obviously he hasn't been able to."

Just then the phone rang. "Hold that thought." Ellen picked up the phone. "Ellen's Diner." There was a pause. "Dean?" We all snapped to look. "Remind me to slap you when I see you, boy." Another pause. "Keeping us all in the dark like this. No matter, how are you?"

A few minutes—a few anxiety-filled minutes went by. He spoke to Ellen, then Bobby, then Jo.

"Yeah..." Jo was listening to something. "And then what? Promise." I was looking at Ellen who had been sharing a look with Bobby ever since they got off the phone. And then Jo's face changed. "Right, yeah." She nodded and I narrowed my eyes, I turned back to pour a customer coffee. "Cas?" I turned my head and she shook the phone in her hand, a little in the air.

"Excuse me." I walked away and traded the coffee pot for the phone. I didn't think he would talk to me since we wrote all of the time. "Dean?" I turned my back to the diner.

"Hey Cas, how are you?" Just hearing his voice made me close my eyes and I'd only heard it once before.

"I'm better for talking to you. I haven't written back to you yet because I wasn't sure what was going on."

"That's good, I haven't had much of a chance to check mail anyway. Listen..." He paused, that wasn't good. "You know that training exercise I told you about?" I mumbled a reply. "Well they promoted me because I brought the team together like I said but," there was another pause, "I didn't mean for it to happen. I really didn't."

"What is it?" I looked to Ellen and Bobby, then Jo who was serving but looked to me. Whatever it was they knew. "What's wrong, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Cas. Well, actually I'm not fine." Silence for a few seconds. "I'm being shipped out." My heart fell into my throat. "They said I showed leadership and I was needed. I was just trying to get them to listen to me. I wasn't trying to be shipped out, I swear. You and your stupid smile, Cas. I don't want to go and it's all your fault."

I closed my eyes and looked down, letting my chin rest on my chest. "Listen to me, PV2 Winchester," I heard him laugh and I stilled my eyes, trying to keep it together, "you need to want to go, if you don't then you are going to get yourself killed. And I swear if that happens," I paused and exhaled, "if that happens then I'll get a marine boyfriend." He laughed more. "And I'll show
him my smile all night long. Alright?"


"One thing you need to know about me Dean, I'm always right."

"Wish I'd known that before I met you."

"Would you have ran in the other direction?" I whispered.

"No, I would have stayed and argued all night with you on that damn pier."

I laughed and lifted my head. "Well, I'm wearing a necklace that belongs to you and it's getting itchy so you'll need to take it back soon."

"You're smothering me." I smiled. "Seriously though, keep it for me. I can't lose that."

"I won't lose it. Just..." I inhaled. "Just come back."

"Cas, I got to go." I closed my eyes again and nodded. "If you don't write me the minute you get off this phone I'll go Liam Neeson on your ass."

"I need your-"

"If you were going to say new address then Ellen has it, if you were going to say something else I should tell you this is probably being recorded." I laughed again. "I really got to go Cas. Promise me you won't go to that pier... With anyone else."

"Dean, there's only you." I sighed. "Now get off the phone, I got customers to serve."

"Alright, babe." I smiled. "Bye."

"Bye." I heard the phone click and I slowly put the phone down. I turned and looked around me. I walked towards Ellen, Jo and Bobby standing at the end of the counter, Bobby on the customer side. "I need air." I mumbled and Ellen nodded.

I walked outside and leaned against the wall. This was crazy, I hardly knew him, I had spoken to him twice in my life and there I was crying as I leaned against the wall outside my work.

>>>><

Hello Dean,

I have to admit that I didn't write you the minute I hung up. I had to take a few minutes. I hope you won't hunt me down but in a way I kind of do. At least then you'd be here instead of there. I don't understand what you've done to me you damn dirty ape. You united them, even the phobes? I met Bobby today, if it makes you feel any better, it seems your dad was probably the only one that didn't know. It's funny that his name was Liam, maybe he will use his special set of skills to get you back one day. No but that's awful, no kind of life. Of course I understand why you never did, you had a way of living while almost ignoring that part of you, I did too for a long time then one day I was sick of it all and I told them, I sat them down around the dinner table and I told them it all. That night I was on the first bus out of there. I'm originally from Boston but I was up for a one way ticket trip out of there and far away. I got buses and trains and worked some shitty jobs, whenever I felt like it I hopped out of there and further West. Until I ran out of money one night and managed to get as far as Lawrence, I was sleeping in a bus stop. Funnily enough, it was the one you left
from. Jo was just leaving the diner and stopped to make sure I was okay. We talked for a while and by Monday I was working in the diner. And I've just never wanted to leave. I'm glad I didn't. I do think about tracing Lucifer every now and again, and I never thought names were connected to self - look up mine - and some kind of destiny, but I haven't gotten myself together yet, if I was going to contact him I think it would be more when I was settled into my life. I have many siblings but Luke and I always shared a bond that comes from being the oldest and youngest, I suppose.

Bobby mentioned something about a garage, is that how you know him, through your Dad's car? He said he taught you everything that your dad didn't, he wasn't surprised about me anyway. Just that I was wearing Sam's necklace. They spoke about Sam briefly, Bobby and Ellen, saying he went to your dad's funeral. Ellen slapped him for not mentioning you two were in town or she would have said something to you both, spoken to you before. Quick question though, Bobby and Ellen; thing there? Seems like there was or is a little spark. You already defending my honor, Dean? Little cute for you, isn't it? Might use that move on you. Just me, huh? Like I said on the phone, I guess that makes for the both of us. I'm only twenty-five, kid. Call me 'gramps' again and I will take my belt across your ass, boy. Not too old for me to do that, you know. I didn't so much ask Ellen as she seems to delight in telling me stories about you, and now I have Bobby too. I will use them as human shields when you come for me. Or not, I suppose it depends what you mean by that.

Sometimes when I can't sleep, I think about that day at the pier. Just remember that if you hurt yourself because you're not all there in the East, I will never forgive you. Or myself.

I miss you.

- Cas.
Chapter 5

There was nothing good there, nothing. From the minute we got there we were in Hell. We were in camps, huddled into rooms of hundreds and no one really sure who was who. It was all co-ed, to keep companies together, but I could see there were some of these guys that shouldn't even be allowed out in public, never mind in a position of authority over women.

I was walking back from the head the second day we were there and I heard one guy bothering Masters.

"Private Masters." I stood there as they both looked to me. "Is there a problem?"

She opened her mouth to talk but the guy spoke first. "No problem, mate," yes, he was definitely British, "not yours anyway, so why don't you."

I looked to him. "Is your name also Private Masters?"

He paused. "Private Macleod, first class." He gestured around. "British Army. What is it with you Yanks?" He spoke with a gravel that only comes from a lot of smoke inhalation over a long period of time. Either he was a heavy smoker or spent his life standing over a pit of fire.

"PFC Macleod, I suggest that when I talk to one of my company you keep your mouth closed. Now, if you were a member of my company I would not be asking you, and certainly not this nicely." He gestured his hands as if he was admitting defeat. "Masters."

"Yes, sir." I blinked back to her, waiting. "I was checking my equipment for the hike tomorrow when PFC MacLeod approached and spoke to me, Sir." I stood waiting for more. "PFC MacLeod said some inappropriate things and I told him I was not comfortable with this, when he-" He made to talk and I scowled at him, he shut up and I looked back to her. "When he continued I suggested, in less than polite terms that he leave before..." she hesitated.

"Masters." I warned. In my company, that was all I had to say.

"Before I was the one sticking things places." I smirked and then glared to him. "And he refused."

"Thank you, dismissed." She turned and so did he. "Not you MacLeod." I walked up to him.

"Listen Private, you seem to think you're in charge here. But I outrank you."

"Barely." I snarled. "And you outrank me, yes. But you are British Army and not my boss. I, however, am her boss. I am in charge of my company."

"How very noble, I was not aware chivalry crossed the oceans to the new world."

"There's only one ocean between Britain and America." He chuckled. "And I was referring to the fact that I would have to be the one who attended a disciplinary to explain why the officer in my charge stuck her knife up your ass. Oh sorry, is it 'arse'?" He smiled but he was worried. "See, Masters can look after herself, she doesn't need me to defend her, not physically, and she would cut your throat without a moments thought." I smiled. "And if you go near her again, or any officer in here," I pointed out across them all, "I will let her."
He paused. "You'll regret this."

"Will I?" I stepped back. "I don't think so." I was having none of it. "Masters!" She ran to my side. "With me." I gave him one last look and jogged off to my superior's office. I wasn't stupid, I knew Cas was right, even if he had been talking about Walker. People like that always ended up looking like the victim. I wasn't going to have it. We stopped at his door and I knocked.

"Come in!"

I opened the door. "Sir, can I speak to you for a moment?" He nodded and we entered. "It's about PFC MacLeod." He rolled his eyes and I paused.

"What's he done now? I swear that guy is a right royal British pain in my ass."

I internally smiled, I wasn't going to have trouble convincing him. And Masters visibly relaxed.

When we had finished we walked outside and trotted down the stairs. When we were halfway down I heard my superior shout out.

"Macleod!" He must have looked up. "Go and get your superior, tell him I need to see you both in my office." No one moved except us. "Now!" He ran away and got him.

I looked behind me to my officer, Masters, and we shared a look. As MacLeod and his officer walked out of his office, I heard MacLeod superior mumbling at him. We stopped, turned and saluted. "Sirs!" We both said clear and loud as they passed.

MacLeod's superior, a lovely English man who was far too trusting and soft, stopped and quickly saluted back, which he didn't have to do. "Officers." He muttered and kept walking still mumbling worriedly. I glared at MacLeod as he followed him a step behind and then I turned to Masters.

"Never be afraid to tell me stuff." She smiled, nodded and I went back to superior mode. "Now, move it!" She ran off and I followed her. "Still haven't checked your things for the hike, am I going to do it for you, Private?"

"No, Sir!"

>>>>

Cas, I'm sorry it has taken so long for me to write, you must be worried since you totally rely on me to live now. I know, I know, I'm a stud but you need to stop being so clingy, I can't keep this up. Although, you have forced me to plan to use my special set of skills to track you down, which I will. Believe me when I say that, I'll find you one day. I am proud that you have seen that film though, that's one thing I can tick on my list. Seen 'Planet of the Apes' - tick. Yeah, especially the phobes. I told them that they were putting the company in danger, maybe not there in training but if we ever ended up on the front line then they would and if that happened I would put a bullet in their heads. That seemed to work. It seems so horrible to think that I never really thought that I would be writing to you from the front line. We went a hike yesterday, and by 'hike' I mean we scouted the town for IUDs, a hike is what we call it, my company anyway. I guess we can't really believe where we are and what we're doing - it's so silly that we signed up for the Army and never thought that we would fight. I knew it was probably going to happen but I was in a different mind set then, these people they were looking for structure or fun or adventure. They never thought. I will have to change some things soon, I've let them ease in so far but everything kicks up and they can't still be calling it 'hikes' when we could really die. And we could, you know that right? I am coming home, one way or another.
I can't believe you've bused across the country, why Kansas though? What made you think, "I quite fancy Kansas tonight"? I suppose I have no right to say that, I only knew it until I was four and then when I came back. I do remember the diner though, I remember we spent every Sunday there as a family, right up to just before my mom's death. Every Sunday we had breakfast there and then went swimming and took a drive out to the creek. We did lots of things, we fuzzed about in the shallow bits, my mom and dad always knew everything about the plants and animals that lived in the water or the muck. Then we would go home, play a little football and have supper in front of a cheesy film and then I'd wake up the next day in bed. Mom didn't play so much after Sam was born because obviously Sam couldn't play, he needed someone to be with him or hold him and that was mostly Mom. As if she was scared to leave him, even with Dad. Anyway, remind me to thank Jo when I get back. I'm glad you chose Lawrence and I'm glad you decided to stay. I forgot to ask, what do you think of Bobby? He's been like a second father to me, he's right, he taught me just about all the stuff I know that worth knowing. My dad was a mechanic so I guess I learned most of that from him but there was no one besides himself and later me that he'd trust with his car more than Bobby. My dad's car became my car years before Dad died, Bobby has it at the garage, keeping her safe.

Yeah, I haven't spoken to Sam since he left for college, he left me to deal with Dad's one man crusade alone and I was mad. I couldn't bring myself to talk to him at the funeral, not because I was mad, not any more, but because I didn't think he would talk to me. Bobby and Ellen? No, nothing that I know of, but there has always been a little electricity there. Maybe, who knows. They both could use someone. You thinking of doing a little matchmaking? 'Cause Ellen will hurt your face. I suppose it is a little cutesy for me. What can I say, I guess I'm a little possessive. That's not too bad, I suppose I could live with that. Did you just offer, I mean threaten, to spank me? When I come for you? Someone's a little het up, it's the uniform, isn't it? Wait, I know, it's the whole 'me defending your honor' thing, isn't it? I knew it, works every time. Don't play with me Cas, I'm a soldier and you're playing a dangerous game, teasing me like that.

That last bit got very serious. I won't hurt myself, I wouldn't give you the ammo. Don't you be spending your days worrying about me. In fact, yes do that, what else would you do? You know this sort of makes you a Army wife, right? Kind of. Not really.

I miss you too. Don't worry if I don't write for a while, I'll be fine but we're all packing out tomorrow. I can't say more than that but I will write as soon as I can, I won't be able to call. Just so you know, it's that day at the pier that's keeping me going.

PV2 D. Winchester, 513-96-2337

>>>>

"Well, well. Castiel Novak." I turned to Gabriel walking in. "Long time no see." He walked and sat at the counter.

"What can I get you?" I looked at him, in no mood for chit-chat.

"Well," he leaned forward, "since you asked so nicely." He looked up at the board. "I will have the tomato soup and a small cup of coffee." I went to turn around and he put his hand out to stop me. He had grabbed my wrist and I looked at his hand around me before I looked back up. "Make it a large coffee, only way I know how."

"I'm sure." I muttered. "Get your hand off of me."

He let go and pulled his hands back. "Sorry."
I turned around and stabbed the order through the spike before turning it. When I turned he was looking at my ass and was trying to make sure I knew it. "Your order won't be long." I walked away.

When his order was ready Jo served him it, none the wiser, and I carried on busing tables and taking orders. I walked passed him to another table and he leaned back in his seat so I stopped. "Why don't you sit?" He patted the seat next to him. "We should catch up."

"I'm working Gabriel." I turned as I walked passed to face him. "It's what Army wife's do." I caught Jo smirking and I turned back to the other table. "Are you ready to order?"

He left less than half an hour after that and I leaned behind the counter, tired and missing Dean.

"What's up?" Jo slid in beside me, putting money in the till. "Missing Dean?"

I nodded. "Yeah. And he didn't help." I nodded my head to the door.

"Who was that?" She glanced to me.

"Gabriel, an ex." I waved my hand in the air. "High school it was over years ago. Of all the diners to wander into." I sighed.

"He's gone now." She shrugged.

"He'll be back, Jo." I grabbed my pad. "That's Gabriel's thing. He delights in playing games even if no one else wants to play their roles."

---

Hello Dean,

I'm sorry I just can't help myself. I will try to contain myself from now on. Please do find me, Dean. It's strange, I have spent the best part of my adult life always wishing to be somewhere else. It didn't even matter where that was as long as it wasn't where I had been before. Now? Now, it's not that I wish to be somewhere else, it's that I wish to be with you. Doesn't matter where that is and I feel so silly for admitting it. I don't even know what you look like naked, if I don't know that how can I make any kind of judgement about wanting to be near you, it's one of the things on my list, 'seen him naked' - not ticked. Well, I suppose if they ever needed an incentive to see things your way a gun to the head is a hell of one. You're crazy, you know that? You're actually crazy. And it's so hot. So we've established that I am crazier than you. You knew you would end up fighting Dean, I could see it in your eyes and it was mixed with hunger. Why do you think I didn't try to talk you out of it, other than it was none of my business and I didn't care, it was because you wanted it and you had the look of someone who's whole life had already been decided for them. But mostly the not caring thing.

Please don't say that. I don't think I could handle that. Not because you're special or anything, I had a goldfish for a week and when it died I cried for almost as long as I had it. No, I get attached to things too easy, especially if they're hot. Not you, the fish, we had a complicated thing.

I didn't say I decided Kansas, I said I ran out of money. I hopped the only bus I could afford. The one to Colorado was cancelled. I'm not even kidding, I was ready to go for the Colorado one but when I got to the desk the guy said it was cancelled, so I got a ticket to Lawrence, Kansas. Every Sunday? Sounds like a great time, we had this weekly football night, me and my siblings. We played all year, except when the Superbowl was on, do you see the irony? Bobby seems great, he was certainly very nice to me and he asked if there was anything I could tell him when he found out
we had been writing. He didn't demand to know everything, he asked if I would tell him something. So, that was nice. Compared to the third degree I get from Ellen and Jo every time I get mail. I don't even know how they know we've corresponded. I don't tell them, they just know. Do you think Bobby could find me a cheap car? I wouldn't want to ask but it'd be so much easier then the buses, as much as I like them the amount of times I have ended up ill because someone has sneezed on me is beyond ridiculous. Maybe you could try talking to him when you get back, I could be there to hold your hand, you big girl. He's your brother and the worst he can say is no, after that then at least you can say you reached out. Maybe he thinks the same as you do and you're both just being idiots. But you will never know unless you try. I feel like Oprah. I was thinking about it and now I'm going to keep well out, I've had one of those Ellen smacks, I do not require another.

A little possessive? I should hate that. I should. What can I say, someone holds a door open for me and I just drop to my knees. Who said anything about teasing?

Yes I suppose it did get very serious, didn't it? That's what the end of letters are for I guess. I saw my ex yesterday, he came into the diner. He's a pain in the ass, he left but I know him, he'll be back. It's not a problem but I thought you should know. Exactly, what else would I do but worry about you? Whoa, hold up there soldier, we just met, I'm not the Las Vegas chapel kind of girl. You've got me referring to myself as an Army wife and I won't have it. I'm an Army... what exactly am I? A pen pal? More? I guess I know the answer to that but some stupid, fifteen year old part of what's to hear you say it. Or write it. You know what I mean.

Okay Dean, write me when you can. I will try not to worry but I have to tell you now that I will fail because I have no will power. Not when it comes to you. What I do have is very special set of skills...

Castiel Novak; waiter, babe and stray.

Stay safe, 513.

Chapter End Notes

I went through a bunch of wiki pages and other internet pages to try and come up with a realistic social security number for someone born in January in 1979 in Kansas, sorry if it's off. I did the best I could because they are used a lot in the army, as far as I know.
Chapter 6

There was no respite for months on end. We got up, we shipped out, we shot, we defended and we fought for so long I think we all forgot what we were fighting for. Towards, away from, I didn't know. I was ready to pass out from the heat and the exhaustion and the pain. I wasn't hurt but I just wanted to talk to him again, I got his letter, it had been forwarded and I got it a couple of weeks after he sent it. I couldn't stop thinking about him and his family all playing football on Sundays while I was swimming and eating at the diner. I thought about his ex but if I didn't realize I could trust him by now then what the hell was I even doing?

We took this little town in Iraq, we were told it was the hub of a mass operation for weapons and terror. The air support came in first, not to destroy but to disable - they littered the place with smoke and mace, we had masks on and we went in almost blind. We stormed the place, the orders were to take out anything that looked like a threat, secure the place and then wait for it to clear before we'd get new orders.

So the air units did their thing and we got the order to breach. We took one end of the town, closing in a half circle from one end with two other companies, while the same was happening at the other side. I had Macleod's company and a troop of guys mostly from Missouri. The other side had a company of Scots and two others from Texas and California. We breached and we went in blind - we followed our orders blind. We shot everything that looked like a threat and secured the civilians. But the more ground we covered, the more buildings we cleared, the more bodies we confirmed were false alarms and the more we began to realize that one of two things had happened; either we'd had bad intel or we were being lied to.

We went back to the camp that night, all of us jaded and worn. I seen Masters crying, she would never let on about it and I never said anything. We all had our ways. I couldn't sleep. I kept seeing the kid on the floor of the house in that town. I saw him over and over again as I shot him, I saw him go down as a masked terrorist with a gun and a death wish and I walked one step towards his body to kick the gun away before I looked down at this kid, couldn't have been older than ten, with a tin of something in his hands, ready to defend his sister who was upstairs sick. I pointed my gun at his lifeless face and I felt sick. I was barely able to stop myself throwing up on the spot and as I lay in my bunk I couldn't see anything but his eyes and her sickness.

I sat up in my bunk.

"Hey," I heard whispered and I turned to see Walker looking at me, "why aren't you asleep? We're up at four hundred."

"I know." I walked over to him, whispering back. "But I can't sleep, today bothered me. What about you?" I gestured to his bunk and he nodded so I sat. He lit a cigarette and I shot him a look. He looked as bad as I felt so I tutted and let it happen.

"Same thing, those weren't terrorists Winchester, those weren't even soldiers. They were just..." He shrugged, looking off into the distance as if he could see what I saw.

"People." I finished and he looked to me, I nodded. "Just people trying to live their lives and we stormed in like barbarians and murdered them. Slaughtered them in their beds, in their kitchens." I shook my head. "This isn't what I thought it would be." I rubbed my forehead and he held out his cigarette. "No thanks, you'll end up sounding like MacLeod." We laughed quietly as he took another draw.
"Dean," I looked back to him, he never called me that, "I'm sorry about when I first got here." I shook my head. "No, it wasn't fair. I didn't know you and yet I just went on and judged you anyway."

"What you got against gay guys anyway?" I shifted, looking around to make sure no one was awake to catch him smoking.

"I thought you weren't gay?"

I shot him a look and he smiled. "You know what I mean." I rubbed my eye.

"Nothing, honestly." He shrugged. "I don't know man, I guess something about seeing you two together grated at me. I used to be with this girl, we were together for a long time, I loved her like nothing you could believe and it all went to Hell. I guess seeing you two reminded me of what it was like to be in love like that." I smirked, thinking back. "Jealousy, pure and simple." He admitted. "How long you two been together, seem awfully young for a long-term number?"

I smiled. "Would you believe me if I told you that when we kissed like that we had been together about..." I exhaled as I thought about it. "Oh, thirty seconds." His eyes widened and he choked on his cigarette. "Told you they're bad for you." I rubbed his back and looked around. "Now, put that out before I get in trouble."

He dropped in and squished it. "Yes, sir." He picked it back up again and I stood. "Thirty seconds?"

I nodded. "Friends first?"

I shrugged. "Met him three hours before that." I smiled again when he just froze. "Yeah, so not quite love. Just..." I looked around. "I'm shipping out, fancy a snog?" He laughed gently and gestured for me to go away. "G'night Winchester." He shook his head. "Crazy."

>>>>

I knew it had been a while since Dean wrote and I wasn't worried. Not at all. Never. So you can imagine my surprise when I was ripping up scrap paper and Ellen spoke to me over the counter.

"Not heard?" I shook my head. "He'll be fine, Cas."

I nodded. "I know he will, it's the not hearing that drives me mad." I grunted in frustration. "I don't even know him?" I gestured with my hands to see her smiling. "What?"

"I think you do know him, I think you know him very well, darling."

I couldn't help but smile. "Maybe." I looked back to the paper.

"You are going to start owing me money if you rip up any more of my pads." She hit my arm. "Or should I just bill Dean?" I laughed and pushed out my hips to hit my head off of the counter.

"Oh, someone getting to you?" I looked up to see Gabriel standing on the other side of the counter. "Need someone to massage out those knots?" He pointed to my shoulder as I straightened up.

"Gabriel, I warn you, I am in a bad mood and I can take you down." I squinted at him. "Order or get lost."

"What's going on?" Ellen faced Gabriel. "Can I help you?"

Gabriel laughed. "I see what you did there."

"Hon," he turned to at Ellen, "I am going to be nice, either order or leave. I will not have you hassle-

"Listen," Gabriel put his hand up to stop her talking and I just raised my eyebrow, he had signed his own death warrant, he looked to me, "I just want to talk to Castiel, we kind of had a thing. Wouldn't expect you to understand but we're just chatting, I'm not bothering him. So if I could have coffee and a bagel, that'd be great." He shoo'ed her and she took a step forward before Bobby grabbed her gently by the tops of the shoulders from behind as he stood up from his perch at the counter and she seemed to instantly calm a little.

"Listen son," Ellen turned her head a little when he spoke but she was still watching Gabriel who sighed, rolled his eyes and looked to him, "despite the fact that you oughta use your eyes and common sense," Gabriel shrugged not understanding, "this is Ellen's place and this is Ellen, so you disrespect her staff then you disrespect her. And besides the fact that Castiel clearly don't want to talk to you, let me tell you if you ever talk to my friends like that again I will throw you out of here myself. Why don't we just agree there's no coffee left and the bagels are stale?"

We both looked back to Bobby as Gabriel looked to me. "Castiel," he took a step forwards, looking at me, and Ellen leaned along the counter in front of him, he paused and then straightened up. "I'll be back." He muttered.

"I'd like to see that." Ellen nodded.

"Do yourself a favour, Gabriel." I shot over her shoulder as he walked away, he stopped and turned to look at me. "Stay away from me."

He let out a little laugh and then walked out.

"You alright?" Ellen asked me and I nodded.

"Thank you, both of you." I smiled. "Some people are asking to be put on their asses." I muttered.

"You sound like Dean." Bobby smiled and I smirked. He looked to Ellen, his hand still on her left shoulder. "You alright?"

"Yeah, thanks Bobby." She smiled and kissed his cheek before walking away.

I looked at him and he watched her go before he looked back to me. "What?" I raised an eyebrow and he took a seat. "Shut up, give me one of those stale bagels Cas." He smirked. "Silently." He added and I put my hands up before turning away.

>>>>

Dean,

I know you said you couldn't write in a while but I thought I should tell you that Gabriel came back. He tried to hassle me and the way I was feeling I could have done with taking him to the parking lot and trying out that move you told me about. As it happened, Ellen and Bobby told him to go. He said he’d be back but I’m not worried. My point was there is definitely something between those two - definitely. I guess I miss you more than usual, since you haven't been able to write. I hope you're okay, and I hope you're suffering as much as I am.

Where are you Dean? And why aren't you here?
You'll have to excuse this moment of neediness, I'm starting to worry about what you've done to me. The sneezes on the bus are becoming my only break from this need. I may trade you in for the flu altogether.

I don't even have anything else to tell you, I just wanted to write. If I write enough you can get one of those bundles of mail and you can score a rubber band out of this deal. But then you owe me that rubber band.

I miss you, a little more than I did before. Do I still have my dignity or did I send it all in the last letter?

- Castiel Novak, former waiter - now full on sap.
Chapter 7

We got a break about four months in when we all got shipped out to some training camp to learn how to defuse a new kind of roadside bomb and to train for the harsh weather expected soon.

All I could think about was Cas and the people we were terrifying. Cas was keeping me going. How silly is that? I was only learning about him through our letters and I missed him like I'd never missed anyone. Maybe I'd never had anyone to miss before, who knows why it was but it was the truth either way.

We got on the plane and headed back, I found myself excited, I was actually excited to get back. Not to sleep in a proper bunk or to get a better shower. When I got there I did one thing, I checked the mail. I had two letters from Cas and one from Bobby. It was more of a postcard actually. It was a postcard from Kansas and I had to laugh - a postcard had never looked so good.

I walked back to my bunk and I turned it over.

*Dean, get your ass back here in one piece kid. Or the car gets it.* Not funny, Bobby. *Cas is missing you like crazy, he smashed three plates. I'm told that's bad for him.* I could see him shrugging. *Ellen and Jo are going mad too. Driving me mad in the process. You keep safe, son. See you when you get back - Bobby.*

I smiled and opened up my letters, I read them quick as I could with every intention of writing back but by the time I read them it was too late.

"Winchester, Harrison, Frederick and Boyd!" I bundled the things under my pillow and we all stood up where we were.

**SIR YES SIR**

"Debriefing room."

**SIR YES SIR.**

We ran off to the mission room and were told where we'd be leading our companies on the orders that had just come through. I didn't believe it any more, so far we had had six missions that stunk to high Heaven, and we'd done seven. Even that one was questionable.

"Sir, can I ask a question?" I piped up.

"Winchester." My superior introduced me to his bosses.

They nodded. "This intel, how trusted is this?" I put my neck on the line and I could sense the other's mentally wondering what the hell I was doing.

"Why do you ask, Private?" They looked to my boss who looked embarrassed.

"Well Sir, the last few missions have not been what we were led to believe."

"Winchester!" My superior began and something in me snapped.

"Sir, with all due respect, we are out there shooting civilians!" I pointed to the door. "I don't know about you, Sir, but this is not what I signed up for!" I then put my hand to my chest. It really wasn't.
And before I knew it I was being marched out of the office, literally marched, while I was being screamed at.

"HOW DARE YOU QUESTION YOUR ORDERS, WINCHESTER! GET DOWN THOSE STAIRS!" I went down them and he followed while everyone turned to look. "If I tell you to do something then you stand there and you nod and YOU DO IT! Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Sir." I muttered knowing what was coming.

He leaned right in my face. "I can't hear you Private!"

"SIR, YES SIR!" I shouted.

"Now you get outside and we're going to have ourselves a little midnight party." I swallowed. "MOVE IT!" I ran off and he followed me. When I was lying on the ground in the rain after running around the base for two straight hours wondering how I was even able to do one set of sit ups never mind my third I thought about Cas' letter under my pillow. And I sighed. He was going to break a lot more plates and all because I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

>>>><<

There is nothing like knowing you're right, as usual, but this time it felt like a punch to the gut.

I was working in the diner and when I was finishing up, he came in.

"You done for the night?" Gabriel looked around the place. It was just me and I was about to lock up.

"Yes, get out." I was turning lights off and heading to the door.

"You know, you should lock the door when you're closed. All sorts could come in." He smirked.

I glanced to him. "Yes, I think I will in future." I pushed him backwards towards the door. "Come on."

"Cas, come on." He walked towards the entrance as he spoke and I turned the last light out. "Me walking in here that day, it was..." He shrugged. "Fate."

"Yeah, I'm sure." I pulled the door closed and started to lock it up.

"I've missed you." He tried to hug me from behind and I pushed him away.

"Don't touch me." I shook my head as I finished locking up. "I never said you could touch me, never do that again."

I started to walk away, tucking the keys in my pocket. "You weren't complaining the last time." He raised his eyebrows. "The school bathrooms."

I scoffed. "That was six years ago, get over it, Gabriel."

He put his hand out and spun me to look at him. "I don't want to, you hurt me a lot, Castiel." He pushed me away. "You just upped and left without so much as a goodbye."

I stood there in the parking lot arguing with him, just as he wanted. "That wasn't my fault, Gabriel? I promised you I was going to tell them and I did. They threw me out and I went, do you know where I went?" I raised my eyebrows then poked him in the shoulder. "Your house." He let me
push him a step back as if I had just winded him. "Yes, I walked to yours, in tears but knowing it was for the best, knowing we would be fine as long as we were together and what did I see?" He sighed, knowing the answer. "Go on Gabriel, you like games, tell me, what was your role in this?" I waited. "No? I'll tell you shall I? Your role was to be underneath Balthazar, my brother."

"But Cas-"

"No, but Cas nothing Gabriel!" I shouted. "You were having sex with my brother in the back of your dad's car, where we had had sex, where I had given you my-" I stopped myself. "I had just given up my family and my life for you and you did that." I took a step back. "So don't you dare say I hurt you when I left because you looked fine from where I was standing."

"Cas, I swear I'm not that guy any more!" He walked after me and I pushed him away. "Cas, please!"

"Get lost, Gabriel." I walked towards the bus stop and he stood watching me from the diner parking lot.

"You won't find what we had, Cas!" He shouted to me.

I turned on the spot. "That's the point, Gabriel!" I laughed. "I have Dean, for no reason other than we want to be together. Not because we're horny or because someone's decided we shouldn't be together or because we're trying to get over someone who thinks himself personally sculpted by God himself." He inhaled and looked embarrassed. "I'm an Army wife." I laughed before I turned around.

"But do you love him?" He shouted back and I turned to look. He gestured to himself. "Because I know you loved me." He nodded. "Do you love him like you loved me?"

I opened my mouth to answer but I never got a chance.

I woke up in hospital.

>>>>

It was about seven weeks after challenging of my orders and the mission had been done. I finally got to sit down in a camp in Afghanistan to write him back. I had to admit I expected more letters from him than I came back to and I couldn't help but wonder why. When I found out I almost wished I hadn't.

"Private Winchester!" I was writing back when I was called. I closed my eyes before I stood to the Sergeant approaching me. "Call for you in the office. Follow me."

I left my writing there and followed him across the base and to the office. We trotted up the stairs and I was expecting something else, some kind of covert message since we weren't allowed personal phone calls and I wasn't expecting anyone.

He held up the phone and I hesitated. He held it towards me and I took it.

"Hello?"

"Dean? It's me, it's Ellen." I shook my head, not sure what was going on, I wondered what she had told the Sergeant to be able to talk to me. "Listen, it's Cas." My heart stopped working or I stopped hearing it. Or that's all I could hear. One of the three or maybe all at once. "He's been hit by a car, he's fine, he's in hospital but I there was no other way to tell you, it's taken me a week, I phoned
and I phoned but eventually I found Ash, he got the Sergeant to allow it."

I looked up to the Sergeant who nodded and left the room.

"I want to talk to him."

"I thought you might say that." There was rustling before it went quiet. "Dean?"

I closed my eyes. "I knew you were needy but this is a new level." I smiled when he laughed but then it fell when it turned to coughing. "You alright?"

"Oh yeah, just rolled over the hood of a Ford."

I make a disgusted noise. "You could have at least been hit by something good." He chuckled lightly. "I don't have long. What the hell were you doing, playing chicken or something?"

"No." He cleared his throat. "Gabriel-"

My face changed and I cut him off talking sternly into the phone. "What did he do? You tell him I will kill him."

"Dean-"

"I mean it Cas, I have done some things here I never wanted to do and they'll haunt me forever. But no more than the fact I was here when I should have been protecting you there so you tell him I will have no problem shooting him in the head."

There was a silence. "Well, that was a little dark." I smiled, despite myself. "Dean, he tried to talk to me about when we were together and I was walking away from him when he-he asked me a question. I turned to answer it and I didn't realize I was in the middle of the road. It was late and dark, it was my fault." I sighed and leaned on the desk. "I swear, that's all." I heard him sniff.

"What happened to putting him on his ass?"

"I was trying to avoid anyone getting hurt." I laughed a little and I heard the smile in his voice. "It wasn't the car, it was the fall back to the pavement that broke my ribs. I'm fine though. How are you?"

I nodded and wiped my face on my sleeve. "I'm fine."

"Dean, you just said you'd done some bad things?"

I paused. "I'm not allowed to talk about it. Let's just say this is not what I thought it would be. I'm sorry you haven't heard, I was actually writing you right now."

"Really, well make it dirty because I'm not allowed to work for a while so I'll be bored in my flat."

"I will." The door opened and my Sergeant twirled his hand. "Listen, I got to go. Take it easy and I'll write you. Tell Bobby I got his postcard and I..." I hesitated then I turned away from my superior and tried to whisper. "I miss you."

He whispered back. "I miss you too, you big girl."

I laughed. "Bye."

"Bye."
I put the receiver down. "Thank you, Sir."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Winchester." He smiled and I smiled back. "Is he okay?"

I nodded. "Good, now come on, get that letter written before the post goes at nine." I walked to the door. "Remember to check your boots first for tomorrow, Winchester."

"Yes, Sir."

"You did tell him you were going, didn't you?"

I nodded. "Of course, Sir." I walked out the room knowing I was lying. How could I tell him that I was being shipped to Gaza when he was going to be in bed for days trying to recover from a car accident?

>>>>

Castiel, how are you? Other than completely failing at containing yourself? But I suppose wanting to be near me is only natural, I mean you're only human. And seeing me naked? That's just gross. I suppose I could try to describe it. It's boring though. My hair is Army reg now, so short and tidy, you've really got to be rough if you want to run your hands through it, it's so short. I've got some stubble down passed my ears and over my chin, thankfully my moustache grows a lot slower than the rest, never did like it. But there is something to that noise, that scratch when you run your nails over stubble, especially with the heat, there's a layer of sweat that seems to be on my skin all of the time. And that's not just on my face, that's down my neck, over my Adam's apple, where my tan changes. It's more natural from there down, my face and hands are darker but you don't realize just how much until I use my hands to take off my uniform, that layer of sweat over my chest and abdomen makes my natural tan shine a little. But not as much as if you licked a patch of skin, I'm sure. But I won't bore you with the details of the rest.

Oh, I knew you were crazy the minute you put my coffee down. It's probably what drew you to me, that I'm not scared by a little crazy. Well that settles it, if you had cared I wouldn't be in this mess. I wouldn't be suddenly wondering about what you're doing right now, wishing I was there to take care of you. Oh, hurtful. Clutching my chest as I write. So that's Jo and the ticket guy I need to thank. You playing football? This, I need to see. Yeah, Bobby was always one for boundaries. Always made me feel welcome and calm in his house, I never wanted to leave when I was there. It's why I stopped going around, messed up, I know, but we've established that I'm all kinds of screwed up. I'm sure he could find you something, just ask him, he won't bite, but after your accident I think you should stay inside and never go out, sound like a plan?

Yeah, maybe he does but I'm not sure. Are you a millionaire black woman, because that would make my life a hundred times easier? If not, could you find me one before I get back, thanks buddy. No, I'm going to suggest that you stay away from all Ellen smacks in future. You'll be wishing for the car after those.

Oh now, mentioning dropping to your knees is just not fair. At all. I'm lying in my bunk, surrounded by people getting stuff ready and I'm actually flaring up like a teenager, is this your plan? To get me hard in a room of people and imagine me squirming? Because it's working.

I guess you were more than right about him coming back. He had better stay away after that, I'm not kidding. I know I was joking about being possessive but he practically had a hand in a car nearly killing you so I think I'm justified. You been calling yourself an Army wife to other people? Now that's kind of hot and I'm worried about my mental state. I think it's all of this talk of dropping to your knees, you've confused me.
Well, tell the fifteen year old girl doing her make-up in the mirror inside you that I'm just not that into you. Or that I'm embarrassed since I've been referring to you as my boyfriend since I got on the bus. In my defense, Walker did it first, the one who gave me hassle to begin with, and I just ran with it. We're all okay now. We're all trying to just get on with what we've been asked to do so we can all get out and get home. Back to our wives.

You tell me you have no will power when it comes to me after mention dropping to your knees? I need to stop writing. Do you know how hard it is to take care of business in a room of sixty other people? And I have your second letter to answer, damn you, Cas.

Okay, letter number two. Gabriel came back, so he's hassled you three times now? That's it, fault or no fault he's getting a visit. He said he'd be back and you weren't worried? What was it you were saying about always being right?

Definitely something between them? I think they would be good together. He's got a tough face, he could take her. Miss me more than usual? What would that be? As I tell my officers, use your words. I miss you too, Cas, especially since you're hurt. How is it I'm in a war zone and I'm okay and yet you're in Lawrence and you've ended up in hospital? How is it I can't get you out of my head? How is that I have barely thought of anything but you since I got on that bus? Six months, Cas. It's been six months and I would be lying if I said there was more then three consecutive hours in any of those days that I haven't thought about you. Explain that to me. And tell me I'm not suffering.

I can tell you I'm at a base in Afghanistan right now. I'm not there with you because I'm an idiot who enlisted in the Army looking for a direction in my life and bumped right into you in the process. By then it was too late. I laid my bed, or I built my bunk, and now I got to lie in it. Alone.

You get the flu you stay away from Bobby, I don't want him sneezing and chucking up over my baby.

Well that's just mean, dangling the offer of a rubber band in front of my face and then taking it for yourself. Thing is, I'd give you it as well. I hope Ellen bills your ass for those plates you nervous wreck. Calm down, I'm fine, you needy, weird little guy.

Yeah, I spent about half an hour picking up all of your dignity, it poured out of the last letter, I think you put the last bit in this one though. It's good though, I'll use it as a pillow on the plane. You know, when I asked for your address, I didn't ask for your life story. But I should have.

Jesus Cas, what the hell is this? I'm not one for admitting I'm scared of things but that doesn't mean I'm not scared of stuff. I don't like salads, flying by the way - I didn't realise I was in the friggin' RAF over here, more flying than ground work, it's Hell. I don't like chick flicks or the dark, not gonna scream and bitch but I still don't like it. But I got to tell you, this feeling? Scariest thing yet. I don't know how to put it on paper except that it's pain. I've been shot and the bullet hit my breast plate, got a hell of a bruise for that, and it was nothing like this. I don't like it but I don't want it to leave either. I don't know what to do Cas, so I'm taking a serious moment that I'm making stupid child faces at but I'm doing it, I'm being serious for one minute to get you to tell me what the hell this is? Cause, it's new and I don't like not knowing what I'm dealing with.

PFC D. Winchester, 513- 96-2337.

Soldier, puppy dog, escaped mental patient.

>>>>>
I got out of hospital a couple of days after talking to Dean. With me pretty much out of action I spent all day in the flat, Ellen refused to let me go back to work and Bobby refused to let me go anywhere. All of my food was brought in along with anything else I needed. The man was unflappable and at first it was nice but it progressed to just annoying.

So when the door was knocked for the third time I sighed and hobbled down the hall.

"I'm fine Bobby, I don't need bandages, I don't need milk, I don't need more films. I don't need-"

I opened the door to Gabriel. "Hi."

"What are you doing here? I don't want you here." I stood there, I wasn't going to hide away, I wasn't scared of him.

"I came to say I'm sorry." He looked me up and down. "I feel awful."

"Well, you should." I nodded. "But, I'm fine."

He smiled. "Good. Well, I just wanted to say I'm sorry for that and..." He inhaled. "And for everything else."

"I don't want to talk about it Gabriel." I shrugged. "I really don't. Goodbye." I made to shut the door and he put his arm out.

"But Cas-"

I sighed. "I already spoke to Dean and told him it wasn't your fault, what happened, but if you don't move your arm and leave I will call him back." I smiled.

"Who is this Dean? And why isn't he taking care of you?"

"He's in the Army, Gabriel?" I screwed up my eyes when he started laughing. "What?"

"Oh so this, 'Dean'," he airquoted, "who is a 'soldier' in the 'Army', is mad with me and what?"

"Will kick your ass if you don't get lost." Gabriel turned to see Bobby and Ellen standing there. He turned back to me and I just stared. Gabriel laughed. "You don't take a telling, do you boy?"

Gabriel turned towards Bobby, smiling. "It don't matter if he has a boyfriend or not, he don't want you and at first you were annoying, then aggressive and now you're just creepy." Bobby looked him up and down.

"Oh what you going to do, old man?" Gabriel put his hands in his pants pockets and shrugged. "Huh?"

It happened so quick I didn't see it happen and Bobby didn't blink. Gabriel shook and fell slowly to the ground before the impact had finished echoing. Ellen held her hand and sighed, brushing her hair out of her face. "Nothing, but I will not have you hassling our boy." I widened my eyes as I realized she'd just punched him. She punched him. Ellen actually punched him.

Bobby picked him up and walked him down the street while he held his nose. "Me neither."

"You alright, hon?" Ellen looked to me. I nodded and she walked in. "I'll make you some coffee," she put her arm under me and helped me back down the hall, "leave the door, Bobby will get it when he comes back."

Before I knew it I was sitting in my sitting room with a comforter and a cup of coffee. "Thank you,
I'm sorry about that."

"Don't you go apologizing. That lad is poison." Bobby took off his hat and lay it next to him. Ellen leaned over and fuss with his hair and he smiled, I watched them for a few seconds, just sipping.

Ellen eventually turned to me. "I gotta ask, Dean isn't some rebound thing, is he?"

I shook my head as I swallowed some coffee. "No way." I realized I owed them more than that so I shuffled around to get comfy and then looked to them. "Look, Gabriel and I were a thing in high school. We were fifteen, I thought I was in love," I shook my head embarrassed, "I had no idea. I decided I would tell my parents everything one night, a couple of my brothers were there, I sat them down and I told them I was gay and that Gabriel and I were going to be together. In the space of an hour my father had packed a bag for me and threw me out. I was devastated but I knew I still had Gabriel and I'd be fine, you know how it is."

They both nodded, I noticed Ellen's arm was still around Bobby's shoulders and he wasn't bothered by it. "I went to his house, he knew I was going to tell them so I went around and I saw..." I took a breath in. "I saw him and my older brother," Ellen and Bobby shared a look, "in the back of Gabriel's car. So I ran. I boarded every coach and train I came across. You know the end, I ended up here."

I took a drink.

"It may have been Gabriel that started of the chain of events that led me to Dean but he has nothing to do with it. I wouldn't jump head first into love with someone because of a stupid infatuation when I was a blind teenager. I'm not that cruel."

"Love?" Ellen asked.

"What?" I looked up.

"You said 'love'." I thought back to what I had said. "Do you love Dean?"

I stuttered. What do you say to that?

>>><

Dean,

I feel better. Gabriel came back, yet again. He came to my flat, I don't even know how he found out where I live. He started out apologetic and then became very strange. Luckily Bobby and Ellen turned up. Gabriel fell victim to Ellen's punch, yes punch not slap, I don't think I've seen one of those before. Bobby got rid of him and told him not to come back. Again, just thought you should know.

And what if just being near you isn't enough? That description was the most boring thing I have ever heard, I honestly fell asleep over here. Drooled everywhere. Or maybe that's not drool. What drew me to you? Yes, because I was totally the one staring at you and then lying to cover it up. You were so obvious, that heat settled over you quicker than you stopped breathing. And that shade of pink you turned, that was just embarrassing. I wish you were here to take care of me as well, maybe then you could have punched Gabriel instead of Ellen. He would have got the message then, as it is I don't think I've seen the last of him. I am very good at football actually, I'll show you how it's done one day. I think I might take you up on that plan, Bobby and Ellen have been making sure I don't go anywhere. Jo even brought me soup from the diner last night, we sat and watched Games of Thrones as well.

I'm on the hunt for your Oprah as we speak, buddy. Getting stuff ready, you got something on? It
wasn't my plan but it definitely is now. I'll let you in on a secret, I'm a good player and I prefer Quarterback. I like being the leader almost as much as you do. If you understand, if not then let me know I'll draw you a diagram. I'm tops like that. See what I did there?

Boyfriend, eh? That is so clingy. I mean we snog a couple of times and you give me your necklace, I give you my address and you ask me to wait. If that's not clear signs of me wanting to take this slow I don't know what else to say to you. Take care of business? What are you, twelve? Tell me you did not jerk off to the thought of me on my knees? Or was it the thought of me on my knees for you? Because I didn't really specify. Tell me you don't have that whole 'I'm a soldier so I'm the aggressive one' thing going on, or is it the complete other way? Cause I got to say, I like Quarterback, I prefer it but that's not the only position I play. And I don't have one plan either. Are we done with the sports metaphors? Good. I'm unpredictable Dean, and if you can't handle that then get out now. Get out while you can still walk straight.

Yeah, yeah, I know. He came back a fourth time since we spoke, the time I mentioned at the top. I know. I told him that I'd already told you not to hassle him but if he didn't leave I would take that back. Then Bobby told him something similar. They also told him to stop hassling their boy - so weird but I think they were talking about me, not you. Because he's hassling me, not you? Does that make sense? Or does that sound wrong to you?

Yes, and they were all touchy-feely the other night. I swear, I saw it with my own black eyes. I just, I can't explain it Dean. Gabriel asked me a question before I was hit and Ellen asked me the same question the other night too. And each time I didn't answer. Each time, I started to deny it and I couldn't. I don't know how I can be hurt and you're fine but I'm glad your fine. Your obsession with me is obviously because I'm adorable. And there was three hours when you didn't think about me, in six months? We may as well go our separate ways now. I mean it, the spark has clearly gone and it's all my fault. Being so clingy. Every five minutes. Every five minutes someone says something or does something and my mind goes right back to where it started that morning - to you. And has done since I sat in that booth - see I was needy before you.

Would you undo it, if you could? Enlisting. Not meeting me, not our letters, just enlisting. Was it a mistake?

Your baby? Please tell me you aren't talking about me. Please.

How do you know about those? And who do you think you are assuming that was about you? A really hot guy came into the diner and I got nervous, okay? I was thinking about you the whole time, I swear. Dean, of course I am going to worry about you, you are on my mind from the minute I wake up to the next time I wake up, I swear I don't even get a break from you in my dreams. How can you expect me not to worry about you when all I can see is your face and all I can hear is your voice, all I can feel is your lips and all I can do is wait for the mail?

You're going on a plane, you didn't say, is it important?

You don't like salads? That explains your stomach then. Flying? I love flying! Sometimes I think I'm going to sprout wings and then I'm disappointed when I don't. Yeah, I'm not a rom-com fan either. The dark doesn't really bother me but I prefer the light. Maybe one day, when your scared of the shadows, you can reach out and hold my hand. No messing, I'm serious.

You got shot?! Are you alright? You failed to mention that when we were on the phone. Little 'oh I got shot by the way' would have been nice, don't keep these things from me please. I don't care if my head is being held together with sticky tape, don't keep these things from me. Please, Dean.

I don't know what that is, I think I feel the same thing. It's so hard to pinpoint, Dean. I know but I
don't at the same time. I think I do.

Please write to me as soon as possible, tell me what's going on over there.

I miss you.

- Cas.
There wasn’t much time, I basically grabbed my mail and headed back to my company. We were one down. Walker was in the hospital with a bruised rib. He was getting better but we had been shipped out here two months ago and I was about ready to scream if I didn’t get any news soon. Two months since Cas had been hit and had to recover without me. This place was truly Hell. If Hell had even been on earth, it had to be in Gaza. We were the fighters, the ones trying to keep the bad guys out and most of us went to sleep at night trying not to have nightmares about what this was like for the unarmed citizens who just wanted to live and get on with things without this threat and pain. Funerals every other day, wailing heard for miles around, rubble everywhere, people in bits and children screaming in terror. This was our legacy to the rest of the world.

We were all in camp when I plodded myself down on my bed with my mail and read quickly. When I had folded the letters back up I reached for my boots.

"Hey, Winchester!" I looked up to McLeodd as he whisper-shouted. "How's Cas?"

I nodded. "He’s getting better, got my friends looking after him."

"You ever need that Gabriel dealt with you let me know." He dipped his boot polish in the tin and gestured with it. "Not a problem."

"Winchester?" I turned to listen to Hannah, a Specialist from the Missouri end of things. "You talking about Cas?" I nodded and she looked between the two of us, McLeod being closer to her. "How is he?"

"Getting better." McLeod muttered. "I was just saying," a couple of the lads looked up from the Welsh company that had been drafted in 6 weeks ago, "if he needs someone to deal with that tricky bastard, Gabriel, then he only needs to ask."

They all mumbled in agreement and I smiled. "Thanks boys," I looked to Hannah, "Ma’am." She smiled. "I might take you-"

"SPC Winchester!"

I stood up, eyes front. "Yes, Sir."

"Is there a problem?" My superior walked down the row slowly towards me.

"No Sir, no problem." I waited to be dismissed.

"McLeod?" He stood up, a little slower than he should have but the Sergeant let it slide. "Problem?"

"No, Sir."

"Well, something has you all chatting away like teenagers about the next new boy band. Which one do you fancy, Jones?"

One of the Welsh soldiers looked up then stood in a panic, knocking his boots to the floor. "Sir." He said by way of apology.

"The story, Private."
"We were just talking about Castiel, Sir." Jones said, almost apologetically to me.

The Sergeant looked around to me. "How is he, Winchester?"

"Getting better, Sir." I answered, still looking ahead.

"Good, not getting any more trouble, I hope?"

"Not so far, Sir." I admitted and he waited. "I expect it won't be the last we hear of Gabriel, Sir."

He leaned in towards me. "Let me know if there's anything I can do." He muttered to me and I didn't respond. "Alright, back to work." We all sat down and I smiled as I picked up my boots and McLeod held out his polish.

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Cas, I'm sorry I've been lying, I guess, by not saying anything. I suppose you didn't notice the location stamps and I did nothing to point them out. I've moved which is why it's taken me so long to reply. I'm in a bad bit, I'm not going to lie, but I didn't want you to worry. I shipped out the day after I spoke to you on the phone. You have to forgive me, you had just been hit by a car I couldn't get the words out. I'm in Gaza. That's all I can say.

I don't like this Cas, he's just not going away and he's already nearly gotten you killed. I don't like it at all. I really don't. I don't think I've seen Ellen punch either. That's new.

Oh babe, don't be even talking to me about 'not drool'. I don't think you realize what that does to me. Can you blame me? In my defense, I was expecting one of the girls but I'm glad it wasn't, I'm glad you took my breath away. I wish I was there too, I really do. I could make sure you were okay and that he'd leave you alone. Leave us alone. I don't think you have either. And I don't like it. Have I said that enough?

Oh yeah? I like the idea of you tackling me. I'm glad that they're taking care of you. What the hell is Game of Thrones? Is that a film?

Like I said, I shipped out. I'm sorry. I had to go and I didn't want to worry you but I won't keep anything from you again. I promise.

I think I got you Captain Obvious. Why not just say that you... Ah, I see. It's a lot harder to write it then it is to think it. I guess I could say that's fine by me. I guess they were quite big things to ask, I don't know what I was thinking. I suppose I was thinking I was going to war and I might die and I liked your ass. Seriously though, you just completely confused me, one minute I was just passing the time waiting on the bus and now I'm trying to pass the time to get back to you. Not home, not out of the Army - to you. I do not jerk off. I love myself. While I can still walk straight? Promises.

I swear Cas, if I was there he wouldn't be a problem. Do you want to tell me what the deal is? I turn up on the scene then this happens? Am I the rebound or is this just a thing that happened. You can tell me if I'm a rebound because the way I feel, I don't care, I'm not giving you up. Not unless you want me to. Their boy? Wow, so you just cling onto anyone, huh? I thought I was special but I guess not. I'm their boy, you can't steal them from me, you big baby.

You have black eyes? I couldn't want to be there with you more if I tried.

But Ellen and Bobby, sounds like we don't need to help. What was the question? I know, it was my way of letting you down gently. I hope you understand. I can't be with someone I think of 24 hours a day, even when I'm undertaking missions I can't talk about. Wow, so needy. I mean I knew you
brushed my fingers on purpose but you were already all over me.

After what I've seen? In a heartbeat.

I was talking about the Impala. I'm sorry Cas, my baby comes first. You can be my babe but you will never be my baby.

I have my sources. Yeah, well unless you have some Greek blood in you stop smashing Ellen's plates or she'll bill me for them. You've dreamt about me? Please tell, I want diagrams and detailed essays.

I'm going on a small charter tomorrow, I'm not going far and I'm coming back again in two days. It's a meeting for the specialists. Again, I can't say more than that. I've been promoted again, it's not as good as it sounds. The guy before me was, well, I can't say. But I'll be fine. I think. I got to admit, Cas, I'm scared I won't come back. I'm sorry if that upsets you but it's the truth. I don't think the media really makes it clear, you play games and they are so real that you feel it and you watch the news or read the papers and you see it all but it's nothing, nothing compared to the real thing. We lost Masters yesterday, Walker was in the hospital but he's fine now. He was thrown against a building in a blast and Masters well, she was 'pinned in friendly fire'. She's gone and it's all my fault. I made these people believe I could teach them to be invincible and all I did was lead them to the slaughter. It's all my fault, Cas.

Could you do me a massive favor? Could you find a report on her funeral, we're having a silence and loading her body onto the plane. With the others. But that's just not enough. How is that enough? She was twenty last week.

Salads are evil. You're a regular little angel, ain't you? Just don't fly away. Maybe I'd like that, reaching for you. I might just pretend to be afraid of things. See how far that gets me.

Like I said, I'm sorry, I won't lie again. I can't always tell you but I will say what I can.

Cas, this is the hard part. I'm going away for a bit. After the meeting I will have new things to do, things that come with the promotion. I can't talk about it and you've no idea how much it infuriates me that I have to say that again, just know this - I will write to you as soon as I can and I miss you more than anything, I'm not sure of much in life but I am sure of that. I wish I had the guts to write it all down. Or the time. As it is I am being shouted at from across the room. I have to go, Cas.

I [there's a blotch of ink on the page, it looks like a pen has been held to the paper and yet the writer has changed their mind after a while of sitting like that] just wish I was there with you, Castiel Novak. I wish I was there to say everything to you that I don't have time to write.

SPC D. Winchester. [The name is scribbled and the number left out. As if written in a hurry.]

I was back at work, I had managed to heal everything to the standard acceptable for Dean's adopted parents.

"There's your check, Miss." I put it down on the table in the booth.

"Cas?"

I turned to see Gabriel standing there. "Gabriel, I will give you one more chance. Get out of Dodge."
He squinted. "What?"

"It's a film. Get out. Leave me the Hell alone."

"Castiel, come on-"

"You!" Ellen walked out of the kitchen. "You have got five seconds to get out of my diner."

"Or what, you'll punch me again?" He said it with bravado since she was on the other side of the counter but he still shuffled backwards.

"You heard them." Bobby stood up from his stool at the end of the bar. "Get."

My head started ringing and I couldn't hear anything except the sounds of a soldier countless miles away worrying about me and being shot in the chest because he was preoccupied. I grabbed Gabriel's coat and I walked him backwards to the door.

"Cas!" Ellen hopped the counter, Bobby putting his hand out to make sure she was okay as they followed me outside.

"Whoa Cas, I know you like it rough but come on." He held onto my arm then put his out to steady himself when I shoved him backwards.

"Stay away from me Gabriel, stay out of my life and stay the hell away from me. It's been six years, go find someone else to annoy. In fact, where is my precious brother? Go annoy him." I turned away.

"He used me!" He shouted.

I turned back. "What?"

"He seduced me that night, he came to my house and told me to stop corrupting you. I told him I wasn't corrupting you, that we loved each other and he would have to accept that. He didn't believe me so I told him that you were going to tell your folks, I told him that if he went home right then he'd see how serious we were. That's when he changed."

"What do you mean 'changed'?"

"Come on Cas, it doesn't matter?" He walked towards me, smiling and puppy eyes. I reached out, grabbed his shoulders, tucked my left leg behind his and kicked the back of his knee while pushing his shoulders. He fell to the ground and when he made to move I put my foot right on his nuts, hard enough to hurt. "Cas, stop it! That's precious cargo!" He struggled more and I pressed down harder. "Okay, okay." He hissed and I let go the slightest. "He started talking about how he had always liked me and how he could offer me something mature. I don't even know what was going on, one minute he was nearly pounding his fist into my face and then he was..." He shrugged. "he was pounding into me."

Ellen made a disgusted noise. "How could you do that?"

"What, have sex with a man?" He aimed around me.

"She ain't talkin' about that you idjit, she's talking about doing that to Cas!" Bobby shouted as he took a step forward. Ellen put her arm out, across his body from the left and he stopped immediately.
I started laughing. I was actually laughing. I looked to the sky.

Gabriel fake smiled, trying to go along with what I was doing.

I turned back to Ellen, then Bobby, then back to Gabriel. I stopped laughing with a sigh. "It doesn't matter. I don't care." I shrugged. "I never cared for six years and I don't care now. What you did ended me up here." I gestured around and lifted my foot putting it back on the ground before putting out my hand.

He paused and then took it. I hauled him to his feet and then pulled away when he tried to keep a hold of my hand. "Cas-"

"I came here because I had nowhere to go and I ended up on a bus to Lawrence, Kansas." I laughed again. "I worked in a cute diner in the middle of this weird, weird town. And then one day, a shift I wasn't even meant to be working, a travelling soldier wandered in and my life changed. So it didn't matter then and it doesn't matter now Gabriel. I will always be indebted to you for what you did to me, you and my brother." I pushed him so that he stumbled back a bit. "But I'm telling you right now, I am done with being nice." I walked right to his face, changing from smiling to snarling. "You come near me again, and I will make sure he knows every little thing about you. Everything I know, I will tell him. He's in the Army Gabriel, he can find out plenty more on his own. And not because I can't fight my own battles but because," I leaned back, "I don't have to."

I laughed and turned around towards the diner.

"Oh, and you're barred." Bobby added as Ellen put her arm around my shoulders and we walked towards the diner again. Onlookers going back to their food.

"One day, Castiel," I looked up then turned my head, stopping to look, "one day you will wake up and realize that this has all been a big mistake."

I shook my head. "Stop waiting around for history to repeat itself, Gabriel. Sleep around a bit, smoke some weed and just laugh." I shrugged. "Laugh and get a job in a diner in a town in the middle of nowhere. And," I turned properly and Gabriel took a step back, "when a stranger asks you to wait for him. You wait, Gabriel." I smiled. "Wait for as long as it takes, take a walk down to the pier and wait every day of your life if you have to." I slapped him on the shoulder and he jumped in surprise, moving away just a little. "Cause one day he'll come home to you." I turned back and kept walking into the diner.

Gabriel stood there having been staring at me the whole time I spoke as if something about what I said or how I said it struck him like a punch to the gut or a car to the side of his body. Or even a pavement to the rest of him.

>>>>

Dean,

I should have noticed but I was so happy to see the letter I never paid any attention to the envelope. Listen to me, you friggin' watch yourself Dean Winchester, I don't care what your rank is, you are my Dean and you come back alive or so help me God I will find a way to bring you back just to kill you myself. Even if I have to go to Hell and sprout those wings I always wanted just to fly you all the way back to humanity. And let's face it, you're going to Hell. I'll forgive you if you forgive me, Gabriel came back and I used that move on him. I put him on his ass. I told him to go, I told him nothing mattered any more. And then I told him if he came back he was fair game for you. He's had his chances to walk away.
Dean, it wasn't drool. When are you coming back, even if it's just for a day. When you do come back, how long before you end up back out there again? I need to know what the future holds, as long as it's you it's fine but I need to know. So I can settle it in my head.

I took your breath away?

Game of Thrones, it's a TV series. We're done with that now, we're watching OitNB which appears to be nothing but a prison full of lesbians. Not my thing but the stories seem alright. She wants to watch House next, I have seen some of it but not all. I like that, so basically my nights are full just now, but I am back at work.

Okay, thank you for that promise, Dean. It means a lot. I got the report for Megan Masters’ funeral. I went and had a look at the head stone as well as leaving a flower. I hope that was okay.

I want you to come back to me too, Dean. When will that be?

Long story short; we thought we were in love in school, we promised each other the world and I believed it all. One day I decided I'd had enough of the secrets, I decided I was going to tell my family. And we both know how that went. I went to his house, thinking that at least I still had him, and found him having sex with my brother, Balthazar. Gabriel said that my brother seduced him to get him to leave me alone but, as I told Gabriel, it doesn't matter. He thinks it means something that he happened to walk into the diner I work in. I told him point blank from the first meeting, not interested. I wasn't six years ago and I'm not now. And Dean, it has nothing to do with you, if I wasn't with you and he turned up I would have said the same thing.

But I do have you, don't I? You are not a rebound Dean, Ellen and Bobby asked me the same thing before Ellen asked me that damn question. I told Ellen that I wouldn't jump into love with a rebound guy. And she asked me if I loved you. I didn't answer her because I couldn't deny it. The question got stuck in my throat and I knew.

If I don't tell you now then I will never tell you.

I am completely in love with you Dean Winchester; the twenty-two year old soldier who eats too much pie, who is afraid of the dark and hates salads, Dean who refers to his car as a female, who is so afraid of rejection that he won't even try to talk to his brother, the orphan who needed some kind of family so he joined the Army and instead of becoming a son again, he became a father, a brother, a leader - exactly what he's always been. Dean Winchester who entrusted his most prized possession to a man he had barely known three hours for reasons even he doesn't understand. The soldier who was getting on a plane, terrified of flying, to fly into the middle of the bad area of a warzone but didn't tell me because he didn't want to stress me out, the lost boy who let the waiter who brought him pie take his breath away.

For everything I have learned and everything I don't know yet, Dean Winchester, you get your goofy butt back here in one piece before I come and get you. Because you told me about some of the things that scare you and right now all I can think of that scares me is one thing - you not coming back to me. So you stop thinking about me, you stop it right this minute, you get through the days, you come back here and you can think about me for the rest of your life. I will tell you about every dream I have ever had in my life, I will smile for the rest of our days and I will come second to that damn car. Just get back here. You dump that promotion and I don't care if you have to hitch hike and we are on the run for the next fifty years, I can hardly write because I'm crying. You made me cry, Dean, and you need to pay for that. Why aren't you here yet? I keep wishing and wishing but all I get is an empty bed.

I will never let go of your hand, ever, I will never hold anyone else's hand. I will be your angel
forever if you will just find your way back to me so we can make the time to say everything.

Castiel James Novak - totally in love with you.
I lay in front of the TV waiting for the door to open. I heard Jo calling down the hall before I saw her, she brought Kevin and I sighed a little. I had nothing against him but seeing them together made me miss Dean more. I found myself twirling the charm in my fingers every time I thought about him.

"We brought beer." Kevin offered, shifting slightly, gestured with his whole body to the kitchen while his hands were tucked in his pockets. "Cas?" He asked and I turned to look. "Beer, want one?"

I shook my head and turned back.

"Can I ask, without you getting mad?" I twitched my head in his direction but stared at the floor. "Why do you let it worry you so much?" Jo looked to me as she handed Kevin the bottle opener.

I looked up to him. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Well, you barely know him?" Jo hit his shoulder. "Ow!" He looked to her. "What?"

I smiled. "I know him better than anyone." I put my hand out for the beer.

>>><

[September 2014]

Dean,

I know you are unable to write just now so I'm going to write you as often as I can so that you come back to a big bundle and you feel bad. It's the only way to pay me back for this torture. I'm worried for your safety but also for what I told you. This is like being placed on hold. I am worried that perhaps I said too much but I will never say it was not the truth because it was. It is. I know this situation is stressful and it's bound to produce reactions in our brains that would not occur in any other situations. All of that said, I love you. I've never been more sure of anything in my life.

Jo found a young guy called Kevin, he's a smart kid, he's in advanced placement. The two of them together is sickening. I am happy for them but that should be us. Maybe not that noisy, or clingy, or close. But, you know. I suppose if you come back soon I might be willing to be near you as we discussed but it's available for a limited time.

I might just go and, how was it you put it, love myself, in the back seat of the Impala. I can practically hear the jet engines now.

I suppose I have nothing to report, Gabriel hasn't shown up again, I guess I just wanted to talk to you. This is more talking at you though.

- Cas.

>>><

I was wiping the counter in the diner, everything had gotten quiet at some point, I don't know when it happened but I only noticed when the bulletin on the TV seemed to be louder. I turned my head. I widened my eyes and jumped for the remote. "Jo!" I shouted.
She, Ellen and Bart came out of the kitchen worried, it was unlike me to shout at all never mind in the diner and a couple of customers looked as I turned the TV up.

We stood watching the TV in silence. The news headline scrolled along the bottom. Breaking: Blast in Gaza city centre. It rolled that same message over and over as the woman spoke.

"A blast in the city centre of Gaza has sparked a battle in the streets. Servicemen and women from both the United States and the United Kingdom are fighting against an unidentified group who are reported to have rigged an explosive device just outside a local refugee camp and it detonated as aid was being driven into the camp. Three aid workers from the US and two servicemen confirmed dead. Ralph Pinkerton has the story."

It cut to a middle-aged man in a shirt and trousers that were lightly covered in dust. He was shouting over gunfire with his hand to his ear and squinting every time an explosion in the near vicinity could be heard.

"Thank you Karen, I'm here in the middle of a street," he looked around him, "I'm afraid I'm not sure of it's name at this time as soon as we find out we will report it. Not thirty seconds ago we were outside of the local Army base waiting to go on air when this kicked off and we followed the company to the side of a gun battle between-" There was an explosion nearby and the camera shook as the reporter turned to look. People could be seen running away. "Something has just exp."

"You need to move." A voice could be heard talking to the journalist and the camera turned. I lost all ability to breathe and Jo gasped. It was Dean. "You need to move back or you're going to be in the line of fire!"

"Okay, can you tell us-" The journalist started walking with Dean as he was ushering them back.

"Move back or you're going to get yourself and your cameraman killed!" Dean shouted and put his hand up. The camera moved out the way and went black.

It cut back to the studio. The woman looked to the camera and then realized it was back on her, she looked down and shuffled the sheets clearly listening to her producer. "Okay, we seem to have lost the connection there, we will try to return to Ralph and give you more on that story as it develops."

I turned to Ellen as she grasped my shoulder with a tear in her eye. "He's okay." I whispered. She nodded and brought me into a hug. Jo turned the TV down and rubbed my back. "He's okay."

[October 14th]

Dean,

I have to say you looked good in your Army greens. I hope you didn't get in trouble for being caught on TV but I was so glad to see you were okay. You have no idea how happy I was. And yet it made it worse knowing you were right there in the middle of it. You said that the media shows it all of the time but that it never portrays just how bad it is, I have to say that if it's worse than how that looked then I'm going to bed and never leaving until you come back. Or better yet, the pier. That's when everything was simple. Just me and you and our kisses. I miss you and I love you. And I won't ever pretend I don't.

- Cas.

>>>
There was just so much blood. I never thought that it would have bothered me but I saw a five year old girl lying limp in her father's arms while he wailed in the street and then he carried her away to safety just so he could bury her body later. I looked at the trail of blood that followed his footsteps and I felt it stab at my soul. That is an image I knew I would never forget. We had been pretty much on the go since we got our new assignment; I was told to pick a team and I'd head up some crunch movements. In short, I was to pick five other officers and we'd storm houses and businesses in the middle of the night looking for wanted men. I refused. I wanted no part in it, I was not going in guns blazing and murdering more innocent people. My superior understood, he didn't like it any more than I did, but he didn't have a choice and neither did I, he tried to tell me that it wasn't like that this time but I didn't believe him. I didn't believe a word but I didn't have a choice.

I was allowed to choose whoever I wanted but if I wanted someone from a different company I had to put in for recommendations.

In the end I got the team I wanted. PVT 2s Walker, McLeod, Bradbury and Jones as well as SPC Hannah. And it was the worst thing that could have happened.

It was the dead of night and we were on the perimeter of the land. I was at the front and I gestured my left hand forwards as I pointed my gun back the way we had just came, I was covering their rears as they walked to the next building and stopped. I followed in behind and we rested against the wall. They looked to me and I held up two fingers. We had had three strategies for breaching and I was satisfied that two suited this situation the best, a decision that pretty much had to be made when we were actually there. They all nodded that they saw and understood. But then something caught my eye and I held up my hand, closed fist. I pointed to my eyes and then pointed in the distance. There was something moving to the left on the other side of the building, from our two o'clock across to our ten. Walker used his goggles and looked for a few seconds before he used his other hand to signal. Four people, armed, not sure of the types. Heading for the building next door.

I stopped and gestured across so we walked slowly to the other side of our building. We stopped and I gestured to McLeod. He got down low and out of sight before he looked out. After a few seconds he moved back behind the wall and gestured with his hands. Four, breaching, not Army. I thought about it and then looked myself. They took the door and started shooting so I gestured; the six of us ran to the entrance.

I was on one side of the doorway with Walker and Bradbury while McLeod, Jones and Hannah were on the other looking at us - McLeod at point. I gestured that they were to take the upper floor, he nodded and I looked to everyone before I gave the signal and we breached.

"Put them down!" We shouted over and over. "We will shoot!" We even shouted it in the different languages that we had been taught the phrases in, there was so many variations of evil mobilising out here we had to dot the 'i's and cross the 't's. Basically it was 'shout then shoot'. I ran into what turned out to be the sitting room-come-bedroom while Bradbury continued to the kitchen and Walker stood in the hallway covering us. The others took the stairs. I ran in on a man about to shoot a little boy. I shot the guy in the head and he fell to the ground before he had a chance to react. I cleared the room and shouted to the others. I heard other shots but when I heard two 'clears' come back I relaxed waiting for word from upstairs. I looked to the boy, he was lying face down on the bed. Or so I thought. But on closer inspection, when I walked over to make sure he was okay since he hadn't moved, I grabbed his arm to pull him away. I needed to know that there were no more threats in the room, I knew I could have been gentler.

"No, please!" He shouted, crying. Walker and Bradbury poked their heads in.
It was then that I realized he was in fact standing shielding a figure in the bed. I turned my head to my soldiers. "It's alright, Bradbury check on upstairs." I had heard distant gunshots. "Walker, cover." They nodded and made their way up the stairs shouting to the rest. I turned back to the kid. "Hey, it's okay." He turned to look at me as I strung my gun over my shoulder and knelled down to his level, tears streaming down his face which was a little dirty. He couldn't have been more than seven. "English?"

He nodded. "Little."

I put my hand to my chest. "American Army."

He suddenly sobbed again and turned back to the body. "Please!"

"Hey, hey!" I put my hand out. "It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you." I pointed to the man on the floor and he turned to look. "Not my friend."

He turned to look at the door when Walker reappeared. "All clear, Sir." I nodded, our company was fine and everyone else was dead is what that meant. "Is he okay?" He gestured to the kid.

I looked back to the kid again. "Who?" I pointed to the figure and he flinched again. I put my hands up, I spoke but to the officers behind me. "Put your guns away."

Walker and Bradbury slung them over their shoulders and then showed the kid their hands. McLeod and the rest couldn't be seen by me or the boy.

He sniffed and there was shifting behind me. Walker took a tissue from Bradbury and held it out to me, he slowly took a step to me and then back again after he handed me it. I turned to her. "Where did you put that?" She shrugged and I turned back to the kid. I held it out but he didn't take it so I slowly reached out to wipe his face. And he collapsed into hugging me, I stilled for a second but then I kept wiping his face. I just stared at the bloody body on the bed of an older woman, shot in her sleep. I looked down to the kid sobbing in my arms and at the blood on his t-shirt.

He stuttered to talk. "Mamma." He managed and I closed my eyes tightening my grip on him. This wasn't fair.

>>>>

[November 26th.]

Dean,

I miss you. There was a big fight in the diner, some idiots hassling Kevin. They said he wasn't good enough for Jo, you should have seen him, instead of starting a fight he spoke and spoke and eventually he had confused the Hell out of them. It was like he talked a riddle with the only mystery being what he was talking about. All of us were confused but all that did was annoy the bikers and they started. Ellen made for her rifle but they weren't needed. Jo warned them first, she stood and just smiled before telling them that her big brother was in the Army, that they'd never be found. They laughed and I guess I had some pent up anger I took out on a couple of guys and Jo was definitely showing off to her boyfriend.

Did I mention that I have arrived for my shift a few times to see Bobby's truck in the lot. Oh but, Castiel, of course it would be there, Bobby eats in the diner all of the time? Well, Dean, I walked in to find Bobby behind the counter, on more than one occasion. Apron and everything.

Stew on that while I tear myself apart inside worrying about you.
"You alright, kid?"
I looked up to Bobby looking at me from across the counter. "Yeah." I muttered.
"Really?" He smiled. "'Cause if you keep going you're going to wipe that worktop away." He pointed to the spot I had been wiping non-stop for twenty minutes.
"I'm fine." I let go of the cloth and leaned there.
He sighed. "Ellen." She turned. "I'm taking this one out of school early." She nodded and he turned to me. "Get your coat."
"My shift isn't over?"
He nodded, screwing up his eyes. "Just get your coat."

I looked to Ellen who smiled wearily and I untied my apron. I walked to the end of the counter and put it on the shelf underneath before grabbing my coat and following Bobby to the door. We got outside and he headed over to his truck so I followed.

"Where are we going?" I asked it but I didn't really care.
"My house." He said nothing else and I got in the passenger seat.

We didn't speak all of the way there and I was glad for it. I had no idea what was going on but I had no want to argue.

Eventually we pulled into an old spare part yard and I looked around at the cars piled on top of and next to each other. Mere shells of what they used to be - that's how I felt.

We got out and I followed him inside. The door opened to a hallway, the stairs went up on the right and the sitting room was to the left with the kitchen behind that. I followed him into the sitting room, there were books everywhere and they all seemed to be reference. There were ones on different cars and engines, different folklore, different weapons manuals and even Greek mythology. I had to say I was surprised but no more than by the pictures that lay on the side board. I turned to look at them as Bobby walked passed me to the kitchen. There was a picture of what looked like a younger Bobby with a beautiful blonde women, laughing. There was a picture of Jo and Ellen to the other side. But in the middle were lots of pictures of two boys. Playing football, leaning out of a car, with shaving foam all over their faces, one of the boys who seemed to be older had a guitar in one of them just by himself. There was one of the boys and a man with dark hair, he was sitting with a book in front of him oblivious to the boys or the camera - the boys had books in front of them too but they were smiling enthusiastically at the camera.

"That's Dean." Bobby appeared at my side and handed me a beer before pointing. I took it and followed his finger to the boy with the guitar. "And that's Sam." He pointed to the young boy hanging out the back seat of the car laughing at Dean. I looked over the photos again, seeing them completely differently. "That was their daddy." He pointed to the dark haired man in the background. "He weren't never there." He took a swig. "Never seen a person completely consumed by grieve as John. Did Dean tell you about his mom, Mary?"

"Briefly." I followed Bobby as he gestured to the couch but as I sat he put his beer down and
rummaged in a pile of books. "He told me that the house caught fire and Dean got Sam out but John couldn't get her out." Bobby started to walk over holding a big book. "That he was convinced there was someone to blame." I leaned forward and put my beer on the coffee table next to his.

He sat on the sofa beside me. "Yeah, he confronted every low life from here to Florida and back to California. He got into people's faces that you don't even want to walk the same side of the street with in case you piss them off, you know?" He had the book on his knees. "I knew it would catch up to him at some point and I prayed that when it did those boys would be well clear and safe." He sighed. "At least I can be thankful for that." He handed me the book and reached for his beer again.

I looked to it then back to him, he nodded so I opened it. It was a photo album. The first photo was of a young child walking unsteadily in a diaper. He pointed. "Sam's first steps." He pointed to the line of something that ran down one side of the photo. "See that, that's Dean. He kept jumping in front telling Sam to run to him." He laughed. "Sam just kept laughing at Dean, just the sound of that boy's voice made Sam giggle like Hell." I smiled.

I pointed to the second. "Is this Dean?"

He nodded. "Yeah." It was a photo of a totally unamused four or five year old Dean sitting at a dining table with a book, head bowed but eyes at the camera. Bobby pointed into the kitchen. "In there, it was his first day at school." I looked to the kitchen. "John didn't want him to 'waste time' with all of that but when he was here he did what normal kids did. And that meant school, just like everyone else, even if it was in my kitchen."

I smiled. "Is this Mary?" I pointed to a picture of a blonde woman holding a baby and a younger Dean over her shoulder, both smiling at the camera which was quite close. The picture wasn't attached like the rest, it was shoved in. I picked it up to look at as Bobby nodded. "She was beautiful."

"Yeah, she was." He looked to it. "Tore that family apart when she died." He took the photo from me and looked at it. "I never met her," he looked to me, "John only came here to get parts for the car, he was a mechanic so he done all of the work himself." He looked back to the photo. "So I never had the pleasure but Dean and Sam lost two parents that night. They got a drill sergeant instead." He handed me the photo back and I slowly looked through the album as he spoke. "Dean practically raised Sam on his own, he made sure Sam had everything he could; if Sam wanted to learn about something Dean made sure he had all of the books; if Sam wanted to learn about something Dean made sure he had all of the books; if Sam was being bothered Dean tried to use the tough love you know, tell him to stand up for himself but he stood in the background watching ready to jump in at any moment; he was there at three in the morning when Sam was running a fever; I taught Dean how to shave but Dean taught Sam; whenever Sam had a problem - whether it was girls or school or boy things, he went to Dean." He pointed to the necklace around my neck. "Sam gave him that."

"I know." I played with it. "He asked me to keep it for him." I felt like I had to explain.

"I know." He smiled. "But I gave that to Sam." I screwed up my brow. "Sam wanted something to give his daddy for Christmas, something special. I had it lying around, had found it in the back of a car ages ago and I thought he might like it so I gave it to Sam, told him it was special, got a ton of magic used on it I said. It will keep someone safe as long as they wear it." I smiled. "He was always worrying about John when they weren't with him. Anyway, he gave it to Dean instead." I raised my eyebrows. "Yeah, John promised he'd be home for Christmas and he wasn't. I didn't exactly press for the details but Sam gave it to Dean. Dean has worn it ever since."

"For how long?"
He looked up as if thinking. "Four years."

"Every day?" I let my head bob a little and Bobby nodded. "I only knew him three hours when he asked me to keep it for him."

Bobby smiled. "Says it all, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, that those two need to talk." I smiled and Bobby looked at me. I knew what he meant. "I know."

He put his hand over the book. "Dean's first date with a girl in town a weekend he was staying here." I smiled and we flipped through the book. I don't know when I fell asleep but I woke up the next morning on Bobby's couch with a blanket over me and I reached up to touch the necklace.

>>>>

[December 24th.]

Merry Christmas, Dean.

Bobby was showing me some pictures of you and Sam when you were kids. I think he did it to ease my worry, I don't know if it worked or not. I love you.

- Cas.

>>>>

[January 1st, 2015.]

Dean,

In all honesty I never thought for one second that I'd be starting this year without you by my side. I hope Christmas didn't suck too much, and New Year's. Ellen said we're going to have a big party to make up for it when you get back.

Where are you, Dean?

I hate eating pie alone.

- Cas.

>>>>

[February 19th, 2015.]

I'm scared now, Dean. I don't care about the holidays. It's been just over a year, give or take, since you left. But it's been six months since I read anything you wrote and that was a letter of sorrow and uncertainty. I'm beginning to hate what you're doing to me, I know you're not doing it on purpose but I don't know how much longer I can stand this.

I don't know how much longer I can hold onto this necklace.

- Cas.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

I apologize in advance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was March and no one really cared when the diner door opened for two men to walk in. Bobby was behind the counter but he was looking in the till counting out change so he didn't look up.

"We're looking for Mr Robert Singer?" A voice said, flat and certain.

"Who's aski-" He trailed off and froze as he looked up.

"The United States Army, Sir." Two men stood there looking at Bobby in uniform, one man seemed to be of a higher rank than the other.

Bobby dropped the money in the till and fumbled for his wallet. "Cas, Ellen!" He shouted in the hatch, never taking his eyes from the men. He shakily found his wallet and then held it out for them "I'm Robert Singer."

Ellen and I walked out of the kitchen behind him chatting and froze as we looked up. The diners all watched as the men looked at Bobby's ID and then to each other. "Mr Singer is there somewhere-"

"Talk!" Bobby boomed and Ellen reached to take his hand. I was holding my breath.

"SPC Dean Winchester went missing at ten hundred hours yesterday morning and was declared KIA by fourteen hundred."

Everything stopped.

I closed my eyes and all I could see was me and Dean down at the pier, feel his hand on my neck and I reached for his necklace. I didn't hear the rest, all I heard was the jingle of the dog tags dropping to the floor at Bobby's feet and I opened my eyes, turning my head, to watch them. As I did, I fell down a second after them, my head bounced on my shoulders and hit the wall as I landed on my left foot and right buttock against the wall on the other side of the kitchen entrance.

"Cas!" Ellen leaned down and I heard the diner door open.

"What's wrong?" Jo's voice rang out with panic before the door bell had finished ringing and her sobs joined Ellen's.

Ellen ran around the counter to her daughter and I saw Bobby's legs shake. He stumbled against the wall and Bart appeared just in time to catch him. I couldn't have moved for anything and I wasn't moving any time soon.

>>>>>
From the Office of SGT Rufus Turner.

Dear Robert Singer,

I am sorry I cannot be there to talk to you face to face but I cannot catch a flight out of Gaza until Monday. We have never met but I had the sincere pleasure of being SPC Dean Winchester's first point of contact at the training base, then in Afghanistan and again here in Gaza. It is not customary for SGTs to write to the listed contacts of an officer after they have been declared KIA but I felt I must. I have sent Dean's dog tags home to you with the notifying officers ahead of his things in the hope you will find some comfort in them. I knew Dean, not as much as his fellow officers and the officers in his charge would have but I felt that he and I shared a friendship, however limited it was. I wanted to tell you that he was my best officer. He followed orders and yet he was never a sheep. He questioned and he disobeyed and then he took his punishment with principle - his reluctant and eventual following of the rules never once meant that his opinions had changed and he made it known. I respected him on so many levels - from his background, abilities, courage, humanity, hunger, compassion to his heart. There was not one soldier he met who did not end up loving Dean Winchester, no matter how they started out.

I cannot tell you a lot about the mission in which Dean was lost but what I can tell you is that he led a team into the middle of a gun battle to take a group of militants who had kidnapped children in the town, children ages ranging from two to fifteen. I chose Dean because three of the children taken in the last raid were children Dean's company had saved from attacks and rehoused. I say I 'chose' Dean, he demanded the assignment. For not turning him down, I will be eternally regretful. Please understand that, I will always have Dean's death on my conscience. They breached and a battle started. At some point, as the children were escaping, an explosive device was discovered. What happened from this point is unknown since Dean was the only soldier still inside the complex with one of the other children he had saved. From what is understood, the child refused to leave and Dean was trying to talk him out. Dean's company heard the explosion from outside as they tried to run the children to safety, doing exactly what their commanding officer had told them to. We could not get to him until what was left of the building was searched, that is why he was MIA before he was declared KIA. There was no way he would have survived a blast at that proximity. Maybe you can take comfort in how quickly it would have happened but I suspect not. I know his officers can't and neither can I.

I am riding back on the plane that will carry Dean's things home. I know that you have a CAO there who will deal with everything but I have included a list of my details, please feel free to contact me at any point. If you wish that I contact anyone else to inform them of this news then please let me know. Anything I can do, do not hesitate to ask. Dean's loss is a truly devastating blow to the US Army, to this base out here, to his company and the others he worked with, and to me personally.

I wish you would have the comfort of being able to put him at rest but, as I said, I am riding home with his things on Monday. Including his letters.

Please tell Castiel that I am truly sorry and I know how little that means at this time. Dean told us about him. He told us all. There was one thing keeping Dean standing straight and that was Castiel.

Again, if there is anything, let me know.

My deepest sympathies.

Sergeant Rufus Turner.
We closed the diner and Ellen dragged us all to Bobby's house. I don't remember when Kevin arrived but one minute he wasn't there and the next he was. He didn't try to intervene or fuss or smother - he just sat there ready for Jo and helping Ellen do things that Bobby and I were too numb to even acknowledge. Jo just sat curled up against the couch between it and the table, occasionally she would lean on Bobby's leg as he sat in the middle of the couch but he didn't even respond. I sat on the end staring at the photographs on the table. Just him and that guitar.

I don't know when it happened but at some point I fell asleep on the end there and when I woke up it was dark. I was the only person in the sitting room and I sat up, turning to look at the windows when lights blared in through the glass. I heard an engine too and I wiped my eyes trying to see my watch. I don't know why, I didn't care what time it was, it didn't matter any more. Nothing did.

Ellen walked down the stairs and opened the door, I only heard her talk. "Come in, hon."

"Thanks." The guy walked into view and put bags down. I couldn't see much in the light but he was tall and his hair clearly wasn't Army reg. I felt the emotion bubble behind my eyes again. He didn't see me and he turned to the young woman who joined him at his side. I heard Ellen close the door as he spoke. "This is my fiancée, Jess." She held out her hand and Ellen shook it.

"I'm Ellen."

"It's nice to meet you, I'm sorry it was like this." She lowered her head with a sad smile.

"Yes, so am I." Ellen looked to the man. "Jo and Kevin are asleep."

"Kevin?" He asked.

"Boyfriend." Ellen waved her hand in the air to dismiss it.

"Sam?" Bobby's voice carried from the kitchen.

"Bobby?" Sam looked around the doorway as he took a step into the darkness to meet Bobby half way. They shared a hug as they mumbled into each other's shoulders and I heard Bobby begin to cry again. It dawned on me that he was Dean's brother.

"This is Jess." Ellen gestured to her.

It was when they pulled back, Bobby walking to shake her hand and Sam watching him, that Sam noticed me. I just stared at him, what else could I do?

When they pulled back the others looked and saw me. Ellen leaned to put a lamp on and I came into full view.

"Oh, Sam." Bobby wiped his nose and sniffed. "This is Castiel." Ellen wiped a tear for him. "Cas."

I stood. "I'm Sam." I nodded and put my hand out in response. This wasn't fair. This isn't how I should have met Sam, Dean should have been introducing us. Mid-shake he smiled a little. "You were his boyfriend." I froze and we let go of each other, he pointed to my chest. "It's the only way you'd have that." I looked down and felt a panic in me but it wasn't mine to keep. I had been looking after it for someone, and he wasn't coming to get it. Ever. I started to take it off and he put
his hand out so I paused. "Please, keep it." I just looked at him. "Really."

"Thank you." I placed it back against my chest and rubbed the charm in between my fingers. I felt the panic subside but I felt my chest swell. This was not how it was supposed to go. Dean was supposed to tell me to keep it.

"How long were you together?" He walked forwards a few steps and stood facing me, his hands in his pockets.

"I met him the day he left for the Army and I've been waiting for him ever since." I could feel the emotion in the room and my chest hurt. It was like it was happening again, it was crashing down on me again, the realization. This was real. "He said he'd come back." I lifted my hand to my mouth as my eyes welled up and I suddenly felt sick. This wasn't how the story was supposed to be told. Dean should have been there to tell it with me. "Excuse me." I ran to the kitchen and leaned over the sink before I threw up. I felt Ellen come up behind me and rub my back.

"It's okay, hon."

"He said he'd come back to me." I then spat into the sink before it came up again, I couldn't see and my legs were on autopilot, shaking underneath me.

"I know. I know he did."

He should have been there.

>>>><<

It was a couple of nights later, I was sat, head resting in my left palm on the arm of Bobby's couch, where I had seldom moved from, when I heard a noise. I looked to the stairs as Sam shuffled down them. He was just in flannel pyjama trousers. bare chest and bare feet, his hair was messy as if he had been tossing and turning and his jaw was strained.

"Cas?" He turned a lamp on. "Why are you sleeping down here?" I shrugged and sat up. "Just grabbing water."

I rubbed my eyes, playing with the charm and yawning. "How was the flight?" I muttered. "When you arrived." I hadn't said much to him since the day we met and I felt I should, even if it was days late.

"Long." I knew what he meant, even a four hour flight can feel like forever. "So you met him the day he left?" I nodded. "Wow." He filled up his glass.

"He wrote to me." I sniffed. "He told me about you."

Sam turned off the tap and walked slowly back into the sitting room. "What did he say?"

"Just that you hadn't spoken in years and that he wanted to talk to you at the funeral but he was worried you'd reject him."

Sam inhaled and nodded. "He's probably right." He sighed. "Stupid pettiness." He took a drink and looked to me. "You loved him?"

"I love him."

He nodded again and looked to the side. "Me too."
Chapter End Notes

The "It was march and no one really cared" part is a nod to the line "And one name read and no one really cared" in Ty England's version of "Travellin' Soldier" which this fic was inspired by.

KIA is Killed In Action in case anyone was confused.

A CAO is a Casualty Assistance Officer and they pretty much liaise for the family/emergency contacts after an injury or death. She would have been with the notifying officers when they arrived but not in the cafe.
Chapter 11

Military honors, that's what he got. Uniformed officers, lone instrument and a flag over the empty coffin. It was all ceremony but we were determined that he would be remembered as the hero that he was. There were more people in uniform at the service than without but Dean's life had barely started so that made sense.

Bobby had Dean's dog tags now, I had his necklace and the headstone had his name.

I stood with Sam, Jess, Ellen, Bobby, Jo, Kevin and Kevin's mother at the graveside. SGT Rufus Turner marched ahead, leading the coffin. I was told by Anna, the CAO, that the coffin was carried, front to back, by PFC Walker, PFC McLeod, SPC Miles, PFC Bradbury, PV2 Jones and SPC Hannah. The sound of the wind howling as the Sergeant's commands echoed was haunting. All of the bearers were crying and yet I did not even feel like I was inside of my body. This couldn't be real, this was all some sick joke and it'd all be over soon. But as the service men and women saluted the coffin and stepped back out of the way more and more soldiers stepped forward to salute the coffin and I felt each wave like someone reminding me that, no, this was real.

Castiel, Dean is dead. Dean is dead. He is dead. He's never coming back. He's dead.

I shook my head. No. How could this be real? When was the reveal? When was the punchline? When would someone pull me from this nightmare? Even if it meant that Ellen nudged me back to consciousness and I had just been day-dreaming about the soldier at the end of the diner who I had never met yet, I would have given it all up, all that we shared, if it meant that he was okay.

I cried.

It didn't come from my eyes, or my throat. I sobbed. It came from somewhere deeper. I wailed. It was so heavy on me that I felt my legs give way. It couldn't be real. Sam's arms wrapped around me from my left and he came to the ground with me. It was as if there was somewhere deeper in me than my soul. I vaguely heard him talking to me, telling him he understood, that it was okay, that he had me. That deeper place was broken. I felt his arms pull me towards him and his voice tighten with emotion.

We cried.

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We all went back to Bobby's and the place was full of people. He was only twenty-three - something occurred to me right then so I walked to Sam. "His birthday." He turned to look at me. "I didn't even know when he turned twenty-three."

"January twenty-fourth." He croaked.

I nodded and walked away. He was only twenty-three and all of these people were for him.

"Excuse me?" I looked up at a man about my age. Dean didn't know my birthday either, he didn't know he had missed my birthday and I didn't realize I had missed his. We had been so wrapped up in talking to each other that nothing else really mattered; birthdays, valentines day. Nothing.

I thought back to the CAO telling us who was who. "Walker, right?" I held out my hand and he shook it.
"Yes. I saw you at the graveside." We parted and I smiled a little, thinking about my breakdown but not apologetic. I was barely keeping it together enough to talk to him. "I was in Win-" He closed his eyes and then opened them again. "I was in Dean's company." I nodded. "Can I ask how you...?" He seemed sorry to ask.

"Oh, I'm sorry." I closed my own eyes for a second. "It's been an emotional week." I looked to the side. "Year, actually." He nodded. "My name is Castiel." I was going to say more but he widened his eyes and opened his mouth.

"You're Castiel?" I paused and then nodded. "You look different than I remember." He seemed to mutter that to himself. "Can you excuse me for just one second, please?" He pointed to me with his index finger and I nodded again, unsure of what I had said.

He walked away and I watched him for a second, he approached his Sergeant and I looked to the ceiling while closing my eyes, touching the necklace and exhaling. *Keep it together, Cas.* I looked back down when the Sergeant approached me.

"Mr Novak." He saluted and I nodded. "Sergeant Rufus Turner, we spoke on the phone?"

"Yes, of course." I hesitated. "Are you allowed to...?" I held out my hand and he smiled before shaking it.

"I wonder if you would permit me to present to you my officers?" He gestured to the line of men to my left that I only just noticed.

"What are they doing?" I barely heard Sam ask Bobby as they and the rest gradually turned to watch the Sergeant introduce himself.

"They're paying their respects to the widower, son."

"Is that just an Army thing or...?" He looked to Bobby waiting, well aware that Dean and I were not married.

"No," Bobby squeezed Ellen's hand, "*that,*" he nodded to me and the soldiers, "is purely a respect thing."

I nodded and smiled as best I could, not understanding why he would want to introduce them so formally but I figured it was the Army so perhaps I wasn't supposed to.

The Sergeant took a step to my right and turned to face the line. "Private First Class Gordon Walker."

The man I had been talking to stepped in front of me and saluted before putting his hand out again. "Mr Novak, I was on the enlist bus with SPC Winchester."

I nodded unsure of what was happening. "He told me about you." He swallowed and I smiled reassuringly. "Right to the good part." He smiled and faced his SGT, the Sergeant nodded and he walked away to the corner to watch and listen.

The next soldier walked up, I recognized her from the service. The Sergeant waited for her to salute. "Private First Class Charlie Bradbury."

"Mr Novak. D-" She looked to her Sergeant then back to me. "SPC Winchester recommended me for logistics." She smiled. "Best choice ever." She was dismissed and walked over to stand with Walker.
"Specialist Erica Hannah."

"Mr Novak." She saluted and then reached for my hand. "I don't have the time to tell you what SPC Winchester did for me on that charter to-" Her Sergeant cleared his throat and she looked. "Sir." She turned back to me. "I can't anyway but let me just say he saved my life for the first time and not the last." I smiled and shamefully asked myself why he saved their lives and not his own. Then I felt awful.

"Private First Class Fergus McLeod. British Army."

He shook my hand. "Mr Novak, basically I was a knob and he called me on it." The Sergeant sighed and he looked. "Tell me I'm wrong?" The Sergeant just tipped his head. "Exactly." I let out a little laugh and he looked back to me. "He was a solid soldier and a solid man." I nodded tearing up as he stepped away.

"Specialist Ash Miles."

"The famous Ash." I shook his hand and he smirked a little bashfully. "What happened to the..." I pointed to my head.

He realized and the Sergeant looked down a little. "Respect." He nodded and I understood that Ash had elected to shave his head to meet the criteria to carry the coffin.

He was dismissed and they all walked back over around me. "Please, call me Cas." I offered and reached to touch the charm.

"How are you feeling by the way?" McLeod asked.

I looked to him. Surely he wasn't asking me how I was dealing with Dean's death?

"The car." The Sergeant explained.

"Oh, that." I rubbed my neck. "I'm fine."

They all looked to their Sergeant and he leaned to me. "I hope you don't mind but Dean told us about Gabriel."

I raised my eyebrow and Charlie put her hand out to me. "Nothing personal, just that he was a douche and wouldn't leave you alone."

"I think my ears are burning." The officers parted and turned to reveal Gabriel standing in a suit and tie.

"Get. Out." I whispered through gritted teeth as my eyes begun to burn. Not here, please not here. I was going to lose it and I knew it.

"I come in peace." He held his hands out. "I just wanted to pay my respects."

"Respects paid, now get out!" Bobby shouted as he stalked the floor towards him, Sam and Ellen following behind. Ellen stood, her right shoulder in front of Bobby as he stopped and Sam behind him with no idea what was happening. Bobby turned his head a little towards Sam's direction. "Gabriel."

"This?" McLeod pointed. "I could take this one out single handed." He looked around and pointed to a soldier I didn't know but I had heard him being referred to as Fitzgerald. "Even string bean
could." Turner glanced to McLeod but didn't call him on it. No one did.

"You need to leave." Ellen pointed to him as she put her right arm out across Bobby's body. "I will not have this happen here."

"I'm not here to fight." He put his hands out to Bobby. "I swear." He turned to me. "I just wanted to say that you were right about everything and I'm sorry."

"Go." Sam said firmly and a little angry. He had heard the story by now.

"Okay, okay." He took a step back. "I just wanted to say that. I wanted to pay my respects to him." He turned to me again. "I saw the way you spoke about him that day in the parking lot." I shuffled on my feet. "I asked you before you got hit if you'd ever love him like you loved me." Bobby took another step forward and I held out my hand, I wanted to hear what he was going to say. And then I'd punch him myself. "I told you you'd never find anything like what we had but," he panicked when my jaw tightened, "I was right because I saw the way you spoke about him. When you threw me out of the diner and you basically thanked me for hurting you because it led you to Dean-"

"Don't say his name." It came out in a growl. I didn't want to hear it from him. Not now.

"Okay, but I could see that we might have cared for each other but D- he was exactly what I had never been."

"What was that?" Bobby spat.

He turned to look. "Worthy." He looked back to me. "I never deserved you or your love and I can tell, just by the way you spoke about him, that you loved him. You loved him more than..." he shook his head and looked to the side as if looking for a word and then shrugged and looked back to me. "Anything." I swallowed and touched the necklace again. "And I wanted to say that I'm sorry that I made it so that he was out there worrying about you. I'm sorry for what I did, then and now. I'm sorry that you got hit by the car. I'm sorry that he's gone. And I'm sorry that you don't get to feel the way you did when you spoke about him to me everyday. You should have been forever, I could see that in your eyes."

I stepped towards him, through the officers. "Why would you say something like that? Why would you say we were meant to be forever? You didn't even know him!" I could feel myself tear up quickly. "Did you come here to gloat? The love of my life is dead and you come here to rub my face in it?!"

"No!" He screwed up his face. "I would never do that. I just wanted you to know that it wasn't your fault. Despite everything I did, I know you and I know you will tailspin." He pointed to me and looked at Ellen. "Look after him." He paused and looked to Bobby, square in the eyes. "Or you'll have another of these," he gestured around to the service, "to organise." It wasn't a threat.

He was right.

All I could do was watch him pass the picture of Dean in his uniform and bow his head before disappearing out of the door. I looked at the picture. I broke down again where I was, surrounded by officers, a couple of ex-marines, locals I had seen in the diner, cops, teachers and pretty much everyone Dean had ever met in his short life. They watched while Ellen ran to me, some putting their hands over their mouths and crying with me and others just standing watching knowing how unfair life was, she fell to the floor with me while I sobbed into her shoulder.

She cradled me while I looked down at the blurred necklace dangling from my neck between our
bodies.

The only thing I had left of my Dean.
Ten months later and everything was different.

I hadn't stepped back into the diner since the day the officers had given us the news. I just couldn't do it. It was the scene of the best and worst thing that ever happened to me and I wasn't sure which one hurt most. I wasn't able to get a job in town, probably because I just didn't want one. I functioned enough but I just couldn't muster up more than that.

Like I said, I felt broken from deep within me.

I was living at Dean's childhood home with Sam and Jess who had collectively arranged to take a year out. Sam took Dean's death harder than I think even he expected to.

After the funeral he was fine and then the next day he just crumbled. Over the course of that day he descended into Hell. He wouldn't eat breakfast, he didn't want to shower, he didn't want to do anything. He sat on the other end of the couch from me and when he was asked if he wanted lunch he barely even mustered that "No, thanks." He engagement in a little conversation with the odd one-word answer but by supper you would have missed him faintly shake his head unless you were looking for it.

He fell asleep on the couch that night, in Bobby's, I moved to the armchair and settled in for the night.

I woke in the early hours of the morning to sobbing.

I didn't know what to do. Should I pretend I was asleep? Should I talk to him?

In the end I did nothing. I simply closed my eyes and let him cry.

I dreamed about the two brothers standing at opposite ends of their father's coffin not looking at each other except for the angry glances. Then the sad ones they sneaked when the other wasn't looking. Ellen told me it had been raining - 'the Heavens had opened' is what she really said. I thought about how neither of them realized that that was the last time they would see each other and yet they just turned and walked in different directions. Neither even saying a word about their father to the intimate group of people who had gathered to see him pass on.

When I woke Sam was still lying on the couch, eyes wide open staring, red and puffy, at the coffee table. I knew that look. I sat up, rubbed my eyes and stared out the windows for the same reason - because there was no want in us to do anything else.

But eventually we did get up, we showered, we ate and we made arrangements. We had to. I told Ellen I couldn't go back in there, into that diner, I just couldn't.

So, when I couldn't make rent, I moved into the Winchester family home.

Six months after the funeral Sam opened the door to the house and I looked around as I followed him inside. I had boxes of things but I had told him to just throw them anywhere, I wouldn't need them. I had a bag in my hand with some clothes and various other things. It's all I needed. The rest was just baggage that everyone refused to let me throw out.

"Cas, please don't hesitate." I followed Sam up the stairs, without thinking, the first day I moved in. "This is your house, you're not a guest." I nodded not even really listening. I thought about baby
Dean being brought home and carried up to bed at night. I thought about four year old Dean running down the stairs with baby Sam in his arms, stopping to look back up as his mother screamed in the distance. Sam maybe stirring a little and Dean looking back to him before running down the stairs and out the door assuring Sam everything was okay. I turned to look myself, out of the thin net curtain over the door window at the little boy holding his brother and shouting for his parents. The little boy who could nothing but stand and watch it burn. The boy who had decided he would be the last one in the building and ordered his soldiers outside. The soldiers who stood outside shouting on their commanding officer. Their friend. Their savour.

"Cas?" Sam said and I turned to look up at him, he had stopped a few steps above me. "You alright?"

"Yeah." I slowly nodded. "I was just thinking about Dean." Sam gave me a little smile and I followed him up the stairs.

"Here we go." He gestured to the door and I opened it without thinking. I froze in the doorway. The room was pretty bare except a dresser, a bed and a picture of a woman on the night stand, Mary. It was a single bed, it looked new and barely slept in. On the bed were a pile of old folded up clothes. Jeans, a shirt and a t-shirt with a watch just placed on top. "It's Deans old room." I turned to look. "I guess he must have been sleeping in here before he left." He pointed. "New bed."

I shook my head as I looked back. "I can't."

"What do you mean?" Sam watched as I turned and hurried back down the stairs. "Cas?" He followed me.

"I'm sorry, Sam. Thank you for the gesture but I can't, I just can't." I was panicking and I knew I was beginning to cry.

He grabbed my arm and spun me around as I got to the door. "Cas, stop." I kept protesting. "Stop, okay, I'm sorry, okay." He held my shoulders and forced me to look at him. "You don't have to, okay?" I kept shaking my head, unable to see properly through the water in my eyes. "Cas, you don't have to. Just stop." He pulled me into a hug and I let one hand come up to rest on his back. I spoke through tears. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I should have thought." He 'shh'ed me.

"It was a nice thing... to do." I mumbled. "But I can't. It's not fair. That should be our room." He nodded. "I can't."

"I know. I'm sorry." He pulled back to look at me. "But you are going nowhere." I pointed up the stairs and he took my arm. "Stop. I don't have any other beds but we have a couch until we find something." He looked to me and I turned to look at it. "Please? You know I can't let you leave. Dean wouldn't." He stopped himself. "Dean would never forgive me."

I nodded.

"Yeah?" He tipped his head forward a little.

I nodded again and inhaled. "Thank you."

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Before we knew it it was March again. The last year had just blurred past, I don't even remember
I had gone for a few interviews, caught a few buses and ate some meals. I had cried more times than I could count and the showers seemed to happen every five minutes. Sam and Jess were preparing to go back to California to pick up their first year again in a few months.

"You can stay here, Cas." Sam said to me one morning as he was leaving for work. At the local diner. "It'll be empty."

I curled up on the couch and nodded. "Thank you, I'll think about it."

I pulled the box onto my knee as the door closed and the engine started up. Bobby had offered Sam the Impala and he had refused to touch it, he had tried, apparently there was some tradition around driving your fallen brother's car around but he just couldn't. We all understood that. He had offered it to me but I couldn't. So Sam had bought a run-around car from Bobby and I was taking the bus. Dean's baby stayed asleep under the sheet in between Bobby's tune ups. I opened the box and looked as the letters slowly rose up a little from the extra room. I touched the necklace and looked down at the handwriting of the first letter. As I pulled them out I noticed a change - they were more rushed, more used to writing my name and address perhaps, but definitely with less flourish. I had been so eagerly anticipating his letters I had missed the post marks and the change in the way he wrote. Everything became less about sitting down and enjoying writing to me and more about rushing to tell me news before he had to go back into the pit. He had told me on the phone that he had done some things he never thought he would do and that they would haunt him but I just let it drop and I shouldn't have. What had happened to the man who's departure had meant Dean's promotion? What did he mean when he told me of Megan Master's death and put it in inverted commas? What had really happened to her? What more had he been unable to say? What more had he been trying to say and I had missed? I had ignored.

I opened the last letter I got from him.

_I just wish I was there with you, Castiel Novak. I wish I was there to say everything to you that I don't have time to write._

I looked to the blot of ink after the next 'I' and how he had tried to join it to the next word. What was he going to write first? What had he not had enough time to write? I looked up to the previous paragraph.

_I wish I had the guts to write it all down. Or time._

Guts? This letter had bothered me from the minute I got it. What was Dean not saying? Was it what I had thought? Was it what I had hoped? I put the letter to my chest and closed the lid over as the tears fell. To protect them. It was those lines that had sealed it for me. I had to tell him. I had to tell him how I felt. He had asked me what it was that Gabriel had asked me and he had asked me what Ellen had asked me. I don't even know why I told him about them, maybe I wanted him to ask, I don't know. And he did.

I remember writing the letter and pausing after telling him that if I didn't tell him now then I never would.

_Castiel James Novak - totally in love with you._

"I always will be." I whispered and leaned against the couch.

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Sam came in from work and I had been waiting on him all day. I had to know. He came in and ran
up stairs to get changed. When he came down he headed to the kitchen.

"Sam?" I stood and walked towards him.

"Yeah, Cas?" He started fussing in cupboards. Jess was still at the office in town and wouldn't be back for another hour so it was Sam's turn to cook dinner.

"Can I ask-" I hesitated and he turned to look. "Tell me to mind my own business but I just wondered-" I stopped again.

"Do the ends of these sentences appear at any point?"

I laughed. I genuinely laughed. That was exactly how Dean would have responded. Sam smiled as if he was thinking the same thing. "I apologize. I was looking through my letters." Sam seemed to instantly turn worried. "Why did you and Dean stop talking?"

Sam inhaled and turned back to the cupboard before pulling things out. "Stubbornness." He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Dad was dragging us everywhere." I stood listening as he began to make dinner. Casserole by the looks of it. "I had been in and out of schools all my life, always the new kid, always using different names and I never had anyone."

"Except Dean." I said it a little defensively and I hadn't meant to.

"Yes." He smiled as if sensing it. "Yes, I had Dean but Dean blindly followed Dad. Yes, he was always there for me if I had any problems, if I needed anything I went to Dean. But the one thing I wanted he couldn't give me."

"What?"

"A normal life." He shrugged his shoulders. "I wanted to graduate high school and get a degree, I wanted a wife and kids, I wanted a mailbox and a local pub, I wanted to know the people who work in the local store, I wanted routine Saturday nights out with my friends." He seemed to get more annoyed as he spoke. "I wanted wedding invitations to Mr and Mrs Winchester, I wanted to be stressed from work, I wanted a mortgage in my name. I wanted reunions and holiday photos, I wanted to sleep in my own bed and get caught out when the sprinklers came on unexpectedly. I wanted a dog, family barbecues." He grunted. "I wanted nights in the diner and playing football until it was too dark." He slammed the plate down. "Dean didn't understand, he didn't understand because he had all of that!"

"Sam-"

"He had all of that and it was ripped away from him. And he was in pain. He never got to grieve for his mother because he was too busy playing Sir, yes Sir with Dad and committing fraud with credit cards." I raised my eyebrows. "He got all of that and it was ripped away. But he never understood that I never had that. He could have left from anywhere in America for the damn army and he left from here, because this was his home!" He opened the fridge and pulled things out, dumping them on the counter. "He has memories in here, he remembers running down those stairs," he gestured, "he remembers everything. He knew Mom and he knew Dad, he knew the Dad we had before this all happened." He picked up a knife and chopped into something I couldn't see before he stopped to point to himself as he turned every so often in my direction. "I don't. Mom to me is the woman who lives in the frame," he pointed to the living room and I looked at Mary smiling back, "Dad to me is the drill Sergeant who got us up at ridiculous times and told us to keep up while he was running after people then either leaving us or blaming us when he never caught them." I could hear the knife hitting the chopping board, hard. "And after all of that, after I say I'm
done and run away at 15, after Dad stands there, as I'm threatening to leave, and opens the door, after he tells me not come back, and after Dean stood there and said nothing. After all of that, what does he do?" Sam laughed but it was sad and suddenly full of emotion. "He joins the frigging Army." He chopped on more time before leaning his hand there and letting his head fall. "He had to go and die."

I stood there watching his back shake a little.

"After everything, even he left me."

I walked forward and lightly put my right hand on Sam's back. "I know."

Sam turned his head to look at me, tears running down his nose.

"I'm here, Sam." He turned and hugged me. I finally understood why Dean couldn't talk to Sam at the funeral. I understood why he thought Sam would reject him. I understood why Sam had said he was probably right. And I understood why he had worn Sam's necklace right up to the five minute warning.

Regret.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

When I was writing this I didn't really notice that I switched to third person from here on out but I kind of had to. The original plan for the story was different than the turn it took, the original story would have kept the 1st POVs switching back and forth but this one meant that sometimes it had to be 3rd. The chapters do continue from POVs but the narrative stays third person. Sorry if this screws with you but it just happened and I'll try to correct any shifts (original posting on ff.net will prob be slightly different than this one as a result).

After reading through those letters and with what Sam had said Cas couldn't stop thinking about it. It ran through his head every single second, every one that it could get a space between his time with Dean and what could have been. What should have been.

Early that morning he put the phonebook down on the table and sat down with his cellphone. Cas scanned the names looking for the right one. There wasn't any to mistake it for. It wasn't exactly a popular name. He typed in the numbers and pressed 'call', he blew out as he lifted the phone to my ear and it rang.

"Hello?" A man's voice answered. It was older, it was perhaps huskier but it was him.

"Lucifer?" Cas said it shakey and unsure.

"Castiel?" He paused. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, Luke." He sighed as he felt my eyes threatening him again. He put his left hand over them and looked down.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

Cas smiled a little, not for long. "I... No I'm not okay, Luke."

"Where are you?"

"Kansas."

"I'm coming." Cas could hear rustling.

I lifted my head. "No, you don't have to-"

"I'm coming. What's the town?"

"I-I'm in Lawrence."

"How did you end up there?"

"Where are you?"

"Michigan. I'm going to fly down."
"Lucifer-
"Cas, just let me be there."

"You don't even know what's wrong?" Cas found himself welling up.

"Cas, all you have to do is tell me you need me and I'm there." There was pause in any movement. "Do you need me?"

Cas had pursed his lips together as he leaned on the phone book. He slowly nodded. "Yes."

"Then I'm coming."

Three hours later Cas was waiting at the bus stop when, funnily enough, a bus stopped. He stood up properly when he saw him. He was older but still handsome. Cas knew it had been a long time since he had seen any of his family but they all looked the same in his head. He forgot that they aged since he wasn't there to witness it.

He got off the bus and slowly walked to Cas. He had a top and jeans but no coat.

"Aren't you cold?" Cas asked.

"Freezing." They laughed. "I forgot to check the weather before I left." He looked down. "I left in a hurry."

"I'm sorry." Cas looked him square in the eyes as he lifted his head again.

"It's not your fault, I should have checked." He smiled.

"I didn't mean about that."

Lucifer nodded and they shared a moment.

"Well, baby bro." Lucifer rubbed his hands together. "Let's get out of the cold. I'm starved."

"There's a cafe along here." Cas started walking.

Lucifer pointed to the diner across the road. "We could go in there?"

"No." Cas stated and picked up his speed.

The cafe was just at the end of the street so Cas pushed the door open and held it for Lucifer.

Jo had been watching Cas from the window wondering where he was getting a bus to since he had let three pass him. She had watched the man get off and got Sam's attention.

"Who's that?" She asked, looking up to Sam as he walked over.

Sam paused. "I have no idea."

Lucifer and Cas sat down in the cafe. He rubbed his hands together. "That's better."

A woman walked over pulling her pad and pen out of her apron. "What can I get you?" She looked up and saw Cas. "Cas?" Cas looked up. "How are you?"
He smiled a little. "I'm fine, Rachel. How are you?"

She ignored it. "How's Sam?"

Lucifer looked between them.

"He's good. He and Jess are going back to California in the fall." She tutted. "Yeah."

"Are you going to be in that big house all alone?" She put her hand on his shoulder.

"Not sure yet." He smiled again and looked to Lucifer who realized that there was a lot he needed to catch up on. "Could we have two teas please?"

She remembered herself. "Of course, honey." She looked to Lucifer. "Anything else?"

He smiled. "Could I have waffles, please?"

She nodded and wandered away, scribbling in her pad.

Lucifer leaned forward. "Talk."

Cas shuffled in his seat. "Well for the past-"

Lucifer interrupted. "No. From the very, very beginning. Like how did you end up here?" Cas sighed and steeled himself. Lucifer watched in silence for a few minutes. Rachel walked back over with the teas. "It's been a long time, brother, I did not- thank you," he smiled to her and she walked away, "I did not board a flight at an hours notice for anything less than a run down." He poured milk into his tea and stirred it before warming his hands on the mug.

Cas put his hands around his mug and inhaled. "You know why I left?"

Lucifer scoffed. "Please. I knew before you did." Cas looked to him. "And there was no way you were going to stay there, not after the way they reacted with me."

"Why did you leave?"

"Zar didn't tell you?" Lucifer looked confused as he raised his eyes to meet his brother's.

"There's a lot of things Balthazar didn't tell me." Cas muttered and Lucifer raised an eyebrow. "You first."

"I wasn't happy, Cas. I wasn't happy with the way we were being treated. I mean, Dad cared more about his damn farm animals than us. We were nothing but workers to him." He looked down. "And he was doing it wrong anyway." Cas laughed and he looked up. "Well, he was! He thought he was some mighty craftsman with that bloody farm. Farm. It was barely a petting zoo. The way he was doing it was flawed but that wasn't just it. They were just so restricting. I mean, Anna had a few problems-" Cas screwed up his brow not having a clue. "See, you didn't even know." He sighed and rubbed his face. "Anna heard..." He hesitated. "Voices."

Cas looked surprised and then back to Lucifer. "Is that why she went to bordering school?"

Lucifer choked on his tea. "Bordering school?" He wiped his mouth. "Did Zar lose his voice or something?" He leaned forward. "A little therapy, a little space and she would have been fine. A doctor is what she needed. Do you know what she got?" Cas shook his head. "An exorcism."

Cas sighed and brought his right hand up to his forehead and rubbed it. "So you left?"
"Oh no, Castiel." Cas looked up. "No. I got Lilith pregnant." Cas' eyes widened. "Yeah, and I was banished."

"Banished?"

They looked up as Rachel brought over the waffles. "Thank you." She left again. "Yes, that was exactly what Dad said. Banished."

"I was an abomination." Cas sighed and looked down.

Lucifer put his hand out and held Cas' wrist. "Hey, look at me." Cas looked up. "You are not an abomination." He pointed with his other hand. "You're not." Cas smiled and Lucifer moved his hands to the plate. "Dad was an ass." Cas scoffed. "It's an understatement but hey, you have to have respect for the dead, don't you?"

Cas grabbed Lucifer's arm and he looked up. "Dad's dead?!"

Lucifer widened his eyes. "You didn't know?" Cas shook his head. "Oh, Cas, I'm so sorry. I am going to kill Zar when I next talk to him."

Cas swallowed. "Let me catch you up."

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"Okay, now I'm definitely going to kill him." Lucifer pushed the empty plate to the side. "And that Gabriel."

Cas rubbed his face. "I don't care." He shrugged. "I never cared."

Lucifer sighed. "What was Dean like?"

Cas smiled. "Perfect." Lucifer smiled and Cas cringed. "I know it's cliche but I don't care. He is." He lowered his head. "Was."

Lucifer put his hand out and twirled the charm, Cas looked up at the movement then down at it. "Funny little thing." He looked up as Lucifer spoke. "Just like you."

Cas laughed and nodded. "That's one way of putting it." When Lucifer let go he touched it himself. "Sam and Jess are going and I just wonder if it's time to move on."

"Running again?" Cas shrugged guiltily. "Well, if there is one thing I know about us Novaks, Cas, it's that we run away at the first sign of trouble. As soon as the going gets tough the Novak gets going. But I also know that we usually only run when we want to stay." He tipped his empty cup. "I'm surprised you didn't take off right after the funeral."

"I thought about it." Cas admitted. "But I couldn't leave, it would be like leaving him." Lucifer nodded and Cas looked out the window at the road that led to the pier. "Now, it hurts to stay."

"Well, whatever you decide, baby bro, I have a spare room." They shared a smile. "Any time you need it you just let me know." Cas nodded. "And now I have your number." He smiled and widened his eyes.

"Indeed." Cas nodded.

Lucifer looked at his watch. "I'm afraid I have to head on out, Cas. I promised Lilith I would get back before lights out and I have to run to the garage and argue with the mechanic."
Cas stood and Lucifer fished money from his wallet to put on the table before standing himself and they gestured to Rachel who smiled and said goodbye as they left. "I'll come to the airport."

"No, you won't." Lucifer held the door for him. They bundled into the street. "Cas, do you need money?"

Cas turned sharply to look. "No?"

"So... you just wanted to talk?"

Cas' face tensed with hurt. "I would not call you after this long to ask for money, Luke." He shrugged. "I wouldn't even ask you for money if we had spoken yesterday. How can you ask that?" They slowly started to walk towards the bus stop.

"I'm sorry." Lucifer sighed to himself. "I just never thought you would need to talk to me." Cas looked confused. "I don't know." He shrugged. "I haven't spoken to any of us except Anna and Zar. Who I am going to kill."

"Leave him, I don't care." Cas shrugged as they stopped at the bus stop. "Has he grown up? Matured."

"I didn't know he wasn't until now." He hissed to himself. "Bloody bastard." He looked to Cas. "Sorry." He exhaled trying to calm down.

"Seriously, Luke, I don't hate him or Gabriel." Cas smiled. "I ended up here."

"Even after everything?"

"Yes, Dean was the best thing to ever happen to me and I wouldn't change it for anything unless it meant that he would be here but..." Cas trailed off. "Are you happy?" Cas shuffled on his feet.

Lucifer looked surprised then he smiled. "Yes." He took his wallet out and opened it to show Cas the pictures. "That's Ruby." He pointed to the child in school uniform, she was about five years old. "That was elementary but it won't be long now until middle school." He took a nervous breath and Cas looked up.

"This fall?" He nodded. "She's beautiful." He smiled and turned the photo flap over to see a baby on the other said. "Is this Ruby way back then?"

"No." He smiled. "No, that's Adam." Cas looked again. "He's five months."

"Luke!" Cas smiled and handed it back. "He's beautiful." Lucifer nodded and put his wallet back. "Are you sure they're yours?" Lucifer opened his mouth into a shocked smile and Cas started laughing. "I'm kidding." Lucifer looked to the side as the bus came and Cas put his hand on his arm. "I'm kidding." He sighed. "You sure you don't want me to come to the airport?"

"Not after that." Lucifer shook his head. "No, I got it." He moved towards Cas a little to give him a hug, kind of worried but Cas let him. Lucifer wrapped his arms around Cas' neck and Cas brought his around his back. "It's good to see you laugh, bro."

Cas smiled. "It's good to see you, period."

Lucifer squeezed and then pulled back just enough to take Cas' face in his hands. "Let me know what you decide." Cas nodded. "And keep in touch this time," he paused, "please?"
Cas nodded again. "I will, to both."

"Alright." He kissed Cas on his forehead and they squeezed each other one last time before Lucifer jumped on the bus and it slowly pulled away.

As it did Cas thought about the last time he had watched a bus pull away. His hand came up to the charm again before he walked along the road back to the house.

"What the hell?" Sam and Jo stood with Bobby watching as Cas walked away with a little smile on his face.

"You can't expect him to never have anyone ever again." Bobby offered. "He's twenty-eight."

Sam sighed. "I know." He rubbed his face. "I wish he could tell us, I thought we were family." Jo put her hand up and rubbed his arm. "I guess not."
Cas considers what to do now.

Chapter Summary

Cas thought about it. He sat on the step outside Sam's house thinking about it and drinking a beer as the car pulled up.

Sam got out and smiled briefly to Cas as he shut the door. "Hey." Sam offered.

"Hello, Sam." Cas looked back to his beer.

Sam walked the steps and when he got to the door he stopped and sighed. "Who is he?"

Cas turned his upper body so he could face Sam. "Who is who?"

Sam turned fully. "The person you're dating."

"What?" Cas almost dropped the bottle.

Sam sighed and tried to smile. "You can tell me, you really can." Cas couldn't figure out what to say and it left a window for Sam to go on a rampage. "I swear, at first I was mad, I thought about Dean and how you could possibly do that to him but then I really thought about it." He took a few steps forward and then walked down the steps to sit next to Cas. "I realized that you are allowed to have a life now, I mean you're only in your twenties, Cas," Sam sighed, "you're allowed to move on. No one is saying your happiness had to die with Dean," he turned to looked at Cas whose face had a touch of sadness mixed in with confusion, "it was a shock when we saw you two today but more than anything Cas, I wish you could have told me." Cas opened his mouth and Sam put his hand out. "No, I know it's none of my business but I thought we were like family. You should be able to talk to me about anything."

Cas took a breath. "Lucifer."

Sam nodded. "And is he-"

"He's my brother." Sam eyes widened. "I haven't spoke to him since he ran away at fifteen, well," Cas looked to the bottle again, "I was told he ran away but my father banished him for getting his girlfriend pregnant."

"Oh." Sam managed and looked away, embarrassed and sad.

Cas nodded. "I was twelve."

Sam looked back. "You haven't seen him in fourteen years?" Cas shook his head. "Why now?"

"What you said, about Dean and you." Sam pushed his lips together in guilt and looked down. "I called him and he flew out to talk to me. Turns out my brother Balthazar has been keeping a lot of things from all of us. He was the one that told me Luke ran away, he was the one that told me that Anna went to a boarding school when she ran away too. Then there's Gabriel." Cas swallowed.
"And I didn't know that my dad was dead."

Sam looked up to see Cas starting to cry. "Oh, Cas." He moved up a step to be level with Cas and hugged him to him.

"Why keep that from me?" He sobbed. "Didn't I deserve to know when my father died?" Sam nodded. "Should I not have been allowed the decision of attending the funeral?" Sam nodded again rubbing Cas' shoulders. "And all I can think is that Dean should be here to comfort me." He lowered his head, letting his mouth hang open as he sobbed. "What is wrong with me?"

"Nothing." Sam shook his head. "Nothing is wrong with you, Cas."

"Everything turns to dust around me." He put his right hand to Sam's arm and gripped it. "He called me an abomination." Sam closed his eyes remembering the way Dean would hide the way he looked at men and the way his father would talk about men who liked men. "He told me that I would go to Hell." Sam gripped tighter. "He told Lucifer and he told me and he told Anna, he told us all that we had welcomed the devil into our hearts." Cas shook his head. "Maybe that's it, maybe I destroy everything I touch because God is punishing me. Maybe Dean would have been here if--"

Sam pulled back and grabbed Cas' shoulder. "Listen-" Cas kept talking. "Castiel, look at me and shut up." Cas looked up trying not to talk. "You are not an abomination." Cas let his head fall and Sam shook him again. "Listen to me! I sat there and watched Dean's heart break every time our father told a stupid joke or called the men names. I saw him laugh falsely and agree until he looked away and Dean's heart broke every time. You are not an abomination, Castiel. Lucifer and Anna and you were not the problem. Your father was. I'm sorry that he died and I'm sorry you didn't know. I'm sorry that Balthazar was horrible and I'm sorry that--" He took a second. "I am beyond sorry that you and Dean did not get forever." He shook his head. "But don't you dare say that Dean would not have died if you had never met him."

"Sam-" Cas started.

Sam pointed with his left hand. "No." He took hold of the necklace charm and held it up. "Look at this." Cas looked down at it. "Look at this. Because yes, Dean went to the Army and yes, Dean... is dead. But you made his last year the happiest. I wasn't even there, I haven't read your letters and I know. I know because of this. Look at this, Castiel." He shook it a little. "Look at this and tell me you would change it all."

Cas put his hand under Sam's and Sam let the charm fall into Cas'. Cas shook his head and looked up to Sam, he shook it again.

Sam looked him in the eye. "God - if you believe?" Cas nodded. "God makes no mistakes." He put his left arm around Cas' neck and pulled him into another hug. "You are not an abomination and neither was Dean."

Cas waited. "I can't stay here."

Sam sighed. "I know."

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Inside a helicopter in the darkness, a man spoke into a microphone while listening to the Welsh voice in the headphones and looking at a camera he was controlling. The sound of the helicopter blades spinning could be heard as well as the odd hum of traffic from below to the east, towards the town.
HELICOPTER: This is Hawkeye 6-2-7, location thirty-one point four one nine North, thirty-four point three five two six East. Confirm.

VOICE: Copy that Hawkeye 6-2-7. This is Night Owl 2-0 confirming location; thirty-one point four one nine North, thirty-four point three five two six East.

HAWKEYE 627: Location confirmed. Confirming Night Owl 2-0.

NIGHT OWL 20: Copy.

HAWKEYE 627: This is Hawkeye 6-2-7 requesting status, Night Owl 2-0. What's going on down there?

NIGHT OWL 20: This is Night Owl 2-0. McLeod was taking a piss.

HAWKEYE 627: Again?

NIGHT OWL 20: Don't even get me started, Steve.

HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): Ask him if it's all the tea he drinks.

NIGHT OWL 20: That is a negative, he'll sock me just like last time.

HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): Requesting current status, Night Owl.

NIGHT OWL 20: We are drained and in position.


NIGHT OWL 20: Copy.

*static*

HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): Heat camera 0-0-3- Kilo ready and in position.

NIGHT OWL 2-0: Copy that Hawkeye. In position. Requesting status on target.

HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): Reading five signatures in the building. Repeat five.

NIGHT OWL 2-0: We were briefed for four possibles. Please confirm.

*static*

NIGHT OWL 2-0: Hawkeye please confirm.

HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): Give me a minute, Jones. Five heat signatures confirmed. Two on the ground floor. Three on the top floor. One on the move. Two on the top floor in the room to the south. Third descending the stairs. Third signature is now on the ground floor.

NIGHT OWL 2-0 (Jones): Confirm three on the ground floor and two on the second.

HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): Confirmed. Three signatures in the far room on the ground floor and two in the south room on the second floor. Please be advised one of the signatures on the second floor appears to be lying down. We are getting a high reading from that particular signature.

NIGHT OWL 20 (Jones): The one lying down?
HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): Yes.

NIGHT OWL 20 (Jones): Weapons?

HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): We didn't pick any up.

NIGHT OWL 20 (Jones): Requesting a second sweep.

HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): Copy that. Second sweep. Standby.

NIGHT OWL (Jones): Copy that Hawkeye.

*static*

HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): Night Owl, I have nothing. I don't know why this guy is giving off so much heat. No weapons or devices visible throughout the building.

NIGHT OWL 2-0 (Jones): Is there ever Hawkeye. Alright, we are ready and waiting.

HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): Copy. You are cleared to breach. Give the order and we will light this up like the fourth of July

NIGHT OWL 2-0 (Jones): Copy that. Breaching in three. *Jones can be heard whispering down from three* Breaching.

*There was a loud bang and then shouting could be heard in the background over the headphones*

NIGHT OWL 2-0 (Jones): THIS IS THE UNITED STATES ARMY. GET DOWN ON THE FLOOR. COMPANY TWO YANKEE SIX SECURING THE STAIRS. COMPANY- GET DOWN ON THE FLOOR. COMPANY SEVEN MIKE NINE HAS SECURED THREE MALES ON THE GROUND FLOOR.

McLeod: THIS IS THE UNITED STATES ARMY. GET DOWN ON THE FLOOR. ROLL ON YOUR FRONT. COMPANY TWO YANKEE SIX HAS- What the...

NIGHT OWL 2-0 (Jones): MCLEOD REPORT.

HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): Night Owl 2-0 report.

NIGHT OWL 2-0 (Jones): MCLEOD REPORT!

HAWKEYE 627 (Steve): JONES!

NIGHT OWL 2-0 (Jones): HAWKEYE SHUT UP!

Steve and Jones: MCLEOD!

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Cas walked along the road and turned into the gate, he twirled the flower in his hand and kept on walking passed the grass divides and benches until he got to the right row. He walked along the headstones looking at each name and rank. Thirty-five, loving son; forty-seven, doting father; twenty-nine, loving mother; forty-nine, grandmother and mother, forever missed. Cas stopped when he recognized the name.

"Hello Meg." Cas looked around him, the place was relatively empty and he had managed to go
this long without any of Meg's family appearing and wondering who the hell he was. He leaned his hand down on the grass before lowering all of himself to sit facing her name.

_Private 2 M. Masters, C2Y6._
08-20-1994 - 08-25-2014
_Rest In Peace, Our Fallen Sister._

It was a simple enough headstone, there was nothing else on it. Cas had seen a lot of the headstones like Meg's; the Army symbol, the rank and message from the company and unit - it was pretty much standard for all of them but a few had personal things at the bottom such as 'loving mother' or 'son and best friend'. Meg's, however, had nothing but the Army templated headstone and Castiel wondered why.

"I haven't visited in a while. You're probably sick of me anyway." He smiled a little. "I'm sorry but I still haven't been to visit..." He looked a few rows over to a stone he knew. He knew what it said on it without having to be looking or facing it.

_Specialist D. Winchester, C2Y6._
01-24-1992 - 03-16-2015
_Rest In Peace, Our Fallen Brother._

_'He hears the silence so loud'_

A song. That's what Sam and Bobby had said when they explained it needlessly to Cas. One that Dean liked by some metal band. Cas didn't care at the time, about the details, but now, the more he thought about it the more he knew it summed up how he felt. Dean's absence from the world was so loud, Cas didn't think he had actually felt an empty space ever before, never mind with that kind of intensity. It echoed in his blood and every blink. Something was missing. Someone.

"It's like I told you the last time, I can't go over there. Dean isn't there. The only part of Dean I can actually feel is down at the pier." He sighed and looked down at the grass as he began to aimlessly pick at it. "I have to leave. I can't stay here any more." He lifted his right hand to his chest, gesturing it in a ball, unintentionally grazing the charm, and screwed up his brow as if in pain. "It hurts now. I mean," he sighed and dropped his hand again, "it hurt before because he was... gone." He swallowed teasing the flower lying on the grass beside him. "And now it's like the fact that he's gone is suffocating me. And it always has since it happened but I would rather have had that at that point than leave," Cas was emotional, his eyes stinging, "you know?" He looked to the side. "Now, it's not that I want to leave I just know I can't stay. They sound like the same but they're not." He wiped his face with his sleeve. "I don't know."

There was a silence while Cas got himself together.

"I've called Lucifer, he's going to let me stay for a while. He has a lot of room he said and it'd be nice to get to know him again. I haven't met Lilith yet, or Ruby, or Adam!" He smiled. "That should be good. And they have a kitten called Abby." He laughed a little. "Apparently she's taken over my room since they got her so I might have a fight on my hands." His smile dropped. "Dean and I should be visiting them for a break or something." He sighed. "This is not how everything was supposed to pan out."

He lowered his head and found himself crying again. His shoulders shook while he held on to two handfuls of grass and sobbed as his tears fell onto his pants and boots. After a few minutes he stopped and lifted his head, letting go of the grass to wipe his face again. "Anyway, I just wanted to come and say that I won't be boring you with my problems again." He laughed a little. "I'm sorry that we never got to meet." He picked up the lily and placed it against his nose. "I'm sorry that I
don’t know your story. I only know your name, your age, your rank and your company. That's not a story, that's just a bio page. That's stats. What did you look like, what colour was your hair, what kind of..." he looked up as if thinking, "...pizza did you like, were you a kisser or a hugger, what were your favorite films?" He exhaled. "Stats make up a soldier. Things like pet hates and how you sneeze make up a person." Cas sighed and then laughed a little. "I never saw him sneeze. How ridiculous is that?"

He shook his head and then hauled himself and the flower up. He placed it on top of the headstone. "Goodbye Megan. I hope that you tell him everything I said. Tell him I won't go without going to the pier. And you-" He stopped to steel himself as the words got stuck in his throat. "You tell him that when I go, he better come with me." He sighed, looking down, to build himself up before he straightened up and saluted. He then lowered his hand and sniffed before walking away.
Chapter 15

Cas walked along the road going to the pier - he was going to tell Dean.

He was leaving tomorrow and heading out to Michigan to move into Lucifer's house. Ruby had started school again and Adam was doing good while Abby had definitely claimed Cas' room. Luc and Cas spoke most days on the phone, Sam and Jess were leaving the day after Cas. Sam had refused to leave Cas alone in the house for even one day and Jess was right behind him.

Cas walked past the diner as Ellen and Jo stood in the parking lot talking to Bobby. He was in his truck and had backed out of his space before stopping to lean out and talk to Ellen. Jo was picking up rubbish to put in the nearby trash can when they all saw Cas.

"Cas!" Ellen shouted gesturing her head, Jo had been walking back to her mother and the trash can behind her and she turned to look.

Cas inhaled and walked over. At least it was as far away from the diner as it was possible for him to be. "Hello." He smiled and stuffed his hands in his coat pockets as he stopped beside them.

Bobby leaned out his window. "You all packed, kid?"

"I shipped most of the stuff to Michigan last week," Cas nodded and looked along the road, "so I just have my backpack." They smiled at him. "Same as always."

Ellen shot Bobby a look and he cleared his throat. "Well, I have a car to look at so I'll see you later?" He looked to Ellen and she nodded before kissing him. Actually kissing him. Cas' head bobbed a little. On the mouth. He threw a quick wink to Cas before he leaned out the car as he pulled away. "See you, Jo!"

"See you, Bobby!" She waved and Ellen tuned her head a little, without actually looking at her. "Well, I have to get back inside, I've left Sam on his own." She put her hand out to Cas' arm. "You will come and see us before you go?" He opened his mouth to deny her. "We'll come outside." He closed his mouth in a small smile and nodded. She kissed his cheek and ran back inside.

Ellen looked at him. "Come and sit here." They sat on the curb looking at the diner and Cas looked between Ellen and the floor. "I'm sure gonna miss you, kid."

Cas looked up and she was tearful. "Hey." She looked to him. "I'll be fine." He glanced at the diner. "As fine as I can be."

She nodded. "I don't want you to go." She took his left hand in her right and then covered it with her left as she rested them on her knee. "People keep leaving and then..." She sighed. "Not coming back."

"I'm not coming back." Cas raised his eyebrows looking her in the eye. He could have lied - I'll come see you every chance I get, I'll see you for the holidays, I'll arrange a time to come once I'm settled - but he didn't. He felt he owed her the truth. She nodded and pursed her lips together. "I'm not." She nodded again looking down. "But that doesn't mean you can't come and see me or we can meet up somewhere in between or something. It's not that I don't want to see you again," she shook her head and looked to him, "I just can't be here."

She nodded and pulled his hand up to kiss quickly. "I know." She patted it. "I know, Cas." She exhaled and smiled at him. "You're going no matter what I say, huh?" Cas nodded and smiled a
little. "Alright. Well," she pushed herself to standing and he followed suit, "you be sure to come here and wait for your bus."

"I'll sit out here and wait." He nodded again, reminding her. He would never go inside.

Sam walked over and Ellen nodded before wiping her face and walking away. Sam raised his eyebrows and head in greeting to Cas and then turned as the two of them watched Ellen walk away. Sam turned back. "Hey."

"Hello, Sam." Cas suddenly felt like he was leaving now. As if everyone was saying their goodbyes.

"You all packed and ready to go?" Sam asked and Cas almost laughed. Sam had helped Cas pack and ship his things. He knew.

"Yes, all of my things arrived in Michigan and my bag is ready." They smiled. "What about you and Jess?"

"Yeah, we never brought much to be honest, all of the stuff we had shipped out we've shipped back and Harry, our flat mate?" Cas nodded that he recalled. "He called yesterday to say it all arrived so..."

They nodded and a silence descended.

"I'm going to miss you, Cas." Sam admitted. "I just want to say that..." He exhaled and looked down. "This might be hard to hear but I have to say it." Cas waited. "I think, if you and Dean had gotten together, that you would have been the best thing to happen to him." Cas' throat tightened. "I think that he would have found whatever he was looking for out there, he would have came back here and he would have left the Army and made a life with you." Cas nodded, his eyes burning. "I think with you behind him, he would have made up, he would have done something with his life that he enjoyed like cars or music." Cas bit his lip trying not to cry but it was coming. Sam looked up. "I think-" The words caught, looking at Cas' face. "I'm sorry but I think that I would have loved you and you could have been amazing together." He shrugged. "I think that the world is unfair and cruel and I'm sorry." He put his hands on Cas' shoulders. "But please, please allow yourself to be happy." Cas half-laughed a mocking sob as the tears fell. "No, really." Sam shook him gently to look at him. "It sounds ridiculous, it really does, and I don't mean get a boyfriend or anything. I mean, just be happy, it might not come tomorrow or next week, next year or even the next five. But one day you will find the strength in you to be happy and remember him. It won't hurt less but it won't feel as heavy."

Cas nodded a little. Because if he didn't then he'd fall to his knees and wail.

"I may not have spoken to Dean in a long time but I knew my brother, almost as much as you could have," Cas let out another sob at that and Sam's voice tightened, "and I know he would have rathered that you smile than cry." Cas sobbed again. "Even for a second." Cas inhaled trying to pull it back. "I had to say that to you." Sam squeezed his arms and then let go.

"Thanks, Sam." Cas managed.

"Where are you off to?" Sam shuffled.

"I'm going to the pier." Cas stated with a little smile and trying to find his proper voice again. Sam knew it was special to him.

"I could, I don't know, come with you if you want?" Sam offered.
Cas' eyes widened and he shook his head. "No, I can't." He put his hand to his chest. "I promised him and even his own brother would--"

Sam put his hand out. "It's okay." Cas stopped. "I'm sorry, I didn't think."

Cas exhaled. "I promised." He whispered.

Sam nodded. "I understand. I'll catch you on your way back and give you a lift to the house if you like?"

Cas nodded. "That would be nice, thank you." They smiled again and parted as Sam went back inside and Cas set off for the pier.

>>>>

Walker ran along the corridor, hat thrown at Jones as soon as they had gotten off the bus, he flew passed the closed doors faster than half the men in his unit, if not all, would bet he could run. He muttered as he ran, counting. "Seven... Eight..."

A fellow soldier had to jump to the side, spread against the wall as he sprinted passed, as if he didn't even see him. "Walker?" Fitzgerald turned as he shot passed him oblivious.

"Nine... Ten... Eleven..." He glanced ahead, knowing he wasn't there yet but still worried he would run passed. He screeched to a stop at the right door putting his hands on the insides of the frame to catch himself. He rapped on the door three times loudly and then shuffled on the spot, looking down and rolling his hand in the air as he grew impatient for the door to open.

Sergeant Rufus Turner appeared at the door and Walker opened his mouth to talk. "What is the rush, Walker," Walker went to talk again, "banging on my door like that?"

"Sir-" Walker started, ready to rush through it but he was cut off.

"You had better have a good reason for making me shit myself and nearly spill my coffee." Walker looked like he was going to burst as he closed his mouth to remind himself to shut up. Turner looked back to his desk where a cup of coffee sat.

"I do-"

"Aren't you just back from your mission, you can't be that eager for the debriefing PFC W-"

"Sir!" Walker shouted, unable to contain himself any longer, and the man's head shot back to him. "I'm sorry, Sir, but-"

"What is it?" Turner knew there had to be a reason for the lack of respect from Walker. "What's wrong?"

Walker had spent the past few minutes trying to get out the words he had spent the whole run through the base trying to think of and now that he had the window he knew he couldn't say anything. Nothing would explain it. He just sighed. "You have to come." Turner watched him as he took a step back and he took a step too realizing that Walker was about to run. "Quickly."

"Take me." Turner said and they took off along the corridor, leaving the office door to click close automatically and the coffee to go cold.

>>>>

Cas got to the pier and walked along it slowly, looked down at the slats and his boots. Every time he visited there he was found the sound of just one pair of shoes on the wood haunting. Again, he could hear the pair that wasn't there, louder than he could hear his own. He got to the end and sat down, crossing his legs in front of him. He never swung them over the edge, not since the first time.

"Hello, Dean." Cas muttered to to wind. "I miss you, as usual." He lowered his head and played with his shoelace. "I'm sure Meg has told you that I'm leaving. I'll be back before I do but..." He looked up and to the side as the wind became forceful, out at the water and the waves. "I just had to, I don't know," he shrugged, "prepare you." He smiled a little. "Prepare myself."

He swallowed and just watched the water for a few minutes, feeling the force on his face. "I keep saying it but I can't stay here. I'm being crushed by this feeling of something missing. As if my life is a story being told and someone has just come along and cut a character without changing the words." He looked back down again and the wind whistled in his ears. "I don't know if that makes sense, even to me, but I keep trying to think of the exact way to explain it." He shrugged as he looked up and out at the water in front of him again. "I can't. Maybe I don't want to either but there is no such word or combination of them that I can use to pinpoint it. It's just... wrong," He sighed. "I won't be back here either." He waited. "I love you." He fell silent as the wind suddenly fell to calm but far from tranquil.

Maybe it was his imagination.

>>>><

Walker and Turner were running when they rounded the corner and they saw a mass of people.

Turner took a quick glance around. He couldn't think of a soldier in this base who wasn't there. Except one, which surprised Turner since McLeod was usually in the middle of everything.

As they slowed next to them the sea of soldiers parted. Stood next to a door were Bradbury, Jones, Hannah, Ash, Braedan, Fitzgerald was also standing there having been drawn in and caught up while Walker was running along and holding his tongue, and Armstrong.

"What the hell is going on here?" Turner looked briefly around at the crowd and then back to the group of two or three companies in front of him who mixed and matched on operations together. "And where the hell is McLeod?"

Jones pointed behind the Sergeant and they turned to see McLeod slow as he ran around the corner with Master Sergeant Jody Mills.

"Just what is this?" She slowed herself, looked around and everyone straightened up.

McLeod pointed to the door in front of them. "You'd better see this."

Mills looked to Turner. "Do you know what's going on?" She pointed over her shoulder. "I was talking to my son." She seemed angry and McLeod shifted to look at Turner.

"No, M'am. McLeod?"

He sighed. "You need to see it to believe it."

Mills looked around her. "Anyone not involved find something to do before I find you all something myself!"
The crowd quickly dispersed leaving McLeod, Jones, Bradbury, Wandall (aka Steve from Hawkeye 627), Braeden and Bass all of who were involved in the mission.

"You all had a role in Operation..." She looked to the side and groaned. "What was that called?"

"Midnight." Jones muttered, clearly unamused.

She looked to him. "Original." They all huffed. "Alright," she gestured to the door, "let me humor you." She sighed and turned to McLeod. "This had better be good." She pointed at him and he nodded, without breathing.

Turner let her walk first, she opened the door walked just a few steps, Walker behind her and the rest of them behind him, before they stopped.

In front of them stood a man in jeans and a shirt with his back to them, hunched over a table.

He turned, chewing on the last bite of a donut and then wiped his hands together before standing straight and saluting.
Chapter 16

It was all very quiet in the office. It wasn't even like there was anything for the two officers to occupy themselves with while they waited, nothing to stare at really; the room was small and familiar with just a simple desk, a hard chair behind it and two harder ones in front of it. There was also an old gray filing cabinet in the corner behind the desk to its left. There was a board behind the desk with schedules and notes on it but the officers knew not to look at that, it was none of their business and would usually have the cover blind pulled down over it if their boss had had any time to think about it. As it was, they looked anywhere but the board. Their eyes even looked over the photograph on the desk which Sergeant Turner had turned and gestured its subject to the other officer before turning it back around with exact precision.

They both sat as relatively relaxed as they could get in the hard chairs they were used to by now. Slumped would be a better way to say it, actually. Turner was glancing periodically at the other officer until he turned to look and then Turner looked away again. Both of them were in their Army greens; well, Turner was, the other officer was in borrowed greens.

When they heard the door handle rattle they both quickly stood and stared at the infamous board and zoned out so as not to read it.

Master Sergeant Mills entered the room and glanced between them as she closed the door behind her.

She walked around the desk and looked between them again. "At ease."

They relaxed and spoke at the same time. "Ma'am."

She turned to put her hand on her chair but as she did so she caught sight of the board and then walked over. She pulled the sheet down and hooked it in place. "Have a seat, gentlemen."

Both men slowly sat down, but stayed straight as opposed to their previous seating positions.

When she finished she looked to the most junior officer in the room who could do nothing but give a weary smile. She looked down and sighed to herself as she stood in front of her chair. "Well, I just don't know what to say." She sat down in her chair and looked up as she pulled it and herself towards the table. "I really don't." She looked to Turner. "Do you?"

He looked to the junior officer. "No, Ma'am, no I don't."

Mills sighed again and Turner looked back to her, she leaned forward and put her elbows on the desk before clasping her hands in front of her face. She pushed her mouth into the side of one of her index fingers and stared at the junior officer pensively. He didn't even budge or attempt to talk.

After a few minutes she inhaled and sat back, raised her eyebrows and looked to the side as she opened a drawer. "Well, I need to hear the story and there is going to be a lot of paperwork here." She rummaged through papers and then stopped, looking at her hand. "What paperwork do I even fill in for this?" She sighed and closed the drawer. "Screw it, I'll figure it out later." She leaned back on the desk. "Tell me what the hell happened out there."

The man, who hadn't spoken up until now, took a long breath in. He looked tired, Mills noted, he looked like he had been sleeping rough, his face recently shaved after probably the first proper shower he had had in months. He'd finally given Walker back the shirt and pants and borrowed a pair of his greens. He was still a soldier and, as far as Mills was concerned, no matter what if you
were in her base you wore the uniform. She glanced down at the name sewn into the fabric of his borrowed greens and made a mental note to rush the new uniform. She couldn't have that kind of mistake coming back to bite her in the ass.

The man still hadn't spoken. He not only looked tired, he looked affected. He didn't look terrified or traumatized but he looked like he had definitely changed. Something had changed him. As if he had been through hell and, even though he was out, he would never forget what he had seen.

Turner put his hand out and hit the man gently on the back in encouragement and support, noting that he seemed to flinch just a little as Turner's hand approached him from the left. "Go on, son." The man turned and reluctantly returned Turner's smile. "Don't be afraid, Winchester."

>>>>

Cas lay in his bed that night thinking about the first time he had ever seen Dean. It wasn't when he had first approached the booth, it was when Ellen had slapped him. Cas had been fussing in the till when he heard the crack and he turned to see Dean smile. Like most people he knew that, if Ellen slapped you, she had at least one damn good reason and you probably deserved it. Cas had thought his face was one meant for smiling - it seemed to fit perfectly. He didn't want to be caught staring so he had turned and finished what he was doing.

When Dean had walked away Ellen had put her hand on Cas' arm. "Cas, honey?" He had turned with a hum in question. "Could you do me a favor?"

"Sure." He smiled.

She pointed to the corner, to the man in greens that had smiled after an Ellen-slap, and however much he might have deserved it Cas knew himself that those were sore. "That boy over there, his name is Dean," Cas had mused over that, it seemed the only name that would go with his face, "and he's the son of an old friend." Cas nodded waiting. "He's joining the Army."

"I guessed." Cas smiled.

Ellen nodded, not smiling. "Yes, could you take him his coffee and pie when it's ready and try to talk him out of it?"

"What, why me?" Cas whispered.

"Because he's not listening to me or Jo and everyone listens to you, hon." She smiled at him. "If anyone can get him to change his mind it's you." Cas almost smiled at how Ellen and Jo seemed to morph into the same person when they wanted something.

"Maybe he knows what he wants?" Cas muttered almost whiny. He didn't want to get involved and he certainly didn't want to tell him what to do, Cas had had enough experience of people dictating his life, he wasn't about to pass it on.

"Cas, please." Ellen said, suddenly morphing from just like Jo back to Ellen, Ellen who was sad and ageing, however gracefully, and had seen too much.

Cas nodded and when the pie was ready he picked them both up, exhaled and walked over to the booth.

In bed though, Cas was crying. He was remembering the way Dean had looked up at him, the way his breath had hitched and his face and neck had glowed. Cas would have laughed if it was funny. It was cute, it was endearing, it was attractive. Here was an attractive man who clearly liked him
and was in front of him going red like a teenager and yet he was going red in Army greens. *Out of bounds*, Cas had thought but the way they had talked and the way he had looked at Cas, Cas had to have a little fun, if not for him then for the soldier. He tested the waters with a brush of his fingers. And from the minute Dean's mouth seemed to visibly dry it gradually went from fun to unfair. He was leaving.

Cas remembered everything. Writing his address while leaning on Dean's back. The necklace. The last kiss.

Cas looked at his backpack sitting on the chair in the corner of the room, his plane ticket tucked in the front pocket and the bus ticket that sat in front of it.

He closed his eyes and rolled onto his back before putting his right hand around the charm and falling asleep that way.

>>>>

"He pushed you?" Turner repeated.

"Yeah." Dean nodded. "He was shouting at me to get out, said if he didn't do this then they would kill his sister."

"Do what?" Mills was writing things down as she spoke, notes for later, but she was still focused on Dean.

"I don't know!" Dean said it at normal level but his eyes widened and he looked at the table gesturing widely with his hands. He was sitting in the office but his vision blurred and suddenly he was back there.

"I said to him that-

"I don't understand, Rahim? That's explosives!" Dean pointed behind the boy to the mass of liquids in various tubs. There were bodies lying around them, the result of Dean's company's siege on the place.

"I know! Get out! Get out!" The boy begged with the limited English he had.

"You don't have to do this." Dean shook his head. There was no way he was letting it end this way.

"Sir!" Walker's voice floated in from outside. "Pulling back, all of the children are at the safe distance line." Dean turned his head to look and Rahim took his chance.

He pushed the button and as Dean turned back he saw everything in slow motion. He saw the room light up behind the twelve year old. "No!" Dean shouted. As plastic and cables flew outwards. As liquid turned to flame and it all came at them.

Rahim screamed as he was set on fire from behind first and when Dean tried to reach for him he lunged forward. His hand came into contact with Dean's shoulder as he bent down and Dean screamed in pain. The heat was already coursing through Rahim's body and it was now burning into Dean's. The smell of chemicals and burning flesh filling the room and each of their nostrils. Their eyes met for a second and Rahim's were full of pure terror and sorrow. Dean's eyes watered instantly looking at him - one of the boys he had saved.

Rahim pushed Dean to the side and Dean stumbled, he couldn't take his eyes from Rahim and as a consequence he couldn't stop himself stumbling. He hit the door frame behind him, he tried to stop
himself but as Rahim closed his eyes and let out a last cry Dean had to close his. He fell through the open door and, in an attempt to grab said door and stop himself, he swung it shut and fell against a window at the back. Which wasn't a window at all, but more of a hole in the wall, so he fell through it and hit his head on the ground as the building came down around him.

"And then what?" Mills brought Dean back to himself.

"And then I woke up a few days later in a room with a woman and a man offering me water. They had bandaged me up and treated my burn."

"Your burn?" Turner asked, still facing in between Dean and Mills.

Dean unbuttoned his shirt enough to pull it down over his left shoulder. It was healing nicely but it was a child's hand print. Every fold of skin Rahim had had on his young hands were now seared into Dean's shoulder, it was raised and red as well as a little dry. It was the kind of thing you would never see in your lifetime. People suffered burns, sure, definitely on the front line and the Army saw their share of casualties but nothing like that. Nothing like a child's flaming hand print burned into flesh. Fingerprints and all.

The senior officers looked between each other and looked down as Dean covered it back up.

"It's been a long time, Dean. You could have left." Mills narrowed her eyes at him.

"They're not terrorists, Ma'am, I haven't been turned."

"Did they keep you there against your will?" Turner turned fully to him.

Dean shook his head firmly. "No. I was still recovering from the building falling on me, which I only remembered a few weeks later. Then I felt like I should repay the man, his son had died and his brother helps out but it's not easy and then after a while I couldn't leave and I was..." He sighed. "I was scared... t-to come back." He shrugged and looked to the floor.

"And Cas?" Turner asked and Dean lifted his head to look at him. Turner suddenly looked angry. "I was at your funeral." Dean's jaw seemed to stiffen and he felt his eyes get hot. "He was a mess." Dean looked down. "You did that." He hit Dean on the back of the head. "You."

"Sergeant." Mills warned.

He never took his eyes from Dean. "Sorry, Ma'am. Bobby collapsed." Dean looked to the side. "Sam shrunk." Dean turned to look and Turner widened his eyes as he nodded once. "Oh yes, he was there." Dean inhaled. "Do you know what Cas looks like when he sobs, when he wails while people hold onto him?"

Dean quietly shook his head.

"Well, I do." Turner looked to Mills. "May I be excused Ma'am?"

"You need to be here." She tapped the paper in front of her.

"Well, permission to step outside for a few minutes before I do something I won't regret."

She paused. "I could do with a break, myself." She nodded and Turner glared at Dean before he stood, saluted and left.

Dean leaned forward in his chair and caught his face in his hands as the door clicked closed. "I'm
not sure I want to go home now."

She leaned forward. "Well, tough." He looked up as she picked up the telephone. "That boy
deserves the truth." She put the phone to her ear and Dean bit his lip before nodding.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Short one, sorry

Dean sat on the charter plane heading to Croatia, it was the closest place that they could get a flight to America. It wouldn't take long to get there and then it was a 12 hour flight to Chicago. It was a small plane, it was supposed to be just him and his superior but Mills had seen the way Turner had looked at him all the way through their session of filling out the paper work and networking with bases at home. It had taken a couple of hours and the whole way through Dean thought about how Cas would be in bed right now, sleeping and clueless. He hoped Cas would still be wearing his necklace. But maybe he would have given it back to Sam. Sam had come home for Dean's funeral and Dean imagined him standing by his empty coffin the same way he had stood by their father's. Angry. Angry and silent. Dean thought about Bobby, that kind rough old man who had been such a gentle constant in Dean's life, collapsing in the diner. Turner had said he had fallen against the wall next to Cas.

Dean looked across at Turner who was glaring at him and had been since they got on the small aircraft and Dean was suddenly thankful that Mills had suggested that Walker and McLeod accompany them. There was silence amongst them, not one of them had spoken but Dean knew they had said a lot in their heads. He could see it in the way they looked at him. They had been there too. They had carried his coffin, they said, Ash had shaved his head. Ash was pissed. Ash was seriously pissed at Dean. Not because of the mullet, no, because he had hacked servers and called in favors to get Dean a charter out of there. When Dean thanked him he muttered that he wasn't doing it for Dean, he was doing it for Castiel.

He was going to get off this plane and immediately board another to Chicago where they'd all then board a domestic flight to Kansas. Dean thought about the car that would pick them up and drive them to Lawrence, about how he'd have to get out of the car and walk into the dinner. How he'd have to explain to Bobby, Ellen, Jo and Sam what had happened. How he'd have to come face to face with Castiel once more, after two years, it had been two years since he had got on that bus. It had been two years since he had kissed those lips or held his hand. A whole year since he had watched Rahim burn with tears in his eyes and heard his last scream.

His dog tags must have snapped from around his neck at some point either during the explosion or when the local farmer and his brother had pulled him from the rubble. Locals rushed to help the soldiers who were thrown back with the blast, never knowing there was one still inside until an onlooker saw a boot. A single boot and he pointed it out to his brother so they went to look. They found it was attached to a leg which was, unusually, still attached to the person whose leg it was. They had pulled him out and took him home.

When he had awoken a few days later Dean had no idea who he was. He didn't even know his name was Dean. One day he saw some faces run passed the window and he felt that he knew them. Army soldiers running towards a building far down the street shouting at residents to get inside. The woman had ushered Dean away from the window, telling him to lie back down and he had replayed the images in his mind. Later that night, at dinner, the man of the house, the man who had helped his brother pull him from the rubble had asked Dean what was wrong and Dean had simply
whispered that he thought he was a soldier.

He missed the slight looks of fear on the family's faces but stuff came flooding back. He was on his bed, which was a mattress on the floor next to the others, and he found himself in a room surrounded by sleeping men and women. Soldiers. Barracks. He knew then that he had been a soldier and this was all too much of a surprise to him to make sense. He was sitting up reading, he looked down at a letter.

*Castiel James Novak - totally in love with you.*

He had inhaled and sat up. Cas. How could he have forgotten Cas? By then he had been living in the house for nearly two months. He sat up that night and thought about everything. How Cas would have been told that Dean was either missing or dead, how he would have regretted his last confession, how he would have kicked himself and told himself that he knew this would happen, how he would berate himself for ever getting involved with the soldier and how Cas would have tried to forget Dean by now. And at the thought of Cas hurt, Dean wondered if that might be better. Everything they had shared, everything they had been to each other was now tainted with Dean's failure. He failed Rahim, his own soldiers and Cas. He failed his mother, his father, Sam, Bobby, Ellen and Jo. He failed Meg and Cas.

It all came back to Cas. He had failed Cas.

Dean leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees and pressing the palms of his hands into his eyes and cried. The other three looked between each other as Dean didn't even try to hide it. He shook and he let out sobs but he didn't care. Not only had he hurt Cas, he had ran away from fixing it. He knew why. Because he was a coward and he knew this would happen. He knew that everything he touched he broke. Not only all of that, but now he had to go back there and see the pain and hurt and hatred in their eyes. In Cas' eyes. And he knew he deserved it.

>>>>

Cas had woken up early, he had a later flight but for some reason he had just woken up at the sound of Sam leaving. He rubbed his face and sleepily made his way down the stairs. Jess was in the kitchen and turned to see him walk into the sitting room.

"Hey, you're up early." She smiled.

"Yeah, I don't know why. Maybe I'll sleep on the plane." He smiled back.

The house was pretty bare now since everyone was going to be leaving it. The only things that were there were the things from the boys' childhoods or appliances.

"Coffee?" Jess offered and Cas nodded while yawning.

Jess had finished working at the offices in town in preparation for the move tomorrow but Sam still helped out in the diner.

"I'm going over to the diner later," she started as she put a cup down on the table and poured coffee into it, Cas sat at the table listening, "will you be-" She stopped when Cas shook his head. She smiled a little. "But you'll say goodbye, since you won't let us take you to the airport?"

Cas took the cup and she put the pot back before joining him. "Yes, of course. But I can't go in." She nodded a little. "Are you excited," she looked up, "about going back to school?"

She nodded. "I am. I've loved being here, even if it was under bad circumstances, but I have missed
"Stanford and California."

"Harry must be missing you." He offered, taking a sip.

"I think he's been enjoying the freedom. He told Sam something about air-guitaring in his underwear at three in the morning." Cas burst out laughing and Jess smiled. "I'm going to miss you, Cas."

"I'm going to miss you, both of you." Cas smiled.

She inhaled. "Although I never met him, Sam told me about Dean, and then talking to you and Bobby and Ellen, and even Jo who is always saying she didn't know her big brother very well," Cas smiled knowing that that's exactly what Jo always says with a sad look, "I feel like he's come to life in my head a little. You know?" She tilted her head.

"Yeah." Cas nodded. "I feel the same way. I didn't know him very well yet-" Cas stopped there. Yet. He cleared his throat. "But from the photos and stories everyone's told me he became a little clearer." She nodded. He lowered his cup to the table and sighed before looking at her. "Can I tell you something?"

She nodded. "Anything." She put the cup to her mouth and waited.

"I'm a little worried," he put his hand to the charm and twirled it in his fingers, "that since I hardly knew him I'm going to forget him." His eyes slowly welled up. "I don't want that to ever happen." He shook his head. "I don't think I've even settled it in my head yet, that he's dead."

Dean strapped himself into the seat on the domestic flight, Walker and McLeod between him and Turner, inhaling. Thinking about what they had said about Gabriel turning up at the funeral.

"I don't think," Cas bit his lip as a tear fell, "that I will ever settle it in my head. It's like my mind completely rejects the possibility."

Dean shook his head as he welled up. "I can't do this." Walker and McLeod turned. "I can't." Dean looked ahead trying not to blink, he fumbled with his seatbelt.

"What?" McLeod looked.

"I can't, I can't go back there." Dean panicked, his hands trembling as he reached for the latch trying to release himself from it's grasp. "I can't watch his face turn from grief to hate. I can't."

Cas grasped the charm tighter. "But if I am ever going to have a shot at at least ever trying to get on with my life, I can't forget him." Cas shook his head, eyes swelling with water yet to fall. "Because that would be so much worse."

Turner unclipped his seatbelt and moved to kneel in front of Dean. "Dean, stop-" Dean was still struggling and protesting. "SPC Winchester, I told you to stop moving and shut up!" The whole plane went quiet and the passengers stared as Dean pursed his lips together. "Now, I know it's been a long time but when I tell you to do something you do it. Look at me!" Dean stopped moving and snapped his eyes to Turner who lowered his voice. "Listen, I know this is scary and I know you want to run away and not deal with it. But you are a soldier, damn it!" He whispered that. "You have been a marine since you were four years old and you're a soldier now so start acting like one." Dean unconsciously straightened up. "You have been running away your whole life, your father dragged you along when he ran away from your mother's death, you ran away to the Army when he died and you ran away when you were too chicken shit to go back to Cas and deal with it. I think you've been running long enough, don't you?" Dean nodded. "Hmm?" Dean nodded more.
enthusiastically and closed his eyes. The tears finally fell.

"Cas," Jess put her hand out to his, "aren't you sick of picking up and leaving town? Never having a home?"

Cas nodded. "I had a home here and now it's just not that to me anymore."

"But, you said yourself, nowhere will feel like home without Dean."

Cas nodded. "I know." He nodded again, quicker and closed his eyes letting the tears fall onto his cheeks. "But it's a start."
Cas had pottered about all day, finding things to do. He helped Jess clean out the garage - well, what was left in the garage anyway - and they ran it over to Bobby's.

They got out of the car and headed over to the door, but when they got there all they heard was loud music. Cas and Jess shared a look.

"Asia?" Cas asked her and she just shrugged with a smile. They tapped the door but got nothing. "Bobby!" Cas shouted and when he banged harder the door opened and let the music spill out even louder.

They were both showing the strain on their face, okay maybe it wasn't as loud as it felt like it but neither of them had slept very well so it hurt. It hurt like Asia jumping on their heads. The drinking session the three of them had had the night before went unmentioned.

Cas and Jess walked into the sitting room and froze.

Bobby was standing in just underpants at his kitchen table. Fair enough. But he was kissing someone who was sitting on the table in, what Cas guessed was, the shirt missing from Bobby's back. Bobby opened his eyes mid-kiss to see Cas and Jess standing there. He pulled back and the woman turned her head to look. Ellen.

She jumped down from the table and hid behind Bobby, now very aware that she had no pants on. "Cas, Jess!" She shouted.

Bobby gave a cheeky smile and then realized he had barely anything on either so he pulled Ellen in front of him. "Guys." He chuckled softly as Ellen rolled her eyes at being used as a shield. And they say chivalry is dead. "We can explain." Ellen leaned over and turned the music down, Bobby following her so as not to be uncovered.

Cas and Jess looked at each other and then just shrugged. "We came to drop of the stuff from the garage." Jess said as Cas put a box down on the couch. "That's books." She pointed to it and Cas nodded as he straightened up.

Bobby and Ellen looked at each other and then back to the pair.

"We will go and get more boxes." Cas pulled at Jess' arm. "Slowly." He added. They made a quick exit and headed towards the car. They left the door open so Ellen and Bobby looked confused at each other until they heard Cas talk to Jess. "About time."

They laughed together and Ellen turned before letting her forehead fall to Bobby's cheek. "I'm gonna have to have that back." Bobby rubbed at the shirt on Ellen's shoulder.

The music still played low and Cas and Jess took a seat in the car.

"Asia was one of Dean's." Jess offered, her head leaning against the head rest and turning to look at Cas. "That's what Sam said."

"Yeah?" She nodded and looked away again. "I like it." Cas smiled, he had never liked Asia before but now he thought it could become a favorite.

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Dean had an hour to waste in Chicago waiting for the connecting flight to Kansas. He had excused himself to the bathroom but Walker had followed him.

They stood beside each other in the urinals. Walker looked at him, as if he was trying to size up something.

"Every day." Dean muttered and then turned to Walker. "I missed him and regretted it every day."

"Then why didn't you just leave?"

"Because," Dean shook and zipped up before moving to the sink and Walker was a shake behind him, "the more I thought about it the scarier it got and the harder it got for me to leave and the scarier it got for me to stay there and then the harder it got to leave and it started again getting worse and w-"] Walked stood there while Dean washed his hands and Dean pointed to the sink, Walker raised his eyebrows. "It's been a year, how have you stopped washing your hands again?" Walker shrugged and then continued to look in the mirror. Dean stopped and stared at him before gesturing with his eyes to the sink and Walker sighed before leaning forward and beginning to wash his hands. "Anyway, I don't know."

"I do." Walker quickly rinsed the soap from his hands and wiped them on Dean's greens. Dean looked down and then up, glaring at him. "You spoke a good game, Winchester. You had me going."

"You're a fucking coward." Dean sighed. "You had this amazing thing and instead of fighting for it you rolled over, stuck your head in the sand and felt sorry for yourself." Dean inhaled wiping his own hands on his greens. He had lost their respect. He had lost a lot of things but he had lost the respect of his soldiers.

He turned towards Walker. "You think I don't know that? You think I don't agree with you? You think I don't hate myself?"

"Oh," Walker looked to the side as he faced Dean too, "don't give me the self-pitying routine, it doesn't suit you."

"Oh yeah, well what does then?" He pushed Walker. "Because I'm clearly not your boss anymore-"

"-you're damn right.-" They stood with their noses almost touching, ready to rumble but neither making their move.

"-and I'm clearly not your friend-"

"-no-"

"-so what does suit me?"

"Death!" Walker boomed. Dean leaned back at that and Walker leaned forward. "I was there, Dean, I stood there and carried your coffin, I don't care if it was empty, that just made it worse, we carried the best man we ever knew," Dean looked down at the floor, "we carried a hero!" He pushed Dean so he would look. "Cas wailed for the love of his life!" He pointed out the door for no reason. "That's what he called you." He poked Dean, with his right index finger, in the chest right at his heart.

Dean felt his world come tumbling down. "He-He said what?"

"He stood there and shouted at Gabriel in front of everyone that the love of his life had died. And
then he fell to the floor in a mess for the second time that day."

Dean's right hand came out to catch the counter beside him.

"You could have made that go away." Dean rubbed his forehead with his left hand, it suddenly got very hot. "You could have come back and you could have told him what happened and he would have been happy. You would have taken that pain away."

Dean could hear his heart beating. What had he done? The explosion, the KIA - those weren't his fault. Being saved and losing his dog tags - those weren't his fault either. But the minute he remembered and every time after that that he didn't leave - those were. And not only had he shattered what he and Cas had had and could have made together the first time he didn't leave, he had done it a thousand times over, every time he stayed. Every time he had hid from the soldiers patrolling.

"You let your family go on hurting and the stupid thing is, I don't think you even know why."

Walker leaned down so Dean would look at him. Everything seemed to go a little sideways. "Dean?" Was he underwater? He didn't know and he didn't care because all he could see was Cas crying. No, sobbing, wailing, they had said. Dean had to imagine it because he had no idea what Cas looked like even crying a little. How had someone like Cas been so devastated by Dean's death? Dean couldn't understand but he definitely couldn't handle the idea that he could have done something to abate it. To make it stop.

"I-" Dean could feel his legs start to fold under him. "I love... him..." Dean's voice slurred a little and suddenly the restroom turned and hit Dean on the side of the head.

"Dean!" Walker shouted, now leaning down on the floor next to him. "Dean!"

"Sorry." Dean managed to get out. "Cas, I'm-" His eyes closed and he vaguely heard Walker run away.

Dean woke up in his bed, but not his bed now, it was his bed when he was a kid in his house. A figure appeared in the doorway, blocking out most of the light. "Did you shout on me, baby?"

Dean sat up in his bed and didn't say anything. He remembered this night. He just nodded, like he had that night.

"Are you still scared?" She sighed and walked over to his bed. "It's okay." She sat next to him and stroked his face.

"I'm not scared, Mom." Dean muttered.

She smiled. "Dean, it's okay to be scared. I know you're a big boy now but everyone gets scared."

"Really?" He asked, sounding much too nervous for his liking.

"Of course, and it's okay to run or hide, it's okay to need me in the night, it's okay to even cry." He shook his head. "Admitting you're scared sometimes makes it so much better." She took his hand. "What does Dad always tell you?"

Dean thought about it, he knew the answer but that night he had shrugged.

"It's what we do that tells us who we are." She ran her hands through his hair. "Even if you do something silly or bad, stand by it."
"What if you regret it?" Dean hadn't asked that that night, but he had to. "What if it ended up being the worst decision ever? What if you wished you could take it back and will always be haunted by it? I don't want to stand by it, I want to take it back. I'm so sick of messing everything up, Mom. I'm sick of hurting people."

She sighed. "Dean, if you hurt someone then they deserve to know why or if you regret it or-" She sighed. "All you can do is explain and ask for forgiveness."

"And what if that's not enough?" Dean didn't understand why she was answering him but he was going to ask and ask until he knew what to do.

"You mean if it's not enough for you to get what you want?" Dean was shocked and she smiled gently. "You have to stop thinking about the end Dean, you go in there and you make sure that they know how much you regret it, and how much you're sorry. And you do it regardless of the ending. If they hate you or not. They deserve to know."

Dean nodded. She was right. Cas deserved every word he had on it. And he knew Cas would hate him, he knew Cas would never forgive him but it wasn't about that. It was about taking away the pain and owning up to his mistakes. It was time Dean stopped making it about him and started making it about Cas.

Dean woke up on the restroom floor.

"Dean?" Turner was leaning over him, a worried expression came into view as Dean's vision cleared. "What happened?"

Dean sat up and they put their hands out to stop him getting up too soon. "I-I don't know." Dean took the cup of water that was put in his hand by one of the three men, he didn't know which. Suddenly he felt the pain. Not in his head, he didn't care about that. He put his right hand over his left shoulder, the one he had landed on, and winced. "I need to get home."

Walker and McLeod looked to each other. "I don't know if you should fly."

Dean looked up to McLeod. "I either get on the plane or I drive." He pushed himself up to his feet and they all helped him. He pulled away. "Leave me, if I fall over I fall over." He dumped the cup in the sink. "I need to go back and explain." He sighed and, leaning on the sink, he pushed back and looked down. "How long until I'm discharged?"

"Technically you've only had one year of active duty." Dean glared at Turner. "I'll see what I can do."

"I need to go back there, I need to explain and then when he hates me..." Dean sighed rubbing his face.

"If." McLeod offered and Dean looked. "He might understand."

"When he hates me," Dean repeated, "I can-" He stopped and put his hands up in the air unsure of the rest of that sentence.

"You have an address in Kansas." Turner questioned without actually questioning. The three men were still stood holding the door to the restroom open and there was a small gathering of men sitting in the chairs directly outside, none of them wanted to ask to be allowed in.

"Lawrence is his home, it's not mine. Is there a barrack or something?"
"I'll find you somewhere." Turner nodded, they all seemed to sense a difference in Dean. He was
genuinely sorry and he was ready to explain, no matter what happened. And then he would carry
out his remaining years of duty before deciding what to do. Turner was silently going over all of
the strings he could pull and things he could say, using the circumstance to help Dean leave this
experience behind him. Even though he never would.

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Cas and Jess pulled into the diner parking lot, Jess tooted as she drove to an empty parking spot
and reversed into the one opposite it. Bobby's truck was in the spot across from theirs, next to and
facing the diner.

Cas and Jess shared a look. "I will never get over seeing Bobby in his underpants." Cas said as
they got out and shut their doors.

"Don't, poor Ellen!" She looked up when Cas laughed. "No, I meant about being used as a shield." 
Cas nodded pursing his lips together. "Not about Bobby!"

"What about me?" Bobby asked as he wandered over, apron around his waist, holding a table up
over his shoulder. He put it down beside Jess's car and looked between them. As he had lowered it
Ellen and Jo came into sight with chairs in each hand.

"We weren't talking about this morning." Cas shook his head smiling and Bobby just sighed, trying
not to smile. "I swear." Cas put his hand out.

Ellen and Jo approached, aprons also around their waists, with their two chairs each. "You'd keep
that mouth shut if you knew what was good for ya." Ellen raised her eyebrows, still smiling, at Cas
and he raised his hands in defeat.

"You tell 'em." Bobby said as he pulled the chairs around the table.

"You too." Ellen looked at him, leaning her right hand on the back of a chair.

"Yes, Ma'am." Bobby leaned and kissed her cheek before walking back towards the diner.

She hit his shoulder as he walked away. "I'll Ma'am you, Bobby Singer."

Cas pointed to the chairs. "What's this?"

Sam walked over, aprons all the range. "If Cas won't come to the diner, then the diner," he draped
a tablecloth over the table and looked up to Cas, "will come to Cas." He sat down in a chair and
pulled Jess onto his knee.

Cas smiled a little. "Guys, you didn't have to."

Jo shrugged. "But we did." She gestured to his seat. "Sit."

She leaned on the back of a chair just like her mother and Cas smirked as he sat down. "Yes,
Ma'am."

Kevin appeared, wearing an apron Cas recognized as his old one, he knew from the slight burn
mark in his pocket where he had been distracted worrying about Dean and had put his pen in a
special Sunday and a sparkler in the pocket. For barely a second. Kevin put a pile of plates, cutlery
and plastic cups down. "Hey, Cas." Kevin and he shared a smile before Jo put her free arm out to
usher him into the seat she was leaning on and he pulled her onto his knee too. She had fully
expected it.

It wasn't until Bobby walked over to put soda and a pie down on the table that Cas noticed. There were seven people, but there were four chairs. And as Bobby sat down letting Ellen sit on his knee too, Cas' throat shrunk to a pin hole. Ellen and Bobby, Jo and Kevin, Jess and Sam. And Cas. He should have been leaning on Dean's knee right now. He would have had a little mock fight with Dean, after Dean had automatically pulled him there, that he could take Dean's weight, then he would tease him and say that he couldn't, he was too fat. Dean would rise to the bait, literally, and stand up, Cas would say it's alright he had nothing to prove and Dean would chuckle telling Cas he couldn't back out now. Cas would have loved the fact that Dean would have pulled him onto his knee but wouldn't admit it and when he finally had Dean leaning on his knee he would crack a joke about Dean being his good little soldier. When Dean pouted and tried not to go red in front of everyone he would be secretly happy when Dean demanded they switched places. Cas was the Army wife after all, Dean would tease back. But when Dean's right arm snaked around his side and his left pulled Cas' legs so he was sitting across Dean's knee facing everyone, just as Jess was, he would find himself smiling as they shared a piece of pie. Sam would joke that he must love Cas because Dean doesn't share pie and-

And what?

Would Dean have scoffed and told Sam that of course he didn't? Would he have pushed Cas to sitting on one knee again just to prove his point? Would he have begun to eat his own slice after that? Would he have mocked Cas because he had fallen so hard and so fast for Dean after barely knowing him?

"Cas?" Cas shook his head to look up at Sam. "Do you want some pie?" Sam was standing with a piece on a cake slice ready to transfer it to Cas' plate.

"Yeah, sorry." Cas picked up his fork and felt his stomach twist.

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When the four soldiers got off the plane you would think it was some kind of montage, four pair of greens walked out of customs and down the concourse towards the exit. Maybe it was because there was no noticeable tension between them anymore or maybe it was because they were clearly on a mission. Dean stopped when he saw something down at the end and the others stopped with him.

He turned to Turner. "Sir, I'm technically on leave, right?"

"Until the review and internal affair inquest, yes."

Dean looked down at himself then back up. "If I'm going back there I'm going without the uniform." Turner looked to the others and then back. "I'm not going to hide behind my rank or situation. I want to stand there as Dean Winchester. I was never a rank to him, that's what he said - just Dean."

McLeod and Walker looked at each other. They seemed to approve, silently.

Turner inhaled, looking down towards the store Dean had eyed. "Alright, but you have ten minutes."

Dean suddenly realized. "This is out of order but-" He turned to the other two officers who looked to Turner and he nodded at them that they could be at ease.
Walker patted his bag, indicating his wallet. "I got it."

They walked towards the end of the concourse and Turner's phone rang. He opened it. "Turner." He walked after them instructing the driver.

Ten minutes later Dean emerged from the store in a khaki shirt, a black top underneath and jeans that clung to his hips. He had elected to keep his boots on and his new dog tags dangled, shiny and unscratched against the black material.

McLeod appeared behind him and Walker holding a bag from the store that now had Dean's greens in it. "Why am I carrying this?"

"Because I said so," Dean glanced at him. "My status may be technically suspended until I can be confirmed as, you know, alive. But I will still take you down." McLeod tried not to but he smiled a little.

There was a loud piercing whistle along the concourse and they turned to see Turner near the doors, he pointed to his watch. "Nineteen hundred!" They turned and began to walk along towards him. "TODAY!" They broke out into a jog and he continued shouting as they approached him. "YOU ARE SERIOUSLY OUT OF SHAPE, WINCHESTER!" The others stifled laughs as they picked up the speed and ran too. "YOU TWO AREN'T ANY BETTER. GET OUT TO THAT CAR!" He pointed to the car and the boys took a left and filed out of the door as he followed them. People inside the airport had turned to look, some had shrugged it off and others were watching intently. "YOU ARE NOT HOME YET WIN-"

Dean couldn't help but suddenly feel sick. No he wasn't, and he never would be.

"Well," Cas stood up from the table, "I don't have long." They had been taking about everything from Dean to Lucifer's children and from Kevin's school work to drinking games Sam and Jess had taken part in at Stanford. They had spoken about hunting trips Bobby and John had taken before the kids were born and a couple after, they had talked about Jo's dad and that time she ran away from Kindergarten and no one noticed. Then Ellen told the story of how she got arrested for assaulting the teacher. "I need to..." He gestured his head along the road and they all understood.

"I wish you would let us drive you." Sam said as Jess hopped off his leg.

"I'll be fine." Cas smiled and embraced Jess, she squeezed. "Oh!" He huffed, feeling the tight restriction of her arms around his ribs but he smiled anyway.

She spoke into his ear. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too." He smiled at her as she pulled back. Sam stayed seated and Jo took her turn. "Oh, Jo." He smiled and hugged her, closing his eyes. It had been because of her this place had been his home for so long. "Thank you, for everything."

"I wish you wouldn't go." She mumbled and pulled back. He wiped her tear and she laughed looking up.

Cas put his hand out for Kevin to shake and they smiled for a few seconds before they laughed and hugged. "I'm her big brother now." Cas said so that everyone could hear. "You understand?" He smiled as he and Kevin parted, he was just kidding but Kevin nodded anyway. When Ellen stepped forward Kevin put his arm around Jo and they kissed. "Mother bear." Cas joked and she rolled her eyes before pulling him in for a hug.
"Cas-

"I mean it." He mumbled as he hugged her. "You've been like a mother to me." She closed her eyes. "And I'm sorry that I'm going." She nodded. "But I love you."

She pulled back and rubbed the tears from his cheeks, when had he started crying? "I love you, Cas." She kissed his forehead and smiled. "You call me." She pointed at him and he nodded.

She stood back and put her arm around Jess as Sam stepped away, standing behind Bobby. "Cas," Bobby started, he sighed and pulled him into a hug, "if you ever need anyone, you change your mind or just whatever, you know where I am." Cas nodded and Bobby patted his back.

"Look after her." Cas whispered and Bobby chuckled.

He pulled back and looked to Ellen. "I think she'll look after me, kid."

Ellen shook her head fondly and smiled as Bobby patted Cas' shoulder and walked away to her.

Sam raised his head and stepped forward. "Cas, if you ever want to come back, there is always a couch for you." He took something out of his pocket. It was the set of keys Cas had given Jess that morning. Cas sighed as Sam put them back in his hands. "It's always your home, too." Cas took them, gestured them and then put them in his pants pocket, suddenly feeling the tears again. "I'll always think of you as family now." He opened his arms a little and Cas stepped forward to hug Sam, which was a little different from the rest. Sam's arms went around Cas' shoulders and he felt himself completely surrounded.

It suddenly occurred to Cas that he had no idea what Dean hugged like. Was he like Bobby, one squeeze and then patting rather than holding; Jo, who wrapped her arms around your neck and stood on her tiptoes a little no matter what height you were; Jess, who had wrapped her arms around his torso clearly used to doing so with Sam; Kevin, who had one arm around his neck and the other around his to his back; or like Sam who had pulled him in gently with one hand on the back of his head and the other around his shoulder? Or was he another kind that Cas had yet to discover: and would the only way to describe it just be 'like Dean'?

He nodded and leaned in Jess' car's open passenger side window to get his bag - it was a green army bag with the name 'D. Winchester' on it that Sam had insisted that he keep.

Cas looked to Sam. "Oh, this is yours." He put his hand around the charm, ready to take it off, as ready as he would ever be. And by 'ready', he meant shaking and anxious and totally not wanting to. He had felt the nerves and pain at the thought for weeks - he had been psyching himself up to it but he had wanted- no needed, to wear it right to the five minute warning. "I had to wear it as long as I could." He began to explain.

Sam put his hand to Cas'. "No, Cas." He shook his head. "It was never mine. I gave it to Dean and he gave it to you to keep for him. It's yours." Cas opened his mouth to protest, even though he didn't want to. "Please?"

"Thank you." Cas nodded. "I will give you a little heads up before I get on the bus." He smiled and they all watched as he threw the bag over his right shoulder and walked down to the pier.

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Dean was nervous and he was terrified and he was excited and he was shaking and he felt sick and he was everything else in between. From Kansas International it was just under an hour's drive and he had to admit that he was shitting it.
Every possible scenario had run through his mind. Cas would hate him, Cas would never talk to him again, Cas would wish he had died, Cas would kill him himself, Cas would shrug and carry on serving, Cas wouldn't care, Cas would laugh that Dean thought he had meant anything at all to him.

Dean couldn't decide what would be worse; Cas hating him or Cas not caring either way.

"Lawrence." The driver said, looking in the mirror at Turner as the khaki green land rover rumbled into the familiar town.

Dean blew out and then inhaled deeply.

McLeod put his hand on Dean's shoulder. "You can do it, you just have to tell the truth." Dean turned to him. "At this point you can't lie to him, even about the little things, that'll just make him hate you more."

More.

Walker punched McLeod's knee. "You arse!" McLeod rubbed it. "Who gives a dead leg anymore?"

Walker glared and him. "However stupidly he put it," he turned back to Dean, "he's right. Truth all the way."

Dean nodded. "I know." He looked up to Turner. "Is there a space at the barracks, yet?"

Turner looked at him, there was a hint of pity he seemed to be trying to conceal. "Yes." Dean looked down again. "If you need it."

"I need it." Dean confirmed and looked out the window. "By the way," they all looked, "if Ellen-when Ellen slaps me, or punches me, don't try to stop her."

"We won't." McLeod stated and Dean smiled a little.

Ellen, Jo and Bobby were walking into the diner with various utensils from their alfresco moment, Bart glad for the break of holding the fort on his own, when the car pulled into the lot. It stopped parallel to the diner and they turned to look. Army. The windows were shadowed from the sun so they looked blacked out and they turned to look. Jess stood in the doorway leaning out, Sam inside.

The driver sat in his seat, waiting to park. Turner got out the front at the diner side but Walker and McLeod got out the far side and walked around the front.

"Sergeant Walker." Ellen sort of stated. "To what do we owe the pleasure?" She smiled.

Turner inhaled. "There is no easy way to break this to you."

"What is it?" Bobby asked. What could the Army possibly have to break to them? "Have you found his body or something?"

Turner looked and nodded to Walker who opened the car door.
Prepare for the angst as our boys come face to face again.

Cas walked slowly along the pier and closed his eyes momentarily to the hollow noise of his solitary footsteps, it hurt so much knowing it would be the last time he would hear them before he walked away. He put Dean's bag down on the end chair, where Dean had put it that first time, and took the last few steps to the end. He sat, cross-legged and stared at the waves. He just stared for a while.

"I guess this is goodbye."

A figure ducked his head as he stepped out of the car and then he looked up as he straightened himself and stood facing the diner. He wasn't smug, he wasn't embarrassed, he wasn't cocky or even happy. He was shaking.

"Dean?" Bobby stumbled and, while they all moved a step towards him, Ellen was the one to catch him. He caught himself a step after she did and managed to turn a fall into a falter.

"It is a long story." McLeod offered to the stunned faces and everyone turned to look. He caught Turner's glare and cleared his throat. "Sir." He pursed his lips together and looked back to the crowd.

"He's not wrong." Dean sort of whispered. He searched the faces. Ellen, Jo, Bobby, dude he didn't know, chick he didn't know. And then he appeared in the doorway. Not Cas.

Sam.

Sam took a sharp inhale. "Dean." He scrambled passed them on the stairs quickly and then slowed as his feet hit the parking lot. He walked until he was right in front of Dean. He put his hand out to Dean's face. "How-Wh-" He trailed off. Then he just pulled Dean into a hug, one arm on the shoulder and one arm on the back - equal. "I'm so sorry."

It took Dean a second to respond in kind, wrapping his arms around his brother. "No, I am." He sighed. "For more than you know yet."

Sam pulled back. "What, what happened? They said you were dead," he pointed to Turner, "you said he was dead!"

"Sam." Everyone moved towards him.

"Whoa, Sam." Dean put himself in front of his brother. "Please, I will explain everything." He pointed to Turner. "It wasn't his fault, or the Army's, it was mine." He put his hand to his chest and Sam leaned away from Turner. "It was my fault, all of it. And I will explain."

"Then explain." Bobby spoke up, his jaw tight and his hand entwined with Ellen's.
"First of all, where's Cas?" He looked between them all, to the two he didn't know. "I don't know you," he pointed to Kevin, "and I don't know you," he pointed to Jess, "but I count," he pointed to their aprons as he counted, "one, two, three, four... four aprons. Does Cas not work here anymore?"

Jo's eyes widened and she looked to Jess. "Cas."

"What, what about Cas?" Dean looked between them all. "Is he alright? If that Gabriel-"

"No, Dean, he's leaving." Sam grabbed Dean's shoulder and he winced out of Sam's grasp, Sam looked down. "What?"

"Later. Cas," he looked between them all, "where?"

"Michigan." Sam replied.

"No, where is he now!" Dean shouted.

"Where do you think?" Bobby said, still uncertain.

Dean didn't asked to be dismissed, he didn't say anything else, he just took off. He ran and he ran.

The three soldiers stood there looking at Ellen and Bobby who were looking after Dean. Kevin put his arm around Jo, and Jess, having moved beside Sam when he started on Turner, took Sam's hand.

"Come inside." Ellen said and the three soldiers made to talk. "No, we can't wait until he comes back." She croaked her finger at them. "You all know and we need to. Move." She turned back inside, and the rest followed after a glance to the disappearing figure of Dean in the distance.

Walker, McLeod and Turner looked at each other.

"I'm saying nothing." Walker looked to McLeod who shook his head.

Turner sighed. "Sometimes I hate being in charge."

Cas sat and thought about all of the things he and Dean could have been doing now. Cas could have been finishing his shift and Dean would be eating pie waiting for him. They'd climb in his Impala and drive to Dean's or Cas' apartment, the one he used to have. They'd go inside and Dean would drum up something for Cas to quickly eat since Dean had his supper at the diner. Cas would have had something but, after so many years working there, that night he just didn't fancy any of it. They'd talk about things, about work and the people that they had encountered that day. Cas imagined that Dean might be a mechanic but he knew it wasn't realistic because the Army had rules, you couldn't just quit, you had to serve a certain amount of time. Whether Dean wanted to leave or not they'd talk about when Dean would be next shipping out or what car he had in to work on. Cas would tell him Army greens are sexy, he would tell him that the idea of Dean covered in grease with his overalls tied around his waist was sexy. Dean would protest and Cas would tell him the idea of Dean in those was sexy. And the idea of him out of them was even better. They'd make out on the couch and maybe move to their room, maybe not. Cas imagined the feel of Dean's lips on his body, his lips on Dean's. He wondered if Dean would like the birth mark he had on his inner thigh, if he'd prove it every time by kissing it gently. He wondered if Dean had any scares on him and he thought about how he'd kiss them all every time to show Dean that he loved every part of him. Then he thought about telling Dean he loved him, of being able to say it out loud, he asked
himself if Dean would feel uncomfortable at that or if it'd make him go a little red and look down. The thought of whispering it against Dean's neck and Dean smiling made Castiel hurt.

Then he heard Dean say it back. He saw him flip Castiel on the bed and whisper it back against his lips. He thought about how he would do everything and anything he could to make Dean moan his name. He would watch as Dean settled into bed beside him, smiling and tired. He thought about waking up next to him and the smell of last night still covering them. He even thought about waking up to an empty bed but not an empty apartment, he would hear Asia drifting in from the kitchen and smell something being fried. It would take his brain a few seconds to determine what it was but by then he would have sighed happily and dragged himself out of bed and to the kitchen.

He didn't want to ever stop thinking about all of that stuff but when he saw himself hook his chin over Dean's shoulder and feel the cold metal on its left side he remembered the dog tags. He remembered the Army and, although he had thought about it before in the 'what Dean would do as a job' part of his imaginings, this somehow brought home the realization that those dog tags hung around Bobby's neck now, not Dean's.

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Dean ran and he ran and he ran. Damn, he was out of shape. When he reached the pier he saw him. He was standing himself up from the edge, but he didn't turn around. Dean walked slowly, breathing out and in, trying not to collapse. He kept repeating over and over - he deserves this, he deserves to know everything, he deserves to know that he was worth so much more than Dean could ever be, he deserves to know just how Dean had hurt him so that he could be angry and hate him and go to Michigan, for whatever reason, and be happy out there.

Dean stopped a few steps away and tried to relax his throat and push the bile down. Just what the hell were words again? Say something, anything, before he turns around. Say something!

"So, where's this Marine boyfriend of yours?"

Cas froze.

Dean froze.

That was so not the way to start this.

What could Dean do but wait for Cas to turn around? He didn't know if he wanted him to turn around. Hell, if Cas jumped in the water and swam away right now he wouldn't blame him.

Cas took a breath. He imagined it, he must have imagined it. He was going crazy, there was yet more proof that he needed out of Dodge. "You're going crazy, Cas." He whispered to himself.

Dean felt his stomach lurch. "Cas?"

Cas turned slowly around. Right away Dean noticed the necklace. When his eyes met Dean's, they widened into... Terror. "No, no, no, no-" He started.

Dean walked forward and tried to grab at him while he freaked out. "Cas, calm down."

"-no, no, no, not real-" Cas tried to move away, taking a step to Dean's left.

"-Cas, it's me-"

Cas looked down at where Dean was touching him; he felt that, he definitely felt those hands
grabbing him so gently. He knew those hands. "-n- no, no, not real, no..." Cas' voice trailed away to a whisper.

"-Cas, it's me." Dean's voice was a whisper too. "Calm down." He 'shh'ed him and ignored the pain he felt seeing Cas like this. He shouldn't have come back, he shouldn't have ever came back.

Cas looked at the dog tags - shiny and new.

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D.
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"D-" Cas gasped for breath.

"It's me, Cas." Dean shook his head, his eyes welling up just hearing Cas' reaction. "I'm sorry."

"So-" Cas tried to repeat, but he finally looked up to Dean's eyes. "Why?" Cas let out a sob.
"Dean." He grabbed Dean's face and then neck and pulled him tight against him, gathering Dean's shirt at the back in his closed fists. "Dean." He let out a breath. Dean closed his eyes as Cas squeezed him tighter and tighter. He pulled back to look at Dean, over his face, and then he sighed before hugging him again. "You're okay." He took a couple of breaths again, pushing his face into Dean's neck. "You're alive and you're back."

"Yeah." Dean croaked, there was a horrible feeling of guilt hauling hope along with it.

"You said you would come back." He felt Cas kiss his neck and he pursed his lips together. Cas pulled back to look at him again. "Oh my god." Cas muttered it before kissing Dean on the lips.

Dean melted into it for a few seconds, feeling Cas' tongue press against his and when Cas' hand ran through his hair he could feel the guilt swell up. He pulled away. "Wait, just wait." Dean put his hand out. "I need to explain-"

"I don't care, I mean obviously I care but, oh my God, Dean!" He grasped at Dean's neck and shoulders. "I have been so miserable. There's not even a word for it, and I'm leaving and you came back and-" He kissed Dean again.

Dean used everything he had in him to pull away, he pulled right out of Cas' grasp, who was reluctant to let him, and stepped back. "Cas, I need to tell you what happened, it's going to be hard and horrible and you're going to hate me but you deserve to know."

"What?" Cas tilted his head to the right and he fixed a scared look on Dean. "Did they know?" Dean didn't understand. "Were you on a mission and this was all some kind of-"

Dean cut him off. "No."

"-sick twisted, part of that?" Cas pointed to Dean's dog tags. "Did they know?"

"No!" Dean grabbed Cas' shoulders and lowered his head a little to stare at Cas. "Look at me, I... promise you, I promise, that they did not know, this was not a mission. I swear to you."

Cas nodded. "Then what?" His face was scared and confused, between relief and hurt.

"There was an explosion." Cas nodded, unsurprised, as Dean's hands fell away from him. "I was
knocked out and this family took me in." Dean sighed. "I didn't know who I was, I forgot everything, I forgot my name, I forgot the Army, I forgot." He swallowed and felt the emotion build up. "I forgot you, Cas." He shook his head. "I'm so sorry, I forgot you."

"Dean," Cas lifted his right hand to Dean's face, "you were in an explosion, a building fell on you. You are lucky to be alive, look at you!" He beamed as he looked over Dean. "You look-" He let out a happy laugh and it cut Dean somewhere deep. "My God Dean, I can't believe this is real." He grabbed at Dean again, trying to pull him in.

Dean pulled away. "Cas, please let me finish." Cas' smile fell. "I forgot everything and then it came back." Cas nodded. "It came back ten months ago."

Cas stopped and Dean could see his mouth form into the words. What they were going to be though, he dreaded. "Ten months?" Dean nodded again. "Well, wh- did they keep you captive?"

Dean shook his head. "No." He whispered.

"No?" Cas ducked his head to Dean's. "What do you mean 'no'?!" He started shouting and Dean took a step back to give him room to throw his arms about. "So, you've been what? Staying in some random family's house for the best part of a year while your friends have being out there fighting, while they mourned you, while we all mourned you? While I mourned you?" Cas was shouting and it pierced Dean but all he could do was nod and look down. "Don't give me that fucking puppy look, Dean! What were you doing? Did we all mean that little to you? Did you just think, fuck this I'll be a-a-a..." Cas trailed off.

"Builder." Dean muttered.

"A what?"

"A builder. We rebuilt the homes that were damaged in the fighting."

"So, is that it, you just thought I've played at being a soldier now I'd quite like to be a builder and fuck everyone else'?"

"No!" Dean didn't know why he was shouting but Cas was angry at him. He was angry at himself for making Cas angry at him.

"Well, why?!" Cas leaned forward.

"Because-"

"Because what, Dean!" Tears streamed from Cas' eyes.

"I don't know why!" Dean admitted.

Cas fell silent and nodded at him with fire in his eyes. "You don't know?" He bit his lip. "You came back here to say you don't know?"

Dean rubbed his face. "Cas, it all just fucking happened and I came here to try and explain to you so you could move on."

Cas laughed bitterly, still biting his lip, ignoring the tears rolling down his cheek. He sat down on the left side, on the edge, cross-legged, heavy and almost sarcastically. "Well, have a seat because I would sure like to hear this." He looked out at the water and Dean thought about walking away, he looked back along the road and he thought about just proving himself right and running away
again. But his Mom's words rang out, all at once, and he closed his eyes, looking to the side. "Just go, Dean." Cas' voice was low and sad. "It's what you want to do, it's all I'm worth to you." Dean turned back as Cas looked round and up at him. "Go." He looked back out at the ocean again.

Dean took a step forward and sat down slowly beside Cas, his legs over the edge. "No." He wiped his face. "I came back to explain. I told Turner that I would come back and then when you hated me I would go back to the barracks." Cas looked at him. "I owe you the truth, all of it. I'm not going until I've told you all of it."

"I have a plane to catch," Cas said, his jaw still tight and his heart in his throat. How was this real? It wasn't, it couldn't be. He found himself waiting once more for the punchline, for Jess to shake him awake and tell him he was going to miss his plane. For Sam to nudge him at the table in the parking lot of the diner and ask if he wanted more pie.

Dean nodded. "I'll be quick." He leaned his elbows on his thighs and took a second to compose himself. "Rahim was eleven when I found him in a loft part of this house, there was a whole house full of people but Rahim had asthma from the dust pockets in the loft or something, I don't know. What drew me to him was that he wasn't the only kid with asthma but he was the only one who never took meds unless he was forced to, this aid truck had come and he could only get one inhaler each time so he gave it to his sister. He had asthma attacks and she had to force it into his lungs. He nearly died so many times and when we breached they both had an attack," Cas looked to Dean. "I had to hold him down and force him to inhale the medicine." Dean shook his head. "He hated me for it. I saved his life and he hated me for it because that meant there was one less dose for his sister."

Dean exhaled and shook his head.

"Anyway, we rehoused them, I was determined they were staying together, oh I was adamant. Turner shouted and gave me a hundred drills but I was sticking to it. Eventually we got them into this home type thing, it wasn't ideal but it was actually pretty good because they had medical facilities so they had medicine for them both. I visited him and when Bradbury told him that I was the one that made sure him and his sister stayed together he thanked me." Dean smiled briefly then it dropped. "Then they were kidnapped, the whole home was raided in the middle of the night. The adults were slaughtered, any of the children who were over fifteen were killed and the rest were taken."

"Why fifteen?" Cas asked without even meaning to.

"We don't know, maybe they were too old and could perhaps overpower them without weapons," Dean shrugged. "I don't know, it was mindless murder. It was Hell, it really was." Dean ran his right hand through his hair. "Every night I would lie in bed and I could hear a lot of the guys crying, it's an unspoken thing that no matter what you hear, whether it be crying or-or whatever, you don't talk about it. Every night I would think about just running. Just grabbing my stuff and disappearing into the night."

"More running." Cas muttered. He wasn't just talking about Dean, he knew that, as he looked out at the water.

"Yeah, I know. But then when we had a lead on the kids, I was right up to Turner's office. I told him, I said, 'you have to let me in this, I will let anyone lead, I needed to be there'."

"He told us." Cas played with his shoelace.

"Well, we got there and everything went as planned, we took out the kidnappers and no one else
was hurt but there was a bunch of explosives so we cleared the area but Rahim wouldn't leave," Dean's eyes widened, "he just wouldn't leave!" He looked down, gesturing with his hands and Cas looked. "He was going on about how they would kill his sister."

"Who?"

"I don't know, I mean I noticed she wasn't there and I said I would find her, I would have, I really would have." Dean's voice was speeding up and Cas watched him, anger changing slowly to worry. What was going on? "There was no way I was just going to forget her, but he had a detonator and he was twelve, Cas!" He ran both his hands through his hair and pulled at it. "Twelve and I pleaded with him, I really did," he rubbed his hands down to his neck and dug his nails in, "but he pushed the thing anyway. He told me to get out and he pushed it." Dean closed his eyes as the tears fell and terror filled him and he saw the boy's face again and felt the heat all over him. It travelled to his shoulder. "I watched him burn, I heard him scream."

Cas looked as Dean shook and his lip quivered. He remembered what Dean had said about it being so much worse than the media showed and how he would have took back his decision to join if he could. When he had told him that he had seen and done some things that would haunt him. And that was before this.

Cas put his right hand out and touched it to Dean's shoulder.

Dean saw Rahim reach out and push him.

Dean let out a scream.

Cas pulled back, eyes wide. "What? What did I do?!"

Dean put his hand to his arm as Rahim touched him. "No!" He shouted again.

"Dean!" Cas grabbed his face and pulled it to look at him. His eyes were open and full of tears but he was somewhere else, Cas turned so that his right leg leaned on the wood beside him. "Dean, look at me!" Dean dug his nails into his arm. "Dean?" He closed his eyes, tight and sobbed. Cas couldn't think of a way to make him stop, to stop him hurting, so he leaned forward and kissed Dean. He kissed him again and again.

Dean could feel it, the fire seemed to die down and while his shoulder still burned, Rahim's face faded.

"Dean?" Cas whispered before kissing him again. "Come back."

Dean opened his eyes again and all he saw was water as Rahim's screams died away, washed away by the sounds of waves and heat turned to touch. He looked down at Cas looking back up. "I tried to save him." He whispered.

"I know." Cas rubbed his thumb against Dean's cheek to wipe the tears before resting his hand over Dean's right which, he had just noticed that, the fingers of were digging into his arm. "Let go." He stroked it gently. Dean slowly loosened his grip and Cas moved Dean's hand away from it before letting it go and gesturing to his shoulder. "Can I see?"

Dean was too busy noticing that Cas had let his hand go before he looked back and realized. "Huh? Oh, yeah." He pulled the sleeve down over his shoulder enough that Cas could see the hand print.

"Oh, God." Cas mumbled before cautiously stroking it. "Does it hurt that bad?"
"Not really." Dean swallowed, embarrassed to admit it but he remember McLeod's advice. "It hurts a little but I think any pain I feel is more psychological."

Cas nodded. "I think you may be right." He leaned forward a little bit and then hesitated before looking to Dean and then down at it again as he slowly kissed it. Dean's eyes closed automatically and Cas kissed it once more before he pulled back, blinking a few times as if pulling himself from a trance, pulling himself away from how he felt for the man in front of him. He pulled Dean's shirt back over it. He looked at his watch. "After that?"

Dean fixed his shirt and tried to keep focused. "I woke up in a house a few weeks later. They told me that they had found me in some rubble but they didn't tell me that they had found me in Army greens or anything. I didn't have my dog tags," he played with the ones around his neck, "these are replacement ones."

"Bobby has the old ones." Cas explained.

Dean nodded. "It was a while later that I saw some of my company run passed. Bradbury and Hannah as well as Jones and McLeod. I couldn't understand it but I knew I knew them. I finally remembered, just as I was drifting off to sleep, about sitting in the barracks and reading one of your letters." Dean bit his lips thinking about it, it wasn't the last one he had received but he hadn't had the opportunity to answer after that. He had written so many of them, replies, and he wanted his reply to be perfect but then when he had decided that any response was better than none it was too late, he never got a chance to post them. He idly wondered if Cas had read them. "I remembered everything."

"And you just decided to stay?" Cas looked out at the water for a second before turning to look at Dean.

"No, it wasn't that I decided to stay, it's that I just didn't decide to leave." Cas scoffed and looked away. "The guy had taken me in, I had to pay him back."

"You are so full of shit, Dean." He looked back. "I meant nothing to you at all, did I?"

"That is the farthest from the truth that anything could ever-"

"Then stop pissing around and tell me the truth! It's what you say you're here for!" Cas gestured around.

Dean paused and then nodded. "You're right." He nodded again swallowing. "I didn't leave because I was scared. I was scared of going back there and being asked to do it all again, to lead teams into," Dean used air quotes, "'terror hotspots' and have my team members killed in 'friendly fire' and then gun down 'potential terrorists' because it's all wrong, Cas! There are never any weapons, there are never any terrorists and it's not friendly fire. Nine times out of ten it's a town who have armed themselves against the threat baring down on them - us!" He grabbed his dog tags as if he wanted to rip them off but then sighed and let them go. "We go in there, kitted up and pointing guns everywhere, holding these people in curfews and breaking their doors down in the middle of the night. Helicopters make the area feel like noon when it's midnight and we shout in six different languages at little boys and old men who tremble as we push them to the floor. I couldn't do it. Rahim died and he tried to save me! I should have saved him! I couldn't go back, Cas, I just couldn't." He let his head fall forward and cried. "And it's not that you meant nothing to me, you were everything, you still are, I love the bones of you and yet I couldn't bring myself to actually go back there. I just couldn't do it. I ran away by sticking my head in the sand and I'm so sorry. I ran when I should have stood up and took it like the man my dad always tried to teach me to be."
Cas felt himself reach out and rub Dean's back. Everything was starting to make more sense.

"And that's what I do, Cas. I fail everything and everyone. My dad needed someone to snap him out of his rut and yet I just marched in line and then Sammy needed someone to stand up for him and I didn't say anything, I let him throw Sam out. When Rahim needed help I didn't see it, when my unit needed their leader back I was in some field moving stuff into trucks to go into town and rebuild houses. When you needed me, when you all needed me here, to take away the pain and say I was sorry, I failed. And that's why I stayed Cas; I failed at everything and I had already failed you," he turned his head to look at Cas taking a sniff, the mess of tears over his eyes and his hands, "you were-you are perfect. I wasn't even here and I failed. How could I come back and keep doing that? I buried myself in a field and I avoided the unit when they were in town and every night I told myself I should go back and every night I told myself I shouldn't." He shook his head. "I'm so sorry." He let his face fall back to his hands. "I'm sorry."

"I'm going to kill him." Ellen leaned back on her hands on the counter. "I'm going to kill him myself."

All of them were huddled around the bar in some way; the soldiers were on stools on the customer side, Ellen, Jo and Sam were on the other side. Bobby was on his usual perch finally having regained the control in his legs. Sam was leaning against the same wall Bobby had fell against and Jess was hugging into him. The whole place was empty, they had apologized and closed the diner, owing to personal circumstances.

"Now," Walker put his hand out, "you didn't see him."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked, sternly.

"He collapsed, in the restroom at the airport he had cried on the charter." McLeod added in.

"He had a full-on panic attack on the plain to Chicago." Walker nodded. "Yeah, and when I confronted him in the restroom before the domestic and told him that Cas had collapsed at the funeral calling him the love of his life he passed out."

Ellen looked to Bobby, suddenly feeling guilty.

"So, why did he come back?" Bobby asked turning his head to Turner.

"He said that Cas deserved to know the truth."

"He's trying to win him back?" Jo's head bobbed a little in disbelief.

"No." Walker shook his head. "No, he knows there's no way but he said he owed it to Cas."

"He's done running." Turner added. "He knows what's happening but he's facing it because he loves him."

They all looked at each other as Kevin came out of the kitchen rubbing his hands. "You know you want to go." They all turned. "Go, I'll lock up."

They shared one last look before they took off out of the diner, Jo stopped to kiss Kevin on the cheek first.
Dean looked at his watch and Cas did too. "Oh."

Dean nodded. "Go."

Cas inhaled. "I spoke to Lucifer." Dean turned. "He lives there."

"That's good." Dean smiled wearily. "That's really good, Cas." He leaned back. "I'm sorry."

"I know." Cas whispered. "But Dean, I can't-"

Dean put up his hand. "That wasn't what this was about Cas, I knew that was never going to happen, it was about facing up to my fears and giving you what you deserved."

"And what if I had hated you?"

"You mean you don't?" Dean raised his eyebrows.

"No." Cas shook his head as he leaned forward and kissed Dean's forehead. Dean's eyes closed, he tried to memorize it. "I told you before, I could never hate you." He pushed himself to standing and Dean looked up.

Sam arrived first, surprisingly, followed by Walker and Turner, then Jess, then McLeod who glared at Jess for out running him, then Jo, then Ellen and Bobby. They looked out as Cas picked up his bag and threw it over his shoulder.

"No?" Dean asked, looking up at Cas.

Cas shook his head. "I love you." The group smiled for a second. "Oh," Cas pulled the charm over his head, "this is yours." He held it out for Dean and everyone's face dropped. Dean looked as it fell into his hand. "Thank you for giving it to me."

"Thank you for looking after it." Dean managed to croak as his hands clasped around it. "I would ask you to keep it, if you wanted to?"

Cas reluctantly took it and put it in his pants pocket. "Thank you." He sighed. "For everything." Dean smiled and nodded. "Stay safe, 513."

Cas turned and saw the crowd of stunned faces looking at him. He walked towards them, Dean's bag over his shoulder and stopped beside Sam looking at him and ducking his head before he kept walking along the road.

Dean looked out at the water. He had expected that but it didn't mean it had hurt any less. And he waited as long as he could, a few seconds, before he let his body shake once. He bit his lip and it shook again. He lowered his head and cried again. He shoulders shook and he tried to muffle the sobs.

Cas walked and walked, looking at the ground, as he walked to the bus stop. When he got there the bus was waiting, he had cut it fine. He jumped on and found a seat looking out at the spot he had stood and watched Dean's bus drive away. The day he had been asked to wait, the day he had...
promised to wait as long as it took. And now was the day the waiting was over.

But Cas wasn't welcoming his soldier home. He was boarding another bus and starting again, again.

Sam walked to sit beside Dean and pulled him to lean on his shoulder. The brother who had held him in the night when he had cried, the brother who had let him walk out and have the freedom he had so craved and the brother who had been so afraid of rejection that he hadn't spoken to Sam ever again was sobbing on his shoulder because the love of his life had just walk away.

He had expected it and he had still done it.

For Cas' sake.
Chapter 20

Everything felt kind of numb.

What the hell had just happened? Dean was alive, he was okay and he was alive, standing there right in front of Cas. Standing there just as Cas had prayed for a hundred times over. He had even made stupid bargains with God. Please bring him back, take me instead, just bring him back. I'll do anything, I'll never touch another man again, I'll never even think about them. I won't touch or think about anyone, I promise. Just please bring him back.

And there he was.

But he hadn't been kept from Cas, he had stayed away. He had remembered and still stayed away. He had let Cas think he was dead, let everyone mourn him and hurt. Cas walked onto the plane smiling to the attendant as he pointed out Cas' seat to him. But then Dean had came back, he had came back to explain to Cas why he had done that. He hadn't tried to win Cas back, he had sat and explained expecting Cas to walk away. He expected Cas to hate him.

Cas stared at the little plane symbol on the miniature screen on the back of the seat in front of him, the dotted line that marked the two hour flight to Detroit Wayne Country airport where he'd be picked up by Lucifer and driven back to Hell, Michigan and yet all he could see was that look in Dean's eyes when he had talked about the explosion and the Army. He had been so scared and so traumatized.

Cas leaned his head back to the seat and stared ahead. It was all too much to take in.

Sam sat with Dean while the others walked back to the diner. "Come on, you must be tired." Sam rubbed his shoulders before standing up.

"No." Dean wiped his nose and lazily shook his head.

"Dude, you just flew from..." Sam screwed up his brow. "What country is Gaza in?"

Dean sniffed. "If we knew that I'd be out of a job." Sam scoffed a little. "I'm staying at the barracks."

"No," Dean looked up, "you're staying here. You've got a couple of weeks before you hear back about everything, stay here until then." Sam put his hand out. "Don't make me carry you."

Dean let out a little laugh and then grabbed Sam's hand to stand. They started walking back along the road.

"It'll be okay, Dean."

"I know." Dean looked down. "I expected that to happen." He blew out air. "Doesn't mean it didn't hurt."

"You hurt us all."

Dean looked to Sam. "You don't seem very..." He started and then narrowed his eyes. "Angry at me."
Sam smiled. "I'm not, I've spent the past year wishing I could have taken it all back, said something at the funeral, picked up the phone all of those years. I lost my brother, all of that anger died a long time ago it was just stubbornness that was left."

"And now?" Dean asked as he stopped in the street.

Sam shrugged. "I think now, I'd like an explanation."

Dean nodded. "I can do that." They turned and started walking back along the road towards the diner, nobody said anything because they knew that he'd explain it later.

When they got there the diner was locked up and their little crowd of people was in the parking lot, all of them looking somewhere between confused, angry, relieved and having pity for the man who just lost the love of his life.

Dean looked over them all and then looked at Ellen. "Okay, get it over with." He kind of stuck out his face towards her and she stared at him as he closed his eyes and scrunched his brow. "If I get a vote, I'd prefer the slap over the punch but it's your call."

"Punch?" She asked.

Dean opened one eye. "Cas said you punched Gabriel." He leaned back. "Where is that douche, anyway? I owe him a visit or two."

Dean felt a sharp sting over the left side of his face. It took him a second to register that it was Ellen's slap. "He blew town." He looked back to her. "Right after your funeral." She slapped him again, this one he saw coming. "You little bastard." She muttered and then lunged at him.

He took a sharp breath when he realized she was hugging him.

"Don't you ever do that again." She threatened his shoulder with emotion in her voice. "Ever."

"I won't." He made to hug her back and she pushed him away. "Wha-"

"You're damn right you won't, I'll kill you myself." She glared at him. "You weren't here, you didn't have to deal with it all." She pointed her finger at him. "Jo, Bobby, Sam," Dean took a quick glance at them all and she slapped his collarbone so he would look back at her pointing finger and then her face, "Cas."

Dean looked down at the ground, suddenly feeling it again. "I can explain-"

"I don't think you realize-"

"I don't realize?!" Dean shouted taking a step back to look at them all. He lifted his right hand to his chest. "I don't realize? Look, I'm sorry about what I did but I just stood out there and watched the most important person in the world to me go from terror to happiness to hate and then walk away-"

"What did you expect?" Bobby cut in, shouting.

"I expected it, Bobby, oh believe me I expected it but I didn't expect it to rip into my like it is, nothing prepared me for that." He brought his hands together as if praying and shook them as he spoke gesturing them to the person he was talking to and looked around at them. "Ellen, I'm sorry; Bobby, I'm sorry; Sam, I'm sorry; I don't know you," Dean looked and gestured to Kevin, "but I'm sorry;" he looked at Jess, "I don't know you either, but I'm sorry." He looked up. "I am sorry to
Everyone for everything, you've no idea. But I will explain and then after my review I will go back to the service and you'll never have to hear from me again."

Dean walked away through them slowly.

They all turned to watch him and then they exchanged looks.

Bobby looked between them all. "Back to the den?" He turned to Sam who nodded.

They all got in their cars and headed out to the Winchester family house.

Bobby got in his truck and pulled alongside Dean as he walked. "Get in."

Dean looked at him. "I can walk."

"Get in the car, boy." Dean sighed and ran around the truck to jump in before Bobby drove off.

"None of us hate you."

Dean looked to him. "I deserve it from all of you."

"You can keep playing that same record but we don't hate you. We're in shock, Dean." He looked over briefly and smiled a little.

"You're not angry?" Dean tuned slightly.

"Son, in between the crazy trips your dad took you boys on I practically raised you. I know my own boys." Dean inhaled. "I know why you did it and I know why you came back. Ain't no shame in being scared."

Dean fell silent.

"You know where I am." Bobby had taken the long way around town, that hadn't escaped Dean.

"Did Dad ever talk about serving?"

Bobby shook his head. "No, but I know he enjoyed it. The marines and the Army are very different."

"Yeah." Dean croaked. "I just didn't realize. I mean, I wasn't dumb, I knew what I was training for but I could never have imagined..." Dean trailed off.

Bobby nodded. "I know, kid." He tapped Dean's shoulder and Dean winced. "Oh, I forgot about that."

"Did the guys tell you lot everything?" Dean almost huffed it.

"No, they told us the facts now you gotta tell us the story." Dean nodded. "I think you owe it to Sam to tell it to him in private."

"I know." Dean yawned. "I know."

>>>>

That night Cas lay in his bed with a kitten lying across his stomach. After the sixth time of picking her up and putting her on the floor he had then tried leaving her on the bed. That worked well. So, while the kitten purred on his stomach he stared at the ceiling. He looked down at the ginger fur
The kitten stirred as Cas' stomach muscles shook underneath him and Cas turned his head to the right so that it was on the edge of his pillow. The kitten slowly moved onto the bed next to him and Cas turned fully onto his side squeezing his eyes closed. Abby walked cautiously towards his head and licked his chin.

"No." Cas managed through tears pushing the cat gently away. The kitten waited a second and then put its face close to Cas' enough that its whiskers nearly touched him. Cas was still shaking with sobs as the whole two years came crashing down on him. The cat moved back when Cas grabbed the spare pillow and hugged it to himself, she settled somewhat concerned on the empty side of the bed facing Cas. Cas pushed his face into the pillow and let go off all of the crying he had been keeping in, the pillows muffled most but Abby watched him, lowering her head to the bed.

In Kansas Dean was sitting in the sitting room of his childhood home. He and Sam had had a long talk that was basically Dean telling Sam everything. From when Sam left to Dad's death and beyond. He had recanted almost four years of his life to Sam before the Army and right up to the present day. It ended with Sam doing that thing he has always done - he made Dean feel normal. He seemed to have this uncanny way to cut everything Dean did right down to the true reasons, no matter what Dean told himself Sam had always known Dean better than anyone.

Then Dean had sat in the sitting room with Sam, Bobby, Ellen, Jo, Kevin and Jess (who he now knew) and explained everything. Right down to the stupid stuff Sam had laid out that Dean wouldn't ordinarily admit. In the end he realized that he owed them even those.

"I think I was glad when they found me, I mean," Dean took a drink, rolled his lips together and swallowed the beer, "at first I was worried I was going to get shot and then when McLeod realized it was me I thought 'shit, now I have to go back' but..." He looked down and missed the looks exchanged. "I was glad because the decision was made for me, I had no choice but to face up to what I had done." He shrugged. "I don't know."

Sam's cell rang and he looked at it, he widened his eyes to Jess and gestured to it. "I'll be right back - Stanford." He walked into the kitchen and out of view.

"I just hope that one day you guys can forgive me." Dean lowered his voice and picked at the label on the beer bottle.

"Already there, kid." Booby smiled and Ellen turned her head to him slightly. "There is just about nothin' you can do that I won't forgive. You're here and that's all that matters."

Dean looked across to him, smiled a little and nodded just once.

"Me too." Jo smiled and nuded him with her right elbow. "I'm just glad to have my big brother back."

He let out an air-laugh.

"Uh," Kevin started and everyone looked, "I know you're not exactly including me in that since I don't know you but I need you to like me so I forgive you." He smiled. Jo laughed a little and looked down embarrassed, Kevin's arm was along the back of the three-seater he, Jo and Dean were sat on, behind Jo, and Jo's left hand rested lazily on Kevin's right knee.

Dean watched her and a little smile appeared. "Well, anyone that can put that look on her face," Dean gestured with his beer, "gets a vote from me." Kevin nodded a little embarrassed.
Jess leaned forward from her perch on the arm of the arm chair Sam had been sat on. "In that case, can I use that too?"

Dean held out his beer and she lifted hers to knock it gently. "Course."

There was a second or two before everyone except Dean looked to Ellen. She shrugged. "I'm still pissed."

Dean looked up to her. "I know." He sighed. "And you have every right to be, I mean you told me not to go and I should have listened and then you had to deal with everything and you saw it all and I was just-" Dean had begun to speed up, "-I'm sorry and I don't know what else I can say, if I could go back and take it back I would, in a second, I would have shouted after my unit the minute I seen them passing Alon's window and the millions of times I could have gone back to base or I would never have gone to the stupid Army and I would have stayed on that damn pier with Cas and I should have and I will never forgive myself for what I've done." They all shifted as Dean started to get upset, gesturing more and more with his beer. "I regret a lot of things in my life, I've always regretted letting Sam walk out-well he didn't walk out Dad threw him out and I just stood there but now I don't because look at him!" He gestured to the kitchen and Sam walked along so he could see, still talking into his cellphone. "He's nearly a lawyer and he's engaged and Jess is awesome, you are, and I regretted not talking to Sam at the funeral and I-" He seemed to panic. "I shouldn't have done, I didn't have saved Rahim's life because I forced that damn inhaler to his mouth, I should have let him die like that instead of in so much pain and I caused that," he pointed to his new face seeing Rahim's eyes go from brown to orange, "and how is that different from what I did to Cas, how?!"

Ellen stood up and side stepped around the coffee table, kneeling down in front of him. "Dean, stop."

"How is it?" His eyes moved to Ellen as she leaned her hands on the couch at either side of Dean's legs to balance. "It's not. He didn't even know me, we sat on that pier and we kissed I thought 'what am I doing? I'm leaving' but it didn't stop me and I gave him that necklace, I just handed him it, I asked him to wait for me! I knew him like two, three hours and I ask him to wait? Who does that? Crazy people!"

"He said he would?" Ellen looked at him worried. He hadn't slowed down and he was crying. When had that started?

"I came in and completely," he gestured his hand from one side to the other, "ran my car all over his life. I may as well have been the one to run him over. And Gabriel, where was I? I was out there," he shouted and pointed to the door, Jo and Kevin leaning back flush against the couch with Dean's arm barely an inch away from their noses, Jo took Dean's hand in hers and he let her lower it back to the couch and squeeze it as it shook, "storming residential areas and leading my men like lambs to the slaughter. They trusted me, you all trusted me, Rahim trusted me and I turned my back on all of you."

Dean put his right arm over his eyes and Ellen reached up to take the beer bottle from him, Kevin leaned forward to take it from her, before she pulled Dean's arm away and he tilted his head upwards trying to stop the tears.

"Dean, look at me, hon." He kept his head tipped but his eyes moved to hers. "Did you say all of this to him?"

Dean nodded. "It was never about winning him back, Ellen." He blinked a few times, trying to get rid of them.
"Don't you want him back?" She narrowed her eyes.

"Don't." Dean shook his head. "Don't even talk to me about that." He exhaled. "Cas will always be the one." He cut his right hand in the air. "The one. But coming back here I knew I was walking away from him, I never expected any other outcome."

"That's not what I asked you." Jo kept holding Dean's other hand. Sam muttered something into his cell phone and Jess turned to look at him.

Dean pursed his lips together. He paused and then he shook his head. "No." Everyone looked at each other. "I know what I did. I know what I always do. I don't want to do that again. Not to him." Dean sniffed. "I love him more than anything but-" He wiped his nose. "I came here to explain and give him what he needed to move on." He shook his head again. "I'm done running." He looked to Sam. "It's the only way I ever knew how to deal but it's not dealing at all, is it?"

"That weren't exactly your fault." Bobby said and everyone looked. "John was a good man and a good father but when your mother died he stuffed the both of you in that car and he ran, he ran across America, Dean." Bobby leaned forward in his seat. "I love you both but Sam," he turned his head, "you ran away at fifteen, you did it for all the right reasons but you ran. You ran away from something unhealthy and you did good." Sam lowered his head, the phone still at his ear as Bobby looked back to Dean. "And you stayed with John, not because you were a coward but because that's all you knew and when he died what did you do?"

"I joined the Army." Dean wiped his nose again. Sam muttered into his cell phone again.

"You ran away." Bobby sighed. "You ran away by running towards somethin' familiar. Military and routine, someone shouting at you and tellin' you what to do."

Dean nodded. "I didn't know what else to do."

"No one is blaming you." Ellen put her hand out to his forearm and he smiled back.

"I think that's what attracted me to Cas," Dean nodded, "apart from the obvious," he let out a little embarrassed laugh making all of them smile, "he came over to that table and even though you asked him to talk me out of it he said 'if you want to join the Army then you do that, no one has the right to tell you different'."

Ellen sighed. "That little shit."

Dean laughed. "He just let me do mine, you know?" He looked to Bobby who nodded. "I know we only spoke through letters but the only thing he ever really wanted-well it was two things." Dean paused. "When I got shipped out I told him I didn't want to go and it was all his fault, him and that damn smile." Dean shook his head fondly. Sam said something short, softly snapped his phone closed and walked to lean on the back of the arm chair. "He told me that I had to want to go because if I didn't I'd end up hurt and if I didn't come back he'd date a marine." They all lightly laughed.

"And the second?" Sam asked and Dean looked up. "Do we want to know?" He smiled and Dean laughed.

"Nothing like that Sammy." He looked down. "I got shipped out to Gaza the day after he got hit by the car." Dean inhaled as his jaw tensed and he tried to relax by exhaling. "I didn't tell him, how could I? He was already so worried but we were talking, I told him I got shot-"

"What?" - Everyone in the room said it at once.
Dean waved his hand. "My vest stopped it. But I forgot all about it and when I mentioned it Cas asked me to never keep these things from him, no matter what was going on, so I told him about where I was and stuff." Dean smiled. "But he asked me for those two, he never demanded or threatened me. He just let me do what I needed to do." Dean shrugged. "It was new to me."

"Why did you let him go?" Sam looked at Dean. "If he meant so much to you-"

"-means." Dean corrected.

"-then why did you just let him go?"

"Sam, after what I did do you really think I would even chance thinking that he would do anything other than hate me? I don't even know why he heard me out, I didn't even deserve that. I let him go because I want him to be happy, because he wanted to go and because it's what he needed to do. I had no right to ask otherwise." Dean sighed. "I do have one more regret to add to everything," he paused and looked at Ellen, "I never got to tell him I loved him."
Chapter 21

Two weeks later

Cas was in the sitting room one afternoon, plonked in front of the TV again, when the kitten raced passed the door and Cas looked to see Lucifer almost fall and grab the door frame looking down. "Abby, honestly!" He looked along the hall at her. "I'm going to break my neck one of these days." Cas smiled and Lucifer looked at him. He had his coat on and his keys in his hand. "Hey, I'm just heading out to the store. Need anything? Want to come?"

Cas shook his head. "Nope."

"Cassie," Lucifer walked into the room towards him, "you've got to stop this."

Cas sighed and looked to the coffee table as Lucifer sat on the part of the corner sofa facing sideways to him. "Luke."

"Cas, come on. You've been mopping around here for two weeks." He clasped his keys in his hands. "What is it that's bothering you?"

"Are you kidding?" Cas raised his eyebrows. "Dean's alive and he was alive this whole time!" He gestured with his hand.

Lucifer put his out. "Okay, I get that." Cas lowered his and exhaled. "I do and I can't even imagine how that must have felt," he put his hand to his chest, "it hurts just to look at you." He sighed and lowered it back to clasp his keys. "But I do know that that's not the only thing bothering you." He tilted his head. "Tell me." Cas paused. "Cas, we have spent long enough not talking." Cas sighed. "Please?"

Cas shuffled in his seat. "Luke, he just-" He thought back to the way Dean had spoken on the pier. "He's broken." Cas felt his eyes heat up. "He sat there and he told me, he told me the reasons for it all, he said he couldn't face going back. The fact that we were all hurting wasn't even enough to pull him back, it all ate away at him so much, being out there and doing the things he did, that he saw an out and he took it." Cas rubbed his face. "It wasn't like he sought out a way out, it fell into his lap but he did nothing to walk away from it." Cas saw the way he had screamed when Cas touched his shoulder.

Lucifer leaned forward. "Cas, I hate to tell you this but when it comes to running away from things you are hardly an angel." Cas' brow dipped and he exhaled. "Hell, it's a Novak family trait. I ran away, Anna ran away, you ran away." Cas sighed. "I ran here and then I stayed. Anna ran to New York and she stayed there. You ran a bit longer but you ended up in Kansas and you stayed. Even Balthazar ran t-" Lucifer stopped when Cas glared at him. "Cas, whatever we think of him now, just by lying to us all he was running away everyday, running away in the deepest parts of his mind." Lucifer leaned back. "You may not like it Cas but we all run away sometimes, yes what he did was horrible and I'm not defending that but..." He pursed his lips together nervously. "He came back. He came back and he owned up to what he did. And what did you do?"

"What did you expect me-" Cas started, his voice raised.

"Cas!" Cas shut up and lowered his voice again. "You can shout at me all you like but you're only so defensive because you know I'm right, he ran away and then he stopped running. He decided that no matter what, you deserved the truth. He stopped running for you, when will you stop?"
Cas looked to the TV again as Lucifer smiled weakly and stood up. Cas heard the house door close and then he heard the familiar patting of paws on hardwood floors. Abby walked into the room and paused, mid-stride, to look at Cas then she glanced back out the doorway before jumping up onto the couch. She walked over and put her front paws on Cas' right leg before extending her face to his.

"Maybe he's right." Cas smiled as she leaned up to rub her face on his. He automatically lowered his face so she could reach. His right hand came up to stroke down her back and she lifted her spine. "I was just so..." He looked to the side. "I don't even know." He sighed and lowered his head to touch hers. "He's alive." He smiled. "Like I said to you last night, he was standing right there and I just walked away." Cas widened his eyes and pulled back to look at her. "And he knew I would!" She lowered her head and rubbed it on his leg. "He knew I would run and he let me." He sighed again. "Because he knows what it feels like to need to run away."

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"I don't know why you're here," Dean mumbled nervously looking around the waiting area, "I don't need a lawyer." Dean rubbed his hands over his legs. "You're not even read up on military laws you couldn't-"

"Dean," Sam leaned back in his seat next to Dean, also in a suit, "I'm not here as your lawyer, I'm here as your brother."

Dean nodded. "Good." He took a couple of breaths. "Good."

"Do you need me to go in with you?" Sam looked as shadows moved towards the obscured glass panel in the door. The door had the words 'Commanding Sergeant Major' printed on it and underneath, in smaller letters it said, 'Zachariah Fuller'.

Dean shook his head. "No, I'm okay." He turned. "Besides, you're not allowed to, only lawyers are." Sam let out a little laugh and looked away.

The door opened, Dean stood up automatically and looked ahead at attention, Sam looked up and to the door where Sergeant Turner stood, unsure if he was to do the same. "Winchester." Turner gestured his head inside.

Dean turned on the spot, paused and then walked in. Sam watched the way he did it and sighed to himself. He took out his phone and typed a text to send out to everyone.

He's just gone in - Sam

He put the phone to his lips and looked to the door.

"Winchester, Sir." Sergeant Turner said after closing the door. Dean stood beside him looking forward waiting to be told where to sit.

The room had a desk facing the door and three seats in front of it. Turner stood beside Dean, Master Sergeant Mills sat in the chair to the left facing the man behind the desk. The man looked up to Dean, he was smiling slightly and yet it still made Dean uneasy. The man was clearly in his late fifties, early sixties and was losing the tufts of white hair that he had left on his head.

He stood up from his seat and Mills did too. "Well, the famous Dean Winchester." He smiled. "Back from the dead." He raised his eyebrows and gestured to the seats in front of him.

Turner put out his hand, gesturing to the empty seats, and Dean cautiously stepped forward, Turner
rounded him, leaving Dean walking towards the middle chair. They stood in front of their seats and
the man put his hand out. "Zachariah Fuller." Dean slowly took it and they shook briefly before
Fuller settled himself in his chair. "Sit."

Mills sat first, followed by Turner and then Dean.

"Now, this has been quite a story, Dean." He leaned forward a little. "Can I call you Dean?"

"Yes, Sir." Dean nodded.

The man nodded back. "I had a look over the files and we had a big meet-a couple of big meetings
actually, as I'm sure you'll be fully aware of." He opened the file on the desk in front of him and
fixed his tie, looking down. "First of all, how are you feeling, I understand you are living back at
home just now?" He looked up again.

"Yes, Sir." Dean stated and the man raised an eyebrow. "Well Sir, in all honesty I will be a lot
better when this is over and I know what's happening."

The man nodded. "Quite right, Dean, quite right." He leafed through the papers. "I see that you
saw our resident shrink, how do you think that went?"

Dean inhaled thinking about it. "I think it went well and I would like to continue that if that's an
option, Sir."

Humanity is flawed, Dean, and there is nothing wrong with admitting that you need a hand to get
back on your feet." He looked back to the file. "I like it."

There was a few minutes of silence while Zachariah read through the papers again. "Now Dean, I
know you have probably told this story a million times, not just to us but to your friends and
family, right?" Dean nodded. He looked to the paper searching before he looked up. "No spouse?"

"No, Sir." Dean's throat tightened. "But my boyfriend didn't take it too well." Dean inhaled. "Ex-
boyfriend, Sir."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that." He nodded and looked down again. "Anyway, I've never met you
and although we have already had the meetings and things, I would ask that you tell me the story,"
he tapped the paper in front of him, "I have details here but I would prefer to hear it out of your
mouth, if that isn't too much to ask?"

Dean nodded. "Of course, Sir." He sat forward in his seat.

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Cas sat on the sofa curled up with the little orange furball that seemed to like his company when
Lucifer got back from the store.

"Cassie, I got you a burger, do you want me to make that a cheese one for you?" He shouted from
the kitchen.

"No, I got it." Cas stood up and walked into the kitchen. Abby opened one eye and then looked
before deciding she was comfortable.

"Have you heard from..." Lucifer turned, narrowing his eyes, "Sam, wasn't it?"
Cas nodded. "Why would I have heard from Sam? He'll be in California by now."

"What, his brother comes back from the dead and has all of the court stuff to go through and he just goes back to California? From what you've told me, I highly doubt it." Lucifer had been rooting around in his carrier bag when he pulled the burger out and handed it to Cas.

Cas looked as he took it. "Court stuff?"

Lucifer started emptying the rest onto the worktop. "Yeah, I mean the guy hid from duty for nearly a year, he might be found guilty of going AWOL."

Cas looked down as he reached for a pan from the hanging ones on the wall. "I hadn't even thought. What happens if they decided he was?"

Lucifer shrugged. "I don't know but it won't be a slap on the wrist. It's the Army, you get a two hour run for sneezing in those places." Or smirking.

Cas took out his phone in one hand and Lucifer took the pan, smiling a little as he put it on the heat for him. "Thanks."

Cas found Sam's number and thought about phoning but what if he was in California? Cas sighed and found Jo's number.

Hey, can I ask you something? - C

Jo and Cas spoke every day, they had even already spoken that day, so she wasn't surprised and less than a minute later there was a reply.

Anything. - Jo

Will Dean be in trouble with the Army, for not going back? - C

There was a delay in texts there, Jo and Cas had never discussed Dean since he had left. He had no idea what was going on with him.

We don't know yet, there's been a big investigation into it to see if he's been declared AWOL, if they decide he was then he could be in serious trouble. He finds out today. Why do you ask? - Jo

Cas bit his lip, leaning against the island in the middle of the kitchen before answering.

Can you tell me what happens? - C

Of course. Miss you. - Jo

Miss you too - C

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Zachariah had been quiet for a few minutes after Dean's story. He had his hands clasped in front of his face and stared at the desk.

He suddenly took a sharp inhale and sat forward. "Alright Dean, thank you for telling me all of that again. I'll lay it out for you. Our shrink has postulated that you may be suffering from PTSD." Dean saw Turner nod slightly. "And she wrote here," he flipped the page over to look at it briefly
before letting it fall again, "that she believes it was your trauma that caused you to refrain from contacting your unit." Dean waited. "Now, when I read this I disagreed, I have here," he held up a booklet, "the forms to start the process of declaring you having gone AWOL and this," he put the form back down and pointed to a pink form, "the formal sanction that would allow me to start the process of your punishment."

Dean nodded. He had fully expected that. "I understand, Sir."

"That said," he paused, "after hearing the story of Lazarus from your own mouth." Fuller inhaled deeply as he looked from the form to Dean's face. "I have to say I agree with her." He tapped the paper he had previously indicated as the shrink's profile of Dean. "I think that you were and still are suffering from your experiences before and after the explosion and I think they had made you act in a manner that, according to the previous reports we have on you, is out of character." He leaned off of his elbows.

Sam was in the waiting room when his phone buzzed.

**Cas text me asking about Dean and the Army, he wants to know what happens. - Jo**

**He hasn't come out but I'll let him know too, have Stanford called yet? - Sam**

**Yeah, Jess was talking to them earlier, they said the start of September? - Jo**

**That's fine. Need to go back some time - Sam**

Dean was trying not to be sick.

"So here's what I'm going to do, Dean." Fuller sat back in his chair. "I am going to ask you to complete all of your remaining years of duty at the training camps as an instructor and continue to see Dr. Tapping, uh," he looked to the paper, "Naomi." He nodded. "And after that you can decide what you want to do, if you want to stay after those years are up we'll need to have another review with the Doc and everything but those are my terms."

Dean blinked.

"Dean?" Fuller turned his head a little.

"Sorry Sir, I was just so surprised."

Fuller smiled. "Did you think we would smite you for being human and making a mistake, Dean?" He laughed a little. "No, I'm confident that given other circumstances these events would have played out very differently." He paused. "And besides, just talking to you I can tell your memories are punishment enough."

Dean looked down a little. "Thank you, Sir."

"It took a lot of courage to come back here the way you did, Dean."

Dean looked at him. "If you had seen the look on my ex-partner's face Sir," he swallowed, "this was the easy part."

Fuller stood up and the other officers followed suit. "Now, you are still on leave until September first but report to Fort Riley on Monday, just for logistics and everything, Cain in personnel and handling will have all of the information you need on that. That's us for now but I will pencil you in for a review in three months."
"Sir." Dean nodded.

The man nodded to Mills who turned to Turner and nodded.

"Dismissed Winchester." Dean nodded and left out the door.

Dean closed it behind him and exhaled looking at Sam. "I don't know what the hell just happened," he whispered, "but I think Mom was right about an angel watching over me."

Sam widened his eyes. "What happened?"

Dean and Sam said their thanks to Becky, Fuller's secretary, and exited into the main corridor.

"Been transferred to Fort Riley as an instructor until my time runs out and I have to keep seeing the shrink."

"That's it?" Sam exhaled relieved. "Could have been worse."

"Worse? Dude, I could have been in Army jail!" He whispered. "No," he nodded, "I like talking to the shrink." Sam glanced at him. "I think it'll help." Sam patted his shoulder lightly but Dean still winced a little. "Help me find personnel." Dean walked away.

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Cas was standing in the kitchen while Lucifer loaded plates and everything else into the dishwasher, Lilith sipped a glass of wine and Cas held baby Adam, who was getting heavy.

"He certainly likes you." Lilith smiled.

"Every time I hold him he falls asleep." Cas smiled back.

"And that's why we like you." Lucifer smirked at his little brother. "I have to say bro, I'm glad you called that day." Lilith put her hand out and rubbed Lucifer's back.

"Me too." Cas smiled down at the bundle in his arms as his hand reached slowly out and relaxed to still in the air. Cas brought his hand and touched it to the baby's gently. "I only wish it had been sooner."

"No point thinking like that, bro." Cas looked up. "Regrets will eat you up."

"Yeah." Cas whispered, his smile falling, as he looked back down.

Cas' phone rang and he pulled it out.

Sam

He flipped it open. "Sam." He and Lucifer shared a look. Cas swallowed, trying not to seem too eager. "How-How are you?"

"I'm good, how are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks." Cas took a breath. "I take it Jo told you I asked."

"Yeah, I just wanted to call and let you know that he's been diagnosed with PTSD," Cas closed his eyes and nodded, "he's been transferred to Fort Riley to carry out the rest of his duty as an instructor and he has to carry on seeing the Army shrink."
Cas opened his eyes. "I think that sounds like a good idea."

"So does he." Sam sighed. "How's Michigan?"

"Its great." Cas smiled down at Adam. "I still miss you guys though."

"Yeah, we miss you too. Dean starts the first of September and Jess and I go back to California about the same time."

"Oh so you're still in Kansas?" Lucifer looked over with a 'told you so' expression and Cas tutted at him. Adam stirred so Cas gestured to Lilith who reached out and took Adam.

"Yeah, we couldn't go back just yet, had to take time to let everything sink in." There was a pause. "How are you dealing with it all?"

Cas walked into the hallway, moving away from Adam in case Sam was on for a long conversation, and pulled the necklace out of his pants pocket. "I am..." He sighed. "I'm dealing."

"Good. Listen, I have to go but I'll text you."

"Yeah, bye." Cas heard the click on the other end and stuffed the necklace back in his pocket before he walked back into the kitchen. "He's been confirmed as having PTSD and made an instructor at Fort Riley."

"How do you feel about that?" Luke asked closing the dishwasher noticing a bit of lace poking out of Cas' pocket.

Cas smiled. "I'm glad he's not in trouble." He walked away, letting the smile fall, until he got to his room door. He opened it and a ginger fur ball ran under his feet and inside. "Abby." Cas closed the door and walked to the bed. "You need to stop doing that."

He dumped himself on the bed and watched as she walked up beside him and sat looking down at his face.

"I still love him." He muttered before looking up. "He told me he loved me, did I tell you that?"

She meowed. "Yeah, I don't even think he meant to say it, he just said it in the middle of a stream of other things." Cas rolled his head and smooshed it into the pillow before turning back to look at her. "PTSD, that was obvious." He looked away. "I'm an idiot, aren't I?"

She meowed.

He let out a little laugh. "Yeah well, you're ginger." She meowed again looking at his pants. "Sorry." He sighed. "What do I do?" She walked towards his pocket and pawed it. "What?" He looked down and watched as she played with the bit of lace hanging out.

There was a few minutes of silence while Cas thought to himself. One thing was bothering him. He took out his phone and tapped out a text to Sam.

Why didn't he fight for me? - C

It seemed like an eternity before he got a reply.

I think because he knew what he had done was so unforgivable that he didn't want to put himself out there when he knew he'd be shot down. Fear, I guess - Sam
Cas pressed the phone upside down into the cover and looked down again as Abby jumped off the bed onto the window sil, looking out. Then his phone went again.

**Would you have wanted him to fight for you? - Sam**

Cas looked at it and sighed. "I don't know." Abby turned her head to look at Cas and then licked her paw.

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Sam was sitting in the diner when Cas didn't reply. He looked across at Dean, whose head was bowed, and sighed. "Was it the Army that made you like this?"

Dean looked up, Jess, Jo and Kevin looked around to Sam and then Dean. Ellen was serving and Bobby was in the restroom.

"Like what?"

"You just gave up." Sam shrugged. "You used to fight until there was no more fight left and even then you'd keep on fighting." He shrugged again. "For everything."

"I don't-" Dean started confused.

"Right down to the last mini-muffin." Sam leaned forward. "So why didn't you fight for Cas?"

Dean inhaled. "In fact, why didn't you fight for me?"

"Sam-" Dean said a little sterner.

"Why didn't you fight for me!" Sam shouted.

"Because I knew you wanted to leave!" Sam shouted back.

The diner went silent.

Dean's eyes were on Sam, his voice lowered. "I knew you wanted a normal life, Sam, I did too but the difference was that you could have really got it, I knew you wanted to go and I knew we were holding you back so when I didn't say anything Sam, when I let him throw me out..." Dean sighed. "I was fighting for you." He looked back to his coffee.

Sam took that in.

Jo looked between them. "And Cas?" She croaked.

Dean turned his head. "It was hard enough to come back to you all and explain knowing he'd walk away, it would have been impossible to do it with hope that he could shatter knowing I deserved it, Jo. I had to tell myself there was absolutely no inch of hope or I wouldn't have been able to step on the plane never mind actually come back. And he needed me to come back, he waited for me, I owed him the closure."

Sam opened his phone as everyone went back to their thoughts and chats.
It was never that he didn't want to fight for you, it's that he felt defeated before he even began. He told us he did it all so you could be happy, Cas. - Sam

In Michigan, Cas read it and read the last bit again. "But I'm not happy." He looked up as Abby meowed again and then looked out the window.
This is the last chapter, I have an epilogue but this is the last bit of this main story... I know what I mean.

Also, the reason Ruby says "Uncle Gabriel" here is because Cas and Gabriel started off as friends and then hid their relationship behind that friendship so they hung out a lot with Cas' brothers, so when Lucifer was telling younger Ruby the stories he didn't know about what had happened, with Cas leaving and Balthazar and all so he assumed, since he knew Cas was gay and didn't care, that Cas and Gabriel would be together, so he intimated that Gabriel would be like her Uncle if they ever spoke again. And since he's found out, he can't bring himself to correct her because he doesn't want to have to explain about her Uncle Balthazar and what kind of man her Grandad was. I realize I don't say any of this is the story, I don't because there's no place in the story that is logical for that to come up, so it sits in the background. I just thought I'd explain it here for anyone it confuses. It is on purpose and it's one of those little details in stories that go unexplained... Unless you have it on ao3 of course.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean woke up that night in a burning sweat, he felt his boxers stick to him. As the images faded from his eyes he felt the relief and shame wash over him. He reached to the bedside table and grabbed the glass of water there. He took a long gulp. "Breathe." Dean exhaled. "Just like Naomi said." He did it again.

Cas lay away in his bed staring out of the window crying. He wiped his eyes. "What can I do?" He reached out and nudged Abby awake. "Hey, you woke me up at five this morning you don't get to sleep now." She opened one eye and looked at him. "What can I do?"

She lifted her head and yawned wide before just looking at him.

He sighed and looked away. "I'm talking to a cat." She meowed and he looked back. "Well, you are!" She then chose that moment to sneeze and looked at Cas confused. He burst out laughing and looked to the side. Once he had started he couldn't stop for a few minutes. By which point Abby had fixed him with an unamused look before lowering her head back to the bed. "Sorry." He mumbled before drying his eyes again. "I don't think I've laughed in a while."

There was a soft knock at the door. "Uncle Cas?"

Cas lifted his head to look at the clock, it was just past midnight. "Yeah, come in, Ruby." He was glad he had shoved pajamas on earlier. The door crept open and a young girl of nearly fifteen poked her head in. "You alright?"

She nodded and walked into the room, quietly closing the door behind her. He sat up on the bed
and tapped it. She walked over and sat cross legged on the end, she had flannel black pajamas on and her hair was in a long braid that came to rest on her left shoulder. "Sorry, I heard you laughing."

"It's alright." He smiled. "I was laughing at Abby," he looked down at the cat who turned her head to look at Ruby, Cas thought she looked like she was deciding if she could be bothered moving, "she sneezed and didn't understand."

Ruby laughed as Abby stood up and lazily walked over to her. She lifted her hand and stroked Abby's head. "Can I ask you something?" Cas nodded. "Why are you so sad?" Cas' smile fell. "I know I haven't known you very long but Dad spoke about you a lot."

"He did?" Cas asked and she nodded. "Like what?"

"Um," she looked down at Abby as she rubbed her face on her arm, "he told us about that time you both went up to the roof with Uncle Zar, Uncle Gabriel and Auntie Anna and watched the stars."

"Which time?" Cas smiled. "That was something we did every Fourth of July. Our parents would put on this display and we'd sit on the roof watching."

"We do it too." She smiled. "You can do it with us next year."

He smiled. "I'd like that."

She nodded. "But he told us about all of the pranks you'd play on the neighbors and how you were like uber smart and you'd come up with all of it." Cas laughed. "He told us about all of the times you stole his bicycle-"

Cas put his index finger up. "Borrowed."

She smiled. "And would drive out to the creek with your friends. He said you always came home absolutely wet through." She sighed. "But your face doesn't fit those stories." His smile fell again. "You seem so sad, even when you smile, Uncle Cas. That's the first time I've heard you laugh." She looked over to the night stand. "Why do you have a necklace that you don't wear?"

He looked too and then back to her. "I met a guy." He looked down to the bed. "A couple of years ago now but he gave me that."

"Did he die?" She whispered.

He shook his head. "No. They thought he had, because he disappeared, but he was hiding." Cas thought about Dean crying in the darkness for ten months with no one to hold his hand. Dean didn't like the dark.

"Why?"

"Because he was scared." Cas looked back to her.

"Did he come back?"

"Yeah." Cas smiled. "Yeah, he did."

"I don't understand." She looked to the side confused. "If he came back, why are you here and why are you sad?"
Cas opened his mouth to talk then closed it again. He sighed. "Because when he was hiding we all thought he was dead and we were all in a lot of pain. So, when he came back I got mad and..." He trailed off.

"Scared?" She finished bobbing her head to catch his eye. "And now you're the one that's hiding?"

Cas paused and then nodded.

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It was Tuesday morning when Dean rubbed his eyes after a few hours sleep, in between the dreams. He had reported to Fort Riley yesterday and he was actually looking forward to training his recruits, he thought about how he would make sure they knew how bad it was out there. He wondered how he could do that without making every one of them run for the nearest exit. And then he wondered how to do it to make sure every single one of them ran for the nearest exit. He would tell them how he had almost lost everything important to him. How he had lost the love of his life.

Sure Bobby and Sam had forgiven him, but they could have gone the other way. Jo had understood to a point, or maybe it was that she understood that if you get a second chance you shouldn't waste it on anger. Then Dean wished he could swap places with Jo's father and give him the chance Dean didn't deserve.

He padded down the stairs and heard running. He just watched as Sam ran to the bottom of them. "Dean, you're awake." He had a shirt and dress pants on with a tie thrown around his neck and a wild expression of panic. "Listen, I have to go to Rextons."

Dean paused. "I'm sorry, where?" He continued down the stairs.

"The big office building downtown?" Dean shook his head. "Anyway, the local university uses their grounds for some classes and lectures or whatever." Dean walked to the fridge and found the milk. "I have like twenty minutes to get to the conference or I could lose my place and Stanford."

Dean choked on the milk he was drinking from the carton. "Why?" He wiped his mouth with the back of his free hand.

"It's a whole big story, admin screwed up and thought Jess and I were waiting another year-" He shook his head and closed his eyes. "I don't have time. Can you cover my shift at the diner?"

"Dude, calm down." Dean smiled. "Go, I got it." He laughed. "You know Ellen wouldn't mind anyway."

Sam tilted his head and fiddled with his tie. "After the last time..."

Dean laughed. "That one was Bobby's fault, he seriously pissed her off."

"What did he do?"

Dean put his hand out as he dropped the milk back in the door and closed it. "I am not even going to ask, I am not poking that bear."

Sam nodded agreeing. "Bobby and Ellen though, who saw that coming?" Sam wasn't really asking.

"Cas did." Dean muttered as he pushed Sam towards the door. "Go." He handed him the keys to
the Impala. "Scratch her and just go straight to the airport and find somewhere further than Stanford."

Sam smiled. "Thanks." He ran out the door.

Dean shouted out. "Your jacket!" He threw it and Sam caught it before jumping in the car and screeching away. Dean closed his eyes. "I swear, I will kill him." He turned back inside. "I'll run him over in it and see how he prefers it when someone is gentle with the gas."

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Cas was bouncing on his feet in the kitchen, Abby on the counter looking at him. "No." He paced along the tile and Abby followed him. "Yes." He walked back and she followed again. "No, definitely not." He turned to look at her. "Yes." She didn't even blink and he turned to walk again. "You're right, no, I shouldn't."

"Cas?" Luke called from the door.

Abby turned her head and meowed when he appeared before looking back to Cas as he continued to pace.

"Luke, I've decided yes." He smiled and Lucifer just stopped in the doorway to look at him. "No, it's a mistake." He leaned on the breakfast stool. "Yes." He lowered his head to touch the backs of his hands. "I don't know."

Lucifer walked forward and stood next to the counter as Abby looked at him. "Do you know what he's talking about?" He gestured to Cas and she just stared at Lucifer. "Didn't think so." Lucifer looked to the chair Cas was standing beside to see a bag sitting on it. "Going somewhere?"

"No." Cas mumbled and then lifted his head and sighed. "Maybe."

Lucifer saw the name on the bag and turned back to Cas. "You're going back?"

Cas pressed his palms into his eyes. "I don't know!"

Lucifer walked forwards and pulled Cas' hands down. "Talk to me."

"He was standing right there, Luke!" He widened his eyes and Lucifer let go of his hands to lean on the chair Cas had leaned on himself. Abby, now blocked by Lucifer, walked along the bunker and sat back down, looking at Cas. "He was standing there, after all of those nights crying and praying, promising God I wouldn't even look at men anymore, he was right there and I just ran away." He hit the palm of his hand on his forehead. "I punished him for running away by running away!"

"Cas, he didn't die because you're gay." He looked to the side. "He didn't even die." He shrugged. "That's proof right there."

Cas let out a scoff of air and the tiny hint of a smile appeared. "What do I do, Luke?"

"You're asking me?" Lucifer put his hands on Cas' shoulders. "Do you love him?"

Cas nodded, it wasn't even a question. "Yes."

"Do you blame him, for what he did?"

Cas thought about it, about the way Dean cried and screamed and let him walk away. "No." He shook his head. "I think he made a mistake but it still hurts."
"Does it hurt because of what happened or because it hurt before?"

Cas reached his hands up and cried into them. "I buried him." Lucifer looked up and pulled Cas into a hug. "It tore me into pieces," he spoke threw muffled cries, "but he's in pieces too."

"Didn't exactly answer my question there, Cassie. You need to ask yourself if you love him," Cas nodded, "okay, then you need to figure out if you blame him and if you do then ask yourself if you can forgive him. But the most important question is..." He pulled back and lowered himself to meet Cas' eye line. "Can you live, can you be happy without him?" Cas began crying again and Lucifer pulled him back in. "Only you know what you have to do, Cas. There will always be a bed for you here."

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Dean was finishing up sorting some cash into the till behind the counter in the dinner when Bart called through the hatch. "Einstein's lunch."

Dean laughed a little, wrapped the now spare rubber band around his wrist three times and then picked up the burger to take over to the booth that Kevin was sitting in with Jess, Jo and Bobby. "Your burger there, Solo." Dean smiled at Kevin, putting it down in front of him, and stood there. "Jess," she looked up, "any news?"

"He's just parking up." They looked when Sam entered, looking worn out. Jo and Jess shuffled up the booth to let Sam sit. He plonked himself down handing Dean the keys to his Impala. "You get there in time, Sammy?"

Sam looked up at Dean with a bitch face he hadn't seen in years. "Yeah." He rubbed his face, the bitch face melting. "Just."

"So, you still have your space?" Kevin chanced, lifting the bun on the burger to check it.

Sam looked up. "Yes, and I now have whiplash from your damn car." Sam looked to Dean.

Dean's face went serious. "What did you do?"

"The breaks, Dean!"

"Told ya." Bobby muttered and lifted his cup.

Sam pointed at him. "Did you tighten them?"

Bobby shook his head and pointed to Dean. "Boy genius over here has been pissing about under the hood since he got back."

"I was just tinkering!" Dean gestured, he had been bored out of his mind since he was back. And he couldn't stop thinking about everything. About Rahim. About Cas. He had needed a distraction.

"You were just trying to kill me!" Sam half-shouted. "I touched my toe," he lightly touched the table top, "to the pedal and I nearly went through the windshield."

"You better not have scratched my windshield." Dean pointed at him. "Your neck can heal, I'd have to replace the whole thing." Sam widened his eyes and looked at Bobby who laughed a little. "I'll sell you to replace it." Dean muttered and then tapped Sam on the shoulder. "Glad you made it." Sam's anger briefly dissolved for a second before Dean was stuffing the apron at him. "You can do the rest of your shift, then."
Sam looked up. "Dean, I'm exhausted!"

Dean narrowed his eyes. "Fine." He put it back around him. "But if that iPod is in my car I will run it into the dirt."

Sam looked to the side. "Be right back." He grabbed the keys from Dean and ran out.

Sam got his iPod and jack from the car and stuffed it in his coat pocket. As he was clambering out, checking he hadn't left any money in the car that Dean would commandeer, his phone rang. He picked it up and, without checking it, he answered and continued to get out of the car. "Sam Winchester." He closed the car door.

"Hello Sam."

"Cas, hey," Sam took a look at the diner, in the window at Dean serving a booth on the other side of the diner to their table, "how are you?"

"I'm good thanks, how are you?" He sounded shaky and unsure.

"I'm good, is everything okay?"

"Not really, listen..." He paused. "Can you give me Dean's number?"

Sam's eyes widened. "Wha-Why?" He locked the car.

"I need to talk to him."

"He's working in the diner right now."

"Oh, okay I'll maybe call later."

"No!" Sam shouted. "No, Cas, please, call now. Just call the diner." Silence. "Please."

Cas sighed. "Okay, Sam."

They hung up and Sam walked casually back inside. He leaned on the counter to Ellen. "When the phone goes, let Dean get it." He whispered.

"Why?" She whispered back, glancing to Dean as he walked back around the far end of the counter writing in his pad.

"Cas." Sam answered and put his finger to his lip as Ellen's mouth opened.

Sam walked back over to the table and leaned in. "Cas is going to call Dean."

"Wha-!" Jo started and Sam silently 'shh'ed her.

"Just," he sat back in the seat beside Jess, "be cool."

A few minutes went by and they were all staring at each other awkwardly.

"Are you sure-" Jess started.

"Hey guys." Dean beamed and they all smiled back. "How was the burger, Kev?"

"Great, thanks." He smiled as Dean took the plate.
The phone in the diner went and Ellen rushed to Dean's side, taking the plate from him. "Dean, could you get that for me, hon?"

He looked at her and then to the smiling faces. "...Uh, sure." He walked slowly over, glancing back to them who went back to talking to each other. As Dean turned his back they all turned to look. He grabbed the receiver and chucked it over to his other hand, tucking it between his chin and left shoulder as he leaned against the wall and played with his pen. "Ellen's Diner, Dean speaking."

There was a second of silence. "Hello Dean."

Dean's eyes widened and he let the phone drop to his left hand. "Cas," he swallowed, "uh, I'm sorry, who were you looking for? I'll go get them." He inhaled.

"I was looking for you, actually."

Dean closed his eyes. "Is everything alright?" Dean could feel his heart thumping and the blood rushing through his ears.

"Not really, Dean." There was a pause. "I still love you." Dean blew out nodding, the sound of Cas' voice was killing him but he could hear the sound of the pain and fear in his words. Even those beautiful words were tainted with everything that would never be.

"What can I do to make it better, Cas? Tell me anything and I'll do it." He tucked the pen in his apron and then brought his hand to his forehead. It didn't matter what it was, if Cas needed it then Dean would do all he could to give it to him. Even though they would never be together he wanted to be in Cas' life. If the man would let him. Suddenly there were tears on the other end and Dean bowed his head. The sound made all of the things he had ever experienced out there, on the front line, seem so trivial. Dean knew they never would be but the sound of Cas' pain was enough to shatter anything left inside Dean. And to know he caused it? Well that was just too much. "Cas, please don't cry."

The crowd at the table were all looking at Dean. "It doesn't look like a happy conversation." Bobby muttered.

"No, it doesn't." Sam furrowed his brow wondering if he should have told Cas not to call. Or just given him the number and told him to call later.

Dean shook his head. "Cas, I'm sorry."

"I know." Cas calmed himself. "I know you are. So am I."

"You don't need to be. What can I do," Dean asked again, "I'm not trying to get back with you, I just mean if you need anything."

"Why?"

Dean stopped mid-sentence and looked up. "Why, what?"

"Why aren't you trying to get back with me, why didn't you fight for me Dean?" There was a sigh on the other end. "Did you not want me anymore?"

Dean widened his eyes. "What, of course I did? I do! Cas, I would have fought for you to the ends of the earth if I had thought I had a chance."

"Who said you didn't? You just decided for me. You realize that, don't you? You didn't even give
me the choice, you just let me walk away.”

"After everything I did I guess I assumed-"

"Fight for me."

Dean froze. "Cas, I-"

"If I'm what you want."

"-I do." Dean pushed off the wall. "More than anything."

"Then prove it. Fight for me."

Dean pulled out his pad. "What's your address?"

"I'm not in Michigan."

"Then where?"

"Where do you think?" The phone clicked.

Dean put the phone down with a bang and, untying the apron again, he ran around the counter looking at the table. "I have to go." He chucked the apron at Sam.

"Where are you going?" Sam shouted after him.

"The pier!" Dean shouted as he ran out of the door.

Bart didn't even mind when the group bundled out of the diner and left him to hold the fort, he had spent so long working with Cas and he knew Dean since he had come back, he knew how heartbroken they both had been and still were.

Dean had been working out again to get up to speed before he started back at the training camp so as he ran out and into the street people turned wondering where the fire was.

It was in his heart.

The world around Dean blurred as he ran towards the pier, he couldn't get there fast enough, he was sure someone had moved it further away but it didn't matter because it could have been a thousand miles away and he would have ran, walked and crawled his way there. As people moved out of his way and cars beeped at him he remembered looking up at those blue eyes the very first time, electric blue and he had felt it immediately.

Like a shock to his whole system.

Everything had slowed down and Dean could hear nothing but waves, the waves down at the pier and the tiny almost inaudible huffs that came from Cas as they kissed. He felt his Cas' lips on his and his hand on his wrist. Time had gone far too quickly after that, happiness has a way of doing that. He felt Cas' hand in his as they walked back to the bus and he saw himself hand him the necklace. Dean breached the air in front of him harshly as he ran and the cold made his eyes water.

Dean's feet stomped loudly on the wood as he came to a stop at the start of the pier and saw the man in a trench coat standing with his back to Dean. The coat blew a little to the side as the sea wind rushed passed him. The noise made him turn to look at Dean and their eyes met. Blue met green. Dean felt his heart skip, literally skip a beat. He felt it reverberate down the left side of his
neck and that shoulder as the beating returned to normal. They stood like that for a few minutes, looking at each other from opposite ends of the pier.

Dean was terrified.

He turned his head as he heard foot steps behind him. Sam. He turned further, and everyone else. Awesome. He gave them a look. "What are you waiting for?" Sam gestured. "Go."

Dean looked back to Cas. Cas who was here and wanted Dean to fight. Fight. Not that he would take Dean back, that he wanted him to fight for the chance. And Dean had no idea how he was going to do that. But he was damn sure going to try and go down swinging. Ever the soldier.

Dean straightened up and slowly started walking along the pier. When Dean got most of the way Cas began to walk too and they stopped a few steps away from each other by the bench.

"Hey Cas." Dean leaned his left hand on the bench, soldier mode or not, he was going to be sick.

"Hello Dean." Cas smiled a little. They looked at each other for a few seconds. "I heard you're at Fort Riley now?"

Dean nodded. "Yeah, I have to work out my service there." He rubbed his neck. "Quite glad actually." He narrowed his eyes and looked to the side. "I couldn't go back."

Cas nodded. "I'm glad you're not in trouble." They continued to look at each other. "When do you start there?"

"September 1st." He nodded. "Yeah, Sam and Jess go back to Stanford soon so it's time to get back to reality."

It fell silent again and Cas sighed. "I flew from Michigan and just gave you two openers." He gestured to Dean. "You're turn."

Dean inhaled. "I know, I just don't know what to say."

"If I'm wasting my time-" Cas tilted his head.

"No!" Dean stepped forward and put his hand out to Cas' arm. "Please." He swallowed and Cas smiled. Dean found himself rubbing Cas' arm. "I want you back, I know I don't deserve it but I do want that. I want us and I don't know what to say to make that happen." He moved to rub his shoulder. "I just think about the first time we sat here and I wish I could go back and I need to stop that. I need to stop wasting time wishing because I can't go back, if I could I would," his hand moved to Cas' neck, "but I can't." Cas shook his head, the both of them starting to get emotional. "All I can say is that I regret it, I can't change it but I can change the future. I can try to make you see how sorry I am and always will be, I can try to make you as happy as you made me and I can try to be the man you make me." Cas smiled a little as Dean's hand moved to cup his jaw. "When I was out there, you were the one keeping me going and you made me want to be better. Not just a better soldier but a better friend, a better leader, a better man." He sighed. "A better me." Cas leaned into the touch. "Castiel James Novak," he shook his head fondly as tears fell down his cheek, "you weird little guy," Cas laughed, "I don't know what you've done to me but... I am completely in love with you, the twenty-seven year-"

"-eight." Cas butted in.

Dean smiled. "Sorry Gramps." Cas laughed. "Twenty-eight year old waiter who can't finish a piece of pie, who still folds his clothes the way his mother taught him and secretly loves it when I call
him 'babe'. Castiel who has the most beautiful smile I have ever seen or will ever, who is always right and thinks crazy is hot." Cas put his hand out and held Dean's side as Dean's other hand came up to Cas' face. "Castiel Novak who didn't try to talk me out of joining the Army because he knew what it felt like to have his life decided for him. The waiter who was named after an angel, who wished he could fly away but instead promised to wait for me for as long as it took." Dean wiped the tears from Castiel's cheek and he laughed a little which just made Dean smile. "I hope that fifteen year old in there is listening because you are the love of my life and I will fight for you until forever." He ran his right hand through Cas' hair. "Once an Army wife, always an Army wife." He and Cas laughed together and Cas let him pull Cas' head forward so that their foreheads touched. "I'm not a rank, I'm just your Dean and I'm unconditionally in love with you."

Cas looked up at him and then pulled away. Dean let him go as he watched him take the necklace from his pocket. He looked at it in his hand and then hung it on one finger, Dean's smile fell when Cas held it out to him. Dean took a step to the side in shock. He thought he had said everything, he thought he had a second chance with Cas. The group watched as the two turned side on and they exchanged looks, confused until this point, as it looked like Dean had lost the fight.

Cas gestured it in his hand, smiling. Dean slowly reached out and took it, then Cas lowered his head. Dean closed his eyes and sighed as all of the panic and fear and heartbreak suddenly drained out of his feet. "Really?"

Cas looked up but kept his head bowed. "I'm tired of waiting."

Dean's hands were shaking when he took a hold of the necklace in both of them and slowly put it over Cas' head.

Cas straightened up and looked down as he took the charm in his right hand. He looked out as the sun was setting and Dean wondered when he had stopped breathing. "Are you still afraid of the dark?" Cas looked back to him and lowered his hand, holding it out.

Dean smiled. "Terrified." He took Cas' hand in his and Cas smiled before taking a step forward. When their lips gently touched Dean's eyes closed and his hand came up to cup Cas' jaw. They quickly broke apart when they heard a noise at the other end of the pier. They looked to see the group clapping and shouting after them. Cas smiled and buried his face in Dean's shoulder embarrassed. "Cas?" Dean let go of Cas' hand and they stepped apart. "I owe you this." Dean pulled the rubber band from his wrist and held it out. "It's not the exact one but it wasn't there when I got back."

Cas took it and looked up. "You actually saved the rubber band?" Dean nodded. "I don't mean this one, I mean over there?" Dean nodded again smiling. "You big girl." Cas smiled shaking his head.

"Are you kidding?" Dean stepped towards him again and placed his thumb and two fingers on the tip of Cas' chin. "I'm a quarterback." He raised his eyebrows a little and kissed Cas who was laughing into the kiss. He then dropped his hand before leaning down and picking Cas up turning him around and around. They laughed and kissed while he brought Cas back down to earth.

The group stood watching for a few more seconds before making their way back along the diner. An army bag with the soldier's name on it sat on the bench forgotten while the two men stood at the end of the pier kissing and mumbling about how much they had missed each other, how sorry they were and how they'd never leave each other again.

A marine's death had sent a boy to war and that war tore apart a young love. But in Lawrence, down at the pier, a travelling soldier had won his fight and a waiter had stopped waiting.
*inhales*

I hope that was okay. Stick around for the epilogue!
On fanfiction.net I finished this story at the last chapter but a reviewer requested an epilogue and I couldn't resist so here it is.

Bart calls Dean "Joe" here, just a reference to G.I. Joe.

June 2019

Cas finished taking an order and looked up when the diner door opened. Dean walked in, overalls tied around his waist and looking around. He spotted Cas and a grin spread over his face. Cas smiled as they walked to each other, Dean put his hand out to stop Cas touching him. "I'm covered in oil, babe."

"I can see that." Cas leaned forward and kissed Dean without touching the rest of him which was a hard thing to do, Cas looked over Dean as he spoke, taking in the layer of sweat that lined his arms and neck, wanting nothing more than to get rid of that sleeveless t-shirt. "Ellen will kill you if you get oil on her seats again."

"Yes, she will." Ellen appeared from the kitchen and leaned on the counter. "Where's my man?"

"He's standing shouting at the tires." Dean laughed. "I told him and his mood to wait outside, you think I'm covered, you should see him."

Bart appeared from the kitchen and put three paper bags down on the counter with two take-away cups. "Joe." Bart winked.

"Always right on time." Dean picked up the things cautiously, so as not to touch the counter. "We all ready for tonight?" He looked from Ellen and Cas.

"Yeah, Jo and Kevin are going to meet us at the airport." Ellen smiled before she wiped the counter and turned back to the till. "Tell Bobby to get changed first, you know what he's like."

"Will do." Dean smiled and turned back to Cas who was drinking in everything about Dean as he stood there. "What about you, are you," his smile grew wider looking at the way those electric blues were scaling every inch of him, "ready for the flight?"

Cas nodded slowly. "Yeah, got my old kit-bag." Dean laughed. "So, we won't see them before the ceremony?"

Dean shook his head. "Nope, by the time we get in and get settled it's better if we just go to dinner and then bed. That okay?" Cas nodded and Dean looked to Ellen.

"Fine by me." She smiled.

A loud honking noise came from outside and Dean looked at Ellen. "He's going to be fun to fly with."
She smiled wider. "I'll calm him down."

"Oh, really?" Dean smirked and she winked before walking away. He turned back to Cas. "Are you going to calm me down? 'Cause I don't do too well with flying."

"I'll think of something." Cas smirked back.

Dean walked away and he looked down as a guy held the door open for him. "Thanks." He muttered.

"No prob-lemo." He smiled as he walked in, then he froze as Dean looked up. "Holy shit!" Cas looked up as Gabriel stood looking at Dean. "I thought you were dead?" He looked to Cas and took a few steps away from Dean.

"Gabriel, what are you doing here?" Cas' eyes widened as he looked between the two men.

"Gabriel?" Dean walked back to Cas looking at him, unconsciously putting himself between Cas and the man. Ellen came out of the kitchen and Dean put everything back down on the counter. "This is Gabriel?"

"What do you want?" Ellen put her hand on her hip and Bobby walked in, overalls having been discarded at some point.

"What does he want?" Bobby pointed to him. "It's Gabriel." He said to Dean, anger evident on his face.

Gabriel put his hands out. "Whoa, guys." He looked around. "I thought-" He looked to Dean. "I thought you were dead and Cas had moved to Michigan and after four years I just wanted to get that bagel and coffee."

"Well you can forget-" Bobby started.

"No." Dean put his hand out. "No, if Cas doesn't mind then it's fine by me." He turned to Cas who shook his head slowly. Dean then put his left hand out for Gabriel to shake. "A lot has happened and we've put it all behind us." He gestured to his hand. "You're a customer, like everyone else." Gabriel slowly reached out and took it.

Then Dean punched him in the nose.

Everyone took a step forward but as Gabriel's head shot back Dean kept a hold of his hand, stopping him falling over. "You're alright. Ellen get him something cold, please." Bart had been watching through the hatch when Ellen had walked out and he handed her a damp cloth. Dean took it and handed it to Gabriel. "Put that on there." Gabriel did as he was told. "Lean your head forward not back or the blood will just go into your stomach." Gabriel leaned forward to look at him and Dean led him to the seat beside them. "You deserved that."

Gabriel nodded. "Fair enough."

Cas just looked between them. "Crazy." Dean turned to look. "You're absolutely crazy."

Dean shrugged. "I feel better."

Gabriel nodded. "Make that coffee a large." He leaned on the counter and sighed.

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Dean was the first passenger off of the plane, throwing his bag over his shoulder and finding the closest seat. Cas followed slowly behind with Dean's old Army bag in his hand. He walked over to the seat and sat down beside Dean who continued humming.

"Still Metallica?" Cas asked and Dean nodded before he blew out a long breath and sat back in his seat.

The others dispersed, just to stand a little away to give Dean time to adjust. The two of them looked at Bobby and Ellen standing a few feet away talking amongst themselves. Next to them stood Kevin and Jo who were mumbling and kissing.

"Dean?" Cas turned to him and Dean looked smiling. "Are you happy?"

Dean was visibly shocked by the question. "What? Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, you're not in the Army anymore, I know you love cars and I know you love working with Bobby but..." He sighed and leaned forward in his seat.

"Hey." Dean turned himself to look at Cas. "Tell me."

Cas looked up. "Did you find what you were looking for out there?"

Dean inhaled and looked to the side before shaking his head. "No." Cas nodded feeling a little sad at that. "I went out there looking for someone to decide my life for me." He took Cas' hand in his. "And what I found was the realization that that wasn't what I wanted at all." He smiled at Cas. "From the minute I met you, you showed me that I could take my life into my own hands. I didn't need someone to decide it for me. So no," he shook his head again, "I didn't find what I was looking for, I found something a lot better."

"And what's that?" Cas squeezed his hand.

"I found control." Dean shrugged and Cas smiled. "I love you." Dean lifted Cas' hand to kiss the back of it and then used his other hand to pull the necklace out of Cas' t-shirt so that it rested there.

"I know." Cas smiled.

"Did you just Solo me?" Cas shrugged with a little bashful smile. Dean nodded smiling too. "You're lucky I love that smile so much." Dean inhaled and shook Cas' hand in his a little before they stood. The six of them met in the middle and Dean sighed looking down. "Are you guys ready for this?"

"He's only graduating, Dean?" Jo laughed. "Yours next year, babe." She smiled at Kevin before kissing him on the cheek and he smiled back.

"No, no he's not." Dean smiled. "I know my brother." He looked to Bobby. "You think?"

"Oh, definitely." Bobby smiled, squeezing Ellen's hand. "I'd say he already has."

Dean nodded. "Yeah, I think so too. He was far too excited on the phone." They started walking away.

"What?" Cas leaned in and put his left hand around Dean's right upper arm while he held that hand.

"Sam's definitely engaged." Dean smiled.

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The President of the University, John Hennessey, stepped back up the podium to the sounds of dying applause. "Thank you." He settled back to his notes. "Now, this year's graduation ceremony is almost over and I have to applaud your patience." He paused again before looking up. "I actually don't need my notes for this bit. This year's graduates," he gestured to them, "have been fantastic." He smiled. "However this year's class-elected valedictorian is quite something." He took a minute to step out from the podium.

Dean leaned to Cas. "What's a valedictorian?"

Cas whispered quickly. "It's the student that they've chosen who best represents the student body to deliver the closing speech." Dean nodded and sat back.

"I have had the pleasure," Hennessey continued, "of seeing this young man a lot, and, unusually it was not because he was in trouble." Everyone let out a polite laugh. "No, these past few years have been hard for this particular student and yet he still came out top of his class, and," he paused, briefly pointing to the ceiling with his index finger, "most importantly, he never wavered in passion and kept his good heart." He smiled. "I'd like to welcome to the stage, to deliver the closing speech, valedictorian of the class of 2019, Samuel Winchester."

The crowd erupted into cheers and the six guests reacted a little slowly. They looked between each other and then stood up.

"That's my boy!" Dean shouted before whistling through his fingers. Sam looked over as he got to the podium and a flush spread over him. Cas looked to Dean and saw the immense pride on his face and he smiled. Dean resumed clapping before glancing to Cas. "What?" Cas just shook his head smiling and turned back to Sam, he wanted to lean and kiss Dean but he didn't want to take away from Sam's achievement and Dean's moment of pride.

The applause died down and the crowd sat again, leaving Sam a little speechless. "Wow, thanks." He laughed and Dean's smile widened, he leaned over and took Cas' hand in his. Sam cleared his throat and flattened the notes down on the podium. "First of all I would like to thank you all, staff and graduates alike, for the past..." He blew out. "Well, for me it's been a little longer than the three years of this course." He smiled. "Another thanks goes to Jessica Moore, who you all know as my girlfriend-" He stopped and couldn't keep himself smiling more. "I'm sorry, I meant my fiancée." At that everyone in the room applauded and Sam and Jess looked at each other going a deep shade of red as Ellen handed Bobby twenty bucks. "She held me up higher than I ever thought possible, and still does. I'd also like to thank the makeshift family I have sitting over there," he gestured to the six of them, "for everything and more." Sam inhaled deeply and straightened up. "But one last thanks has to go to my dad." Dean and Bobby shared a look of confusion as the rest of them looked to each other. "I lost my mother when I was barely six months old and it sent my father into a tail-spin of self-destruction fuelled by revenge and alcohol." Dean shuffled in his seat as Sam's face became solemn for a short second. "So, as I said, I would like to thank my brother," Sam looked over to Dean who snapped his head back to him, "Dean, who became my dad and without whom I would not be standing here in more ways than any of you will ever know." Cas squeezed Dean's hand and smiled as Dean's shocked face remained. Ellen and Bobby shared a smile and Jo rested her head on Kevin's shoulder. "On that note, I wanted to tell you all one of the most influential stories in my life in the vain hope that I can keep your attention long enough to tell it." There was a little chuckle through the auditorium as Sam paused.

"In 2014 two brothers, a dad and son if you will," Dean felt a smile creep over his face finally taking in Sam's words, "lost their father and since they hadn't spoken to each other in a few years, through misunderstanding and downright stubbornness that seemed to pass through the generations, they searched for what they wanted and needed in life by running in two different
directions. The younger of the two, the son, who by the way was tall and disgustingly handsome," another chuckle broke out and Bobby sent out a whistle, "thank you." He smiled and another laugh touched the air. "The son knew what he wanted and he found it in California when his application for a law school was accepted. But, the dad began to search for his purpose in life, now that his mission as a son had come to an end and his mission as a father was taken away from him by pettiness. Having been raised by a marine on a mission for an answer that wasn't there to find, the older brother ran towards the familiar and joined the Army. The two boys couldn't be more different; one, the tall, handsome one, tried to solve arguments with rationality and sanctions while the other, the shorter ugly one," Dean burst out laughing and the rest smiled, "used strategy and force." Dean's smile fell, Cas noticed and shook Dean's hand to get his attention, Dean turned to look and immediately smiled just looking at Cas as he stroked Dean's hand in his. "Brains against brawn, the intellectual against the physical."

"Is he calling me stupid?" Dean asked Bobby who just tilted his head and then laughed when Dean's face fell.

"Well, you couldn't be more wrong." Sam continued and Dean looked again. "You see, the soldier disappeared, an explosion happened--"

Dean felt himself shake and Cas leaned into his ear whispering. "You're okay. Just keep listening to Sam's voice." Dean nodded, holding his breath.

"-he was declared dead and-" Sam took a second, exhaling and looking down. "Sorry." He laughed a little at his own emotions.

He blew out again and straightened up, he glanced to Dean and Dean smiled automatically, unconsciously letting go of his held breath and loosening his grasp on Cas' hand, nodding, reassuring him and telling him to go on. "You can do it." Dean whispered, enunciating so that Sam might read his lips. Cas leaned back in his seat, Dean being okay now.

Sam nodded looking down at his notes before looking back up, smiling and nodding to Jess before he spoke. "He was declared dead and a son came home to bury another father, a dad. And upon his return, the son, the handsome one, was told of a beautiful tale," He gestured. "Which is actually the point of this one. It was the story of a lost boy who, while waiting for his big green bus, met someone; a smiling waiter who worked in the diner that the would-be soldier had spent a lot of time in as a child, with his parents, before tragedy had struck. It's the age-old story of boy meets boy," Sam paused, turning the page, "well, maybe not age old." The room laughed again. "They were just two men who were running away from themselves and their lives and in doing so they were too busy looking over their shoulders when they crashed right into each other. The story continued in the form of letters sent from a training camp back to Kansas and those replies. Eventually those letters were being sent from further East and then from Hell on earth itself." Dean shifted again and Ellen rubbed his leg reassuringly, he even nodded without prompt. Focus on Sam's voice. You're okay, you're safe. "But in between gun battles on the front line and relentless ex's who wouldn't take no for an answer back home--"

At this Cas laughed and Dean turned to look. "You just punched him?" Dean laughed and leaned to kiss Cas.

"-two men fell in love. Now, after burying his hero," Dean broke away from Cas to look back to Sam at that; not the hero, his hero, "the intellectual son had to rely on the lessons his dad taught him about how to let yourself fall and then pick yourself back up and march on, all with the knowledge that Dad wasn't there to catch him anymore." Dean leaned back in his seat, mouth open a little. "However, one day, a miracle happened - the soldier came home. The brains had learned to
use the physical and the brawns now had to learn to live with his own memories." Sam paused looking to Jess briefly before looking down at his notes. "But through all of that pain and suffering a soldier, now a mechanic, and a waiter, still a waiter, fell in love, stayed in love and learned to stop running together." Dean put his left arm around Cas and Cas squeezed Dean's knee. Sam read the last part to himself before turning the page as he spoke. "The reason I tell you this story is, well mostly to embarrass them," a laugh went out again and a lot of the class turned to look at Dean and Cas, as did Sam, Dean and Cas looked at each other surprised that everyone knew who they were and then Sam spoke again, the pair glad when attention returned to Sam, "but also because, just like them, I stand here before you today despite the loss, tears, sorrow and trials I have waded through to get here."

"Every one of us in this room has or will experience all of that mixed in with panic, love, rejection, joy and much, much more. Aristotle once said that 'the law is reason free from passion' and that may be, but we are lawyers and lawyers are not the law, lawyers are people who are the sum total of everything we've ever experienced and it is turning that into a passion that will carry us through life. As lawyers, we will experience wins and losses, success and failure, no matter what we do - and that does not define our abilities as lawyers. Just as our successes and failures in life, the joys and pains, do not define us as people. What does define us, is not that we will fall, or run away, but that we dust ourselves off and come running back." He paused, looking to Dean and Cas. "And now I tell you what a travelling soldier and a bus-hopping waiter taught me, as well as the woman who would later agree to be my wife," he glanced to Jess and smiled, Dean tightened his grasp on Cas' shoulder and smiled proudly, "that you and only you control what your future holds. So, as we all take our next steps into the world, academically or personally, remember that there is no pre-set destiny for any of us. Fate is nothing compared to the power of the flame of passion and want in your heart."

He moved the first page out of the way. "You must always, I beg of you, always remember to pick yourself up, even if doesn't feel like you've fallen, dust yourself off and, above all else, have faith in yourself because... this is just the beginning and the best is yet to come. Congratulations, class of 2019 - the future is in your hands."

He nodded, folded his notes and stepped back from the podium, shoving them into his robe pocket. The auditorium erupted in applause and everyone stood up. Sam raised his diploma in the air and shook it a little, the rest slowly did the same. Jo was shouting since she couldn't whistle like Bobby and Dean. Sam walked down the steps and found his seat again.

President Hennessey stepped up to the podium clapping as everyone sat back down. "Thank you, Mr Winchester." The applause died away. "Incidentally, I have just been informed that Mr Winchester and his intended have both been invited to join Foulston Siefkin in Kansas City." Dean and Cas looked at each other as a small applause rang out. "So, it looks like the handsome one is going home again." Another chuckle, mostly from the front row. "Congratulations are in abundance today, not least for the Winchesters." He smiled down at Sam and Jess briefly before looking up again, out at everyone. "Well class, it is with great pride that I confirm that you are now the graduated class of 2019 and it has been my absolute pleasure. I wish you the best of luck as you step out of these doors lawyers and a fine bunch of them at that." He started clapping again and everyone joined in, standing up and he bowed his head before turning away.

There was a lot of people so it took a little while before the group saw Sam and Jess emerge from the crowd, Sam's hand being shook as he was congratulated on his speech and the both of them being hugged as they were congratulated on their engagement and jobs in Kansas' biggest law firm. Jess managed to break free before Sam and she found Cas first, hugging him. A chorus of 'well done's rang out before she turned to Dean.
Congratulations," they hugged, "on everything." They pulled back and Dean smiled. "Kansas, huh?"

"Yeah," she nodded and looked back to Sam as he managed to break away, "he wanted to be close to you guys."

Dean nodded silently and smiled as Sam walked over. "Hey, guys." Sam smiled as he was pulled into hugs and congratulations. "Thanks."

Dean patted Sam on the shoulder and he let out a little laugh. "Congrats on getting engaged, man." Sam smiled. "And the move, you moving back home?"

Sam nodded. "Uh, yeah. If that's okay? Just until we find somewhere closer to the City."

Dean shook his head. "Totally fine. It's okay, right?" He turned to Cas.

"Of course." He smiled at Sam. "Congratulations, I loved your speech."

Sam smiled, looking down embarrassed. "Had to say something." He mumbled.

Dean cleared his throat and nodded. "Yeah."

Everything went silent and Bobby laughed, shaking his head. "You two never change. C'mon guys, let these two get emotional."

They went to walk away and Dean put out his hand. "No." They all stopped. "No," he turned to Sam, "it took a lot for you to stand up there and say all that in front of all of them, never mind while I was sitting there. And it's me being all funny with you and emotions that means you had to say it all in a speech instead of just standing here like this so," Dean looked Sam in the eye, "thank you." Sam's eyes widened a little and Dean nodded. "I don't know if you just said all of that for effect but," Sam shook his head, "well, even if you did it doesn't matter because I'm-I'm proud of you Sammy, you got your diploma and your job and your beautiful fiancée," he gestured to Jess as she hugged into Sam's side a little, "and I'm just glad, not surprised, but glad that you got that normal life you wanted." He nodded. "You deserved it."

"Thanks Dean." Sam smiled. "Means a lot."

Everything went quiet as the brothers looked at each other so Cas broke the tension before it got awkward. "You big girl." Cas punched Dean in the side and everyone laughed.

Dean turned to look at Cas and opened his mouth wide in shock. "Oh, yeah?" He walked towards Cas who started to walk backwards. Dean lifted him over his shoulder. "Well, you're getting fat again." Cas laughed as Dean spun around to look at the group. "I say burgers and beers?" Everyone agreed and Dean turned walking towards a pub with Cas on his shoulder. "I'm sorry I can't hear you over all of the success Sam and Jess are giving off, it reeks!" He looked to Cas' bum. "Or is that you?" He smacked Cas who burst into more laughter asking Dean to put him down. "No way," he started running down the road and Cas' shouts got louder, "you wanted to fly."

"Dean, seriously!" Cas tried not to laugh but as Dean slowed down and stopped at the nearest pub, which was starting to fill with students and their guests, Dean pointed, the group a short distance away nodded and Dean headed inside.

Once inside he looked to his left and then right before walking to the bar. "I had a boyfriend, have you seen him?" The barmaid smiled as Cas giggled and protested again. Dean slowly let Cas back to the floor. "Did you just giggle?"
Cas composed himself. "No," he turned to face the barmaid fixing his shirt and necklace, "it was a low, manly chuckle."

"Whatever you say, babe." Dean turned as the door opened. "What you having, Sammy?"

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_The fourth of July 2020._

"Got the beers." Dean plonked the case down on the flat part of the roof before climbing the rest of the way up the ladder. "No thanks to you." He put his hand down and Ruby grabbed it so he hauled her out of the hatch.

"I helped!" She protested and then walked over to the hoard of deck chairs they had scattered about. Dean sat next to Cas, Jess and Sam already in their place. "I brought the orange juice." She handed it to Jess and made a face at Dean. "Dad!" Ruby leaned over the roof a little to Lucifer who was setting things up on the ground and he turned to look up. "Can I have a beer?"

He stared at her. "One." He pointed.

"Thanks Dad!" She shouted and Dean handed her one.

Cas got a little startle when a ginger fur ball jumped up into his lap. "Hello Abby." She rubbed her face on his and then his stomach. "I missed you too." Cas turned to Dean who stroked the cat's face. "Dean, meet Abby." Dean smiled and then wiggled his nose as if he was going to sneeze. "Abby's is the only reason I went back to Kansas."

"The only reason?" Sam leaned forward as Dean finally sneezed and rubbed his nose.

Cas smiled looking from him back to Dean. "No." He turned back. "Ruby helped too."

"Got your back, Jack." Ruby and Dean casually high-fived as she walked passed him to sit in the chair on the other side.

"I'm not sneaking you more beer." Dean smiled and she laughed. "Hey Jess?" They all turned. "You good to watch this, you're not going into labor, are you?"

"Oh, don't!" She rolled her eyes and put her hand on Sam's arm. "You'll start him off again!" She shifted in her seat, as much as her bump would let her and Sam rubbed her stomach. "I'm good." She smiled.

"You guys ready?" Lucifer shouted up as Lilith spoke to Adam as they sat on the patio, reminding him it would be loud again this year.

Cas looked at Abby. "Are you?" She just meowed and tilted her head at him so he copied her.

"Yes!" Dean, Sam and Ruby shouted.

"Alright, here we go."

Dean put his arm around Cas and the first firework of the night hit the sky. Abby looked up, getting a little jump, but then she was fine. Dean and Cas looked over to Sam and Jess briefly as Sam asked her if she was alright.

"Married and a baby on the way." Dean shook his head. "He got the white picket fence."
They looked up again as the fireworks continued. "Not what you want?" Cas asked, looking at the display.

"I didn't say that. I just never thought we'd get it." He tilted his head. "Well, I knew Sam would." They glanced again.

"And what about you, what's your white picket fence?" Cas smiled as he lifted his hand to rub the right said of Dean's face.

Dean turned back and looked into Cas' eyes. "You."

Cas smiled. "No, really though."

"Really." Dean nodded. "You're all I want." He looked back to Sam and Jess. "I didn't say I didn't want the white picket fence. I guess getting pregnant is out of the question but we could have the rest."

Cas looked over Dean's face. "Like what, the house and the jobs and the two cars?" He smiled, knowing that they already had all of that.

Dean looked him square in the eye. "And the marriage."

Cas was shocked for a second but then smiled. "Yeah." He leaned and kissed Dean. "Yeah, I suppose we could." They turned to look back up at the fireworks as Abby decided to lie down on Cas' legs and he reached out and took Dean's hand.

A good ten minutes went by while the group watched the red, white and blue stream over the sky, as well as other displays in the distance. When the fireworks stopped Lucifer shouted up. "How was that?"

"Great!" Dean and Sam shouted.

"Uh, guys?" They all turned to Jess. "I'm not good." She smiled to Sam, admitting he was right and everyone bounded out of their chairs on the roof, except for Cas who picked up Abby and put her on the floor first.

Sam leaned over the roof. "Luke, call 911, the baby's coming!"

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